

## A Shtetl Grew in Bessemer: Temple Beth-El and Jewish Life in Small-Town Alabama

by

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On the corner of Seventeenth Street and Sixth Avenue in downtown Bessemer, Alabama, stands a structure that both marks and masks history. The evolution of this structure also metaphorically describes the evolution of Bessemer's Jewish community. Always the home of a religious body, the building is currently the venue for the Grace and Truth Apostolic Church's Sunday services. But for almost eighty years the building housed Temple Beth-El, the Judaic center of Bessemer.<sup>1</sup>

Like so many other small towns and cities in the modern South, Bessemer has seen its once-flourishing Jewish population dwindle first to a few families in the late 1960s, down to four people in 1999. At the time Temple Beth-El was sold in 1974, it was the second oldest synagogue in continuous use in Alabama.<sup>2</sup> Just as few today would recognize the nondescript Protestant church as the former temple, few too remember the once-vibrant Jewish presence in the city. The remaining temple members who sold the building hoped otherwise. They stipulated in the deed that the Hebrew letters that spelled Beth-El, inscribed in stone over the front door, can never be altered or removed.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the congregations that have owned the building since have placed a wooden board over the Beth-El legend, hiding any overt sign of the building's religious past. This blank board may hide but cannot negate or erase the history of Jewish Bessemer.

## 2 SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

Actually, the metaphor and reality of the hidden Hebrew legend of Bessemer's temple is not the only reminder of the town's Jewish history. Just outside the city limits on the road to the rival city of Hueytown is the site of Beth-El cemetery, the last refuge for many of Bessemer's Jews for almost one hundred years. Its gates are always unlocked and perpetual care is and will be maintained by virtue of two trusts set up in the 1960s and 1970s, the latter established out of the very sale of the temple itself.<sup>4</sup> A former temple with a hidden sign and a cemetery fixed between two towns are fitting symbols for the beginning, growth, and seeming end of a century of Jewish life in Bessemer, the "Marvel City."

As in such locations across America from the 1890s to the 1970s, Bessemer's Jewish citizens were completely integral to the economic, social, and civic life of the town. Over the first half of the twentieth century, anyone who observed the downtown business section of Bessemer, at the intersection of Nineteenth Street and Second Avenue, would find a preponderance of Jewish-owned businesses. If that same person closely examined the city's most prosperous residential area through the 1950s—stately Clarendon Avenue, whose eastern end was divided by a finely-landscaped median and bordered by Victorian and Italian-styled two-storied houses—he or she would also notice that living in the majority of these homes were the same Jewish families who owned the businesses in that same "garment district."<sup>5</sup> "I don't mean to say that there was a little ghetto in Bessemer," says former resident Charlotte Jospin Cohn, "but all of us living so close together, that's the way it felt."<sup>6</sup> As incongruous as it appears, Bessemer's prosperous Jewish ghetto was a reality. While Bessemer is experiencing an economic revitalization today with the opening of the VisionLand theme park and accompanying businesses, several notable, long-time city leaders believe that one major factor in the decline of Bessemer's economy and infrastructure over the past thirty-five years is the migration of Jewish businesses out of the city and into either neighboring Birmingham or the newer suburban enclaves including Vestavia, Hoover, and Riverchase.<sup>7</sup> The following is a case



*Old temple building at Seventeenth Street and Sixth Avenue.  
Present sign covers carved Hebrew letters, which can never be  
removed. (Photo by Terry Barr.)*

study of the rise and decline of this small-town southern community.

Traditionally historians have thought that it was primarily German Jews who left the major urban centers for the hinterlands of the American Midwest, West, and South. In the past few years, however, others have been reassessing the background of the Jewish immigrant who settled in smaller American towns and have discovered that a greater percentage of eastern European Jews journeyed this path than previously thought. Like their German Jewish brethren, the eastern European Jews were traveling peddlers who, after searching for the right opportunity, often began successful retail clothing businesses in the most unlikely of locales.<sup>8</sup> This newly recognized pattern holds true in part for the history of Bessemer.

In Bessemer and other small towns across the American South, the migration of eastern European Jews had a vital impact on the life and longevity of the town. Often their migration sustained the Jewish life of these towns already begun by the earlier arrival of German Jews. In some cases the influx of eastern European Jews actually created new centers of Judaism where none had existed before. As historian Lee Shai Weissbach indicates, only "27 per cent of the triple-digit Southern Jewish communities of the late 1920s had substantial Jewish populations before the era of East European migration began," and "viable Jewish communities" in these towns could not have been launched without the immigrants from eastern Europe.<sup>9</sup> In Bessemer's case, while the origins of some of the earliest Jewish immigrants are unclear, both German and eastern European Jews arrived by the late 1880s and proceeded to work together to found Temple Beth-El and to sustain Jewish life in the city for eight decades. This cooperation and blurring of denominational boundaries illustrates new patterns just now appearing in the historiography.<sup>10</sup>

Jewish arrival and persistence in Bessemer were also affected by and predicated on their acceptance by the majority Christian society and the terms of assimilation that such acceptance necessitated. Thus, these immigrants also participated in the "defining experience" of all American Jewry: the need for acculturation on the one side and the desire to retain ethnic/religious identity on the other.<sup>11</sup> Bessemer's Jews performed this balancing act extremely well.

The reasons why Jewish immigrants settled in Bessemer are both logical and consistent with those of other southern Jewish populations. In the 1880s Bessemer was a boomtown. Although always in neighboring Birmingham's shadow, in the beginning there were plans for Bessemer that could have made it a major rival to the older city. Recognizing that the area surrounding Bessemer was rich in the three essential elements necessary to produce iron (iron ore, coal, and limestone), Henry DeBardeleben and David Roberts officially organized the Bessemer Land and Improvement Company on July 28, 1886. DeBardeleben projected

a company of thirteen with capital stock of two million dollars . . . [and to] build a city that will contain eight [coal-iron] furnaces within two years. We propose to extend two railroad lines touching at Tuscaloosa [approximately forty miles southwest of Bessemer] and another outlet to be determined on. We are going to build a city solid from the bottom and establish it on a rock financial basis.<sup>12</sup>

These early prophecies started on target. On April 12, 1887, the date most sources consider to be the actual founding of Bessemer, The Bessemer Land and Improvement Company sold the first lot of land to Birmingham millionaire Walter W. Davin. During that summer Bessemer's population rose to approximately 1,000.<sup>13</sup> By November 1887, that number had swelled to 2,441, and by April 1888, the population had reached 3,500.<sup>14</sup> This growth was infused by the wave of settlers who came to Bessemer to take advantage of employment in the newly-founded industries, to provide other essential goods for those workers, and to speculate on the boom in land value.<sup>15</sup> The latter multiplied from twenty-five dollars per acre in the fall of 1886 to eighteen thousand dollars per acre the following spring. On one day in the summer of 1887, 569 train tickets were sold to people whose destination was Bessemer.<sup>16</sup> By 1890, according to census bulletin #138, Bessemer's population, when it was just over a decade old, was the eighth largest in the state,<sup>17</sup> and the 1900 census numbered Bessemer's citizenry at ten thousand.<sup>18</sup>

Bessemer's early history is inextricably tied to the growth of its iron and steel industry. DeBardeleben inaugurated the blowing of his first two furnaces in 1888.<sup>19</sup> By 1891 five furnaces had been blown by three different companies, which were consolidated into the DeBardeleben Coal and Iron Company. In 1892 the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company (TCI) acquired all of DeBardeleben's former coal-iron holdings. Many Bessemer leaders envisioned that TCI would build a steel plant in Bessemer, but this was not meant to be. When the plant was eventually built in nearby Ensley, Bessemer's "grandest dream" evaporated.<sup>20</sup>

Other early industries included the Bessemer Rolling Mill, which was actually the first to be developed in the town in 1888,<sup>21</sup>

and the Howard-Harrison Pipe Company, which soon was absorbed by the United States Steel Pipe and Foundry, the largest pipe manufacturer in the world and producer of the first pipe in either Bessemer or Birmingham.<sup>22</sup> On Monday, November 14, 1887, a group of financiers including George Pullman took an "excursion" from Birmingham to Bessemer. Pullman did not forget his experience, for in 1929 he financed a plant in Bessemer that produced railroad cars for over five decades.<sup>23</sup>

From its inception, the city had other businesses, many of which were run by Jewish people. Jews came to Bessemer in response to the commercial opportunities and because of the timing of their migration. Describing a similar pattern in a West Virginia mining town, Deborah Weiner also asserts that "In a milieu where newcomers from a variety of backgrounds gathered to advance themselves anyway they could, the social scene was fluid. The town conformed to a pattern evident from historical accounts of Jewish communities in places as far flung as Odessa, Russia, and Wichita, Kansas: 'fledgling' cities where entrepreneurial spirit runs high and the social hierarchy is not well-fixed, have been particularly welcoming to Jews."<sup>24</sup> Bessemer exhibited these same characteristics:

It is a new city; a growing and developing city. One with such resources awaiting utilization; such facilities for manufacture and conversion; such immense territory for market; such superb system of transportation and distribution; such a salubrious and attractive climate, and with such a grand and beautiful country in and surrounding it, that it presents unusual inducements to the immigrant. Here they are assured of employment and of opportunities of building homes and securing competencies. The field is not crowded. It is but sparsely occupied, and labor and opportunity are abundant, and years to come will not find the channels of industry overflowing nor the demand for its products diminished.<sup>25</sup>

A further inducement to settle in Bessemer was its central location between commercial centers. Bessemer is just above the center of the state, midway between Montgomery and Decatur,

between Meridian and Chattanooga, Mobile and Nashville, Savannah and Memphis, and New Orleans and Louisville. Even in 1888 its rail lines led “directly to Texas via Vicksburg and Shreveport and via New Orleans; to Gulf ports, directly to New Orleans, to Mobile and to Pensacola; to all of the Atlantic ports and to the North, Northwest and West.”<sup>26</sup> More specifically, Bessemer’s proximity to Birmingham, which by the turn of the century boasted three Jewish congregations, and to Tuscaloosa, home of the University of Alabama, made it attractive to the early Jewish pioneers. While economic reasons brought Jews to Bessemer, religion and social/cultural cohesion contributed to their continuity.

Finally, as many historians have noted,<sup>27</sup> Jewish immigrants, particularly from eastern Europe, were adept at filling the needs of a new town. Many were performing similar roles to those they performed in Russia or Poland. But while they were marginalized in the old country because their occupations were peripheral to the central agricultural economies, in small towns like Bessemer they fulfilled their own desires by making a comfortable living for themselves and their children. Concurrently, they met the needs of the then-mainly-mining community by their willingness and ability to launch complementary businesses, such as dry goods and retail clothing stores and even saloons. Because of their adaptability and willingness to participate in civic affairs, they achieved a great degree of acceptance as business leaders and thus even their Jewishness was tolerated, if not theologically, at least practically.

The earliest group of Jews to settle in Bessemer included many who contributed to the city’s growth. Samuel Stein was a “bright particular star” from “Bessemer’s earliest dawn.” According to *The Bessemer Weekly*, Stein was “among the first of our young businessmen to recognize the grand possibilities of the Marvel City and to cast his lot in with her.” An Alabama native, Stein founded the North Calera Land Company in 1886 and made a fortune from it. He moved to Bessemer in August 1887, where he “laid the foundation of his career,” and then apparently established a new occupation, for soon “the famous query ‘Who’s Your

Tailor' . . . [became] as common as the most favorite household words."<sup>28</sup> Stein's tailoring business was still thriving in 1906 as an ad in *The Bessemer Weekly* made clear: On Nineteenth Street, "Under the Grand Hotel," his store offered the "Finest Tailor-Made Clothing to Order."<sup>29</sup> Stein and his wife, Bessie Moses Stein, had a son, Jacob (Jake) Stein, "the first Jewish boy born in Bessemer," whose brit milah was "a gala day among businessmen here."<sup>30</sup>

Samuel Stein's history is probably unrelated to another Stein in early Bessemer history. This other Stein is listed in an 1886 issue of *The Bessemer Weekly* as one who "inaugurated . . . a very important line of business . . . in Bessemer . . . a first class bar. . . ."<sup>31</sup> This Stein was not Bessemer's only Jewish distributor of spirits. Jacob Marks, born in Prussia in 1847, established businesses in Mississippi and Georgia before moving to Bessemer in the late 1880s or early 1890s. Married to the former Rachel Silverstone of Memphis, Marks became the agent of the Bessemer Liquor Company, which sold "Whiskies, Wines, Gin, Rum, and Moerlein Beer" at an establishment on the "Twenty-first Street Adjoining Alley." In 1901, Marks "completed and moved into an elegant residence, the finest in the city. . . ."<sup>32</sup>

Another early Jewish resident was Jacob L. Adler, who owned a two-story business on the corner of Third Avenue and Twenty-first Street in 1887. In July of that same year Adler saw his business narrowly escape damage from a nearby fire that encompassed a hotel, three other businesses, and fourteen two-story dwellings.<sup>33</sup> Shortly after this traumatic event in the town's early life, the firm of Rosenbaum Brothers, general merchants, "rapidly erected" and opened their store on Fourth Avenue between Seventeenth Street and Eighteenth Street. Apparently in 1887 this location was far enough removed from downtown proper that it was described as being "way out in the woods, and the woods were so thick that not another building could then be seen." The Rosenbaums, the self-proclaimed "Merchants for the People," came to Bessemer from Meridian, Mississippi.<sup>34</sup> By 1893 they were "so well-known" that while advertising seemed "unnecessary," nevertheless, there might be some residents of Bessemer who still



had not heard of them. Accordingly, they informed the public that they had “two mammoth store buildings for its [business] accommodations,” and that no establishment in either the town or state “can afford to do better with their patrons than we do” by offering “Dry Goods, Suiting, Notions, Clothing, Gents’ Furnishings, HATS and SHOES, Staple and Fancy Groceries and Provisions.” By this point they were sufficiently prosperous to relocate to the more central business location of Second Avenue between Nineteenth and Twentieth streets.<sup>35</sup>

Other early Jewish Bessemerites included Julius Jaffe, the “watch inspector of the L&N railroad,”<sup>36</sup> and Mr. A. Forst who founded the Forst Mercantile Company located at 1905 Second Avenue.<sup>37</sup> Jaffe, whose jewelry shop was also under the Grand Hotel at 1909 Second Avenue, “passed nearly the whole of his life in Bessemer, coming here from New York in 1890.”<sup>38</sup>

Sam Lefkovits, a native of Hungary, immigrated to New York where he was a stevedore on the docks. Unable to speak or understand English, he was amazed when the police escorted him to and from work every day. “What a wonderful country this is,” he thought. Only later did he discover that the kindness afforded him was due to his being used as a strikebreaker by unscrupulous owners. Lefkovits next traveled to Ohio where he became a peddler and worked his way south. According to his grandson, Arnold,

The family story is that he walked selling goods, peddling with a big sack on his back, from farm to farm, house to house, and no doubt he had heard that Bessemer was a thriving young mining community, and so my guess is that sometime in the 1880s, he ended up in Bessemer.<sup>39</sup>

Shortly thereafter Lefkovits established a department store in partnership with another early Jewish resident, Samuel Erlick. Their store, Erlick-Lefkovits, originally located on Carolina Avenue, soon relocated to Second Avenue, the garment district. On the twentieth anniversary of the founding of their business, they presented each of their customers a commemorative plate:

"Erlick-Lefkovits 1889-1909." Sam Lefkovits married into the Boshwitz family, which had come to Bessemer from Germany via Arkansas and Tennessee because they also had heard of the burgeoning Jewish life in Bessemer and hoped to find husbands for their daughters.<sup>40</sup>

The Schwabacher family also set early roots in Bessemer. Urias Schwabacher was the proprietor of the Famous Shoe Store on Nineteenth Street and Second Avenue. In 1893 Urias sold his interest in the Famous Shoe Store to his brother David who promised to be "better prepared than ever to meet all [the public's] wants and tastes in his line . . . [and to] solicit a continuance of the kind patronage heretofore bestowed upon the house."<sup>41</sup> David and his wife had earlier lived in New Jersey and Mississippi. They thus reflected the general pattern of Jewish mobility to places of greater economic opportunity, mixed with a desire for a Jewish community core.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to their other business interests, this mixture of German and eastern European Jewish immigrants was involved with Bessemer's early financial institutions. Sam Rosenbaum and Julius Jaffe served on the Board of Directors of Bessemer's Bank of Commerce whose capital in 1901 totaled fifty million dollars. Sam Lefkovits served in the same capacity at the Bessemer Savings Bank whose capital during the same period was one hundred thousand dollars.<sup>43</sup> The fact that these early Jewish residents of Bessemer were able to assume prominent roles in the economic makeup of the town undoubtedly contributed to Bessemer's acceptance of Jewish citizens into the social fabric of the community at the same time that it reflected that very acceptance.<sup>44</sup> As their economic fortunes rose, Bessemer's Jews felt the increasing need for a house of worship and were able to afford the resultant expenses. Not only would Temple Beth-El serve their spiritual and cultural needs, it would also illustrate their position in a church-oriented society.

The actual beginnings of Bessemer's Temple Beth-El are debated.<sup>45</sup> An article in *The Jewish Monitor*, a monthly statewide periodical begun in 1948 by then Bessemer Rabbi Joseph Gallinger, dates the temple's consecration to 1896.<sup>46</sup> Noting that the

congregation began in 1891, the article indicates that “of those present at that memorable occasion, only Mrs. H. Goldberg, the wife of one of the founders, is still living in Bessemer today. Mrs. Goldberg well remembers the thrill she experienced at that time, knowing that the young village of Bessemer, founded only three years previously [the city founding actually occurred four years earlier (1887)] was going to have its own Jewish congregation. The following year [1892], the small group of pioneer settlers secured a plot of land for a cemetery, and in 1894, Mrs. Goldberg remembers having been a member of a delegation, which secured from the Bessemer Land Company the site on which two years later the temple was built. The congregation grew slowly until in the 1920s it numbered more than 70 families.”<sup>47</sup> Department store owner Samuel Erlick was elected its first president.<sup>48</sup>

While the temple’s life span covered some seventy-eight years, for only ten of those did it sustain a regular rabbi, with Gallinger serving the bulk of those years from 1948 to 1957. Apparently a Rabbi Hirsch, who served from 1917 to 1918, may have been the first full-time rabbinical leader.<sup>49</sup>

Without a regular rabbi, services in Bessemer were confined mainly to the High Holidays and to irregular Friday nights. Temple Beth-El employed rabbinical students from Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati to lead High Holiday services and for life cycle events during its early years.<sup>50</sup> Since Birmingham was a short distance away, rabbis from that city traveled to Bessemer at special occasions to officiate. Often, lay readers, like shoe store owner Urias Schwabacher, conducted services.<sup>51</sup>

In these early days Temple Beth-El’s members followed either Reform or Orthodox traditions. While most of the Jewish people interviewed for this project are either Reform or Conservative now, their memories of Temple Beth-El are of an institution that through the 1950s was either primarily Orthodox or whose services were mainly dominated by the Orthodox members. The denominational tendency reflected the eastern European background of a majority these congregants, a majority augmented by another influx of immigrants in 1899.<sup>52</sup> Arnold Lefkovits, whose Hungarian-born grandfather was one of the temple’s organizers,

remembers “a lot of Orthodox customs, the men sitting on the right, the women on the left, and the men wearing hats or yarmulkes.”<sup>53</sup> Charlotte Jospin Cohn’s reflections on the services are of “the whole service [conducted] . . . in Yiddish and Hebrew [and] . . . most of the men davening, but the ladies who sat on the other side, who were all mainly American-born, not understanding most of what was being said.”<sup>54</sup>

As has been well documented in American Jewish communities across the country, the tension between German and eastern European Jews was great, so much so that one Reform rabbi of German descent called the neighborhood of his eastern European co-religionists a “reeking pesthole.”<sup>55</sup> Temple Beth-El experienced its own version of this division. Milton Weinstein, born in Bessemer in 1907, maintains that there were philosophical and theological differences within the synagogue: “The Reform Congregation owned the temple in the beginning. The Orthodox rented an upstairs room in a building in downtown Bessemer and held services there. The Reform Jews either died or moved out of Bessemer, and the temple became the property of the Orthodox Congregation somewhere in the late 1920s.”<sup>56</sup>

*The Bessemer Story* offers a slightly different account. After Rabbi Hirsch’s one-year tenure ended in 1917, “a new Orthodox group developed within the Congregation and eventually broke away from the Reformed [*sic*] group which was never officially declared Reformed [*sic*]. The Orthodox group met for four or five years above some stores on Second Avenue. Charles Weinstein [Milton’s father] was their lay leader. After some five years of independence, the groups reunited.”<sup>57</sup>

*The Bessemer Story’s* account appears more credible because Milton Weinstein was just a boy at the time of the break and because of documented patterns of the development of Jewish congregations in other small cities. Generally, in towns where German Jewish communities were already established, eastern European Jews, who usually identified themselves as Orthodox, would establish separate “subcommunities” upon their arrival and would organize congregations “that functioned alongside preexisting assemblies,” mainly because they were uncomfortable

with the Reform practices of the German Jews. But in towns where the eastern Europeans were the organizers of Jewish life, single, Orthodox congregations were the rule.<sup>58</sup> Bessemer's Jewish life and temple seem to fall somewhere in the middle of these patterns. What is more important, however, is that Bessemer's Jews did reunify after a relatively short period of time. Again, while the reasons for the reunification might have been that Reformers left Bessemer, many remained. A city with a small Jewish population, where everyone knew each other and shared socio-economic position, simply could not support two congregations.<sup>59</sup> Bessemer's Jews, despite their differences, maintained a bond based on "economic links, kinship, and religion."<sup>60</sup>

The unity of religion, kinship, and friendship was directly reflected in the activities of Charles Weinstein who, after emigrating from Russia, took his place in the life of the Jewish community. As a boy Arnold Lefkovits viewed Weinstein as "a sort of rabbi" who conducted Passover seders for the Lefkovits and Weinstein families.<sup>61</sup> Weinstein's granddaughter, Estelle Seigel Silverstein, remembers that her family kept kosher out of respect for Charles, not an easy thing given that Charles himself was the only person in the town willing and able to perform the ritual slaughtering of the animals for meat and thus served as Jewish Bessemer's unofficial "shokhet." "On the holidays—Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and often Passover—my grandfather would see everyone come to his house to have him kill the chickens and make them kosher. There was no kosher butcher in Bessemer. We used to drive to Birmingham to buy meats from Haimuvitz on Fourth Avenue. But during the holidays Papa would kill the chickens, slit their necks, and throw them down in the yard."<sup>62</sup> Marvin Cherner, later a Birmingham circuit judge, was a member of one of the families who took "live chickens to Mr. Weinstein to have them slaughtered," because, while his Russian-born grandparents lived with the Cherners, they did "observe the dietary laws."<sup>63</sup>

In an extended household that included Estelle Seigel Silverstein's parents, grandparents, aunt, uncle (Milton "Buddy"

Weinstein), and brother, Jerry, the Seigels supported each other in abiding by the prescribed rituals:

Mother kept kosher because my grandfather was very, very religious. Even during Passover he or my mother would bring my lunch to school so that I wouldn't have to eat in the cafeteria. And all the Jewish kids used to come to our car and he would bring extra, the cake or whatever. We did keep kosher on that score. My brother and I were very thin, emaciated, so mother kept what she'd call outlaw dishes for Jerry and me. We couldn't eat at the regular table, so we ate at a card table and she'd fix us red meat, whereas if it's kosher, all that [blood] is drained out of it.<sup>64</sup>

Silverstein also recalls staying home from school on Jewish holidays, again in deference to her grandfather. During these times there was occasionally a cultural clash of a most unusual sort:

Near the holidays the Chasidim would come through town and come to our house collecting money because they knew my grandfather was the most religious man in town. On one occasion when they came, my brother, who loved to play cowboys, was straddling the sofa—sitting astride his horse—with his cowboy hat on and guns firing. What an impression that made!<sup>65</sup>

Charles Weinstein's emphasis on maintaining Jewish rituals was further evidenced by his being the only Bessemer Jew remembered for employing a non-Jew to come to the house and light the coal stove on the Sabbath. Furthermore, he taught his grandson, Jerry, Hebrew lessons leading to the boy's bar mitzvah at Temple Beth-El, presumably sans cowboy gear.<sup>66</sup>

The Jewish residential patterns in Bessemer reflected the old-country shtetl desire and the necessity to live close to one another.<sup>67</sup> The Jews of Bessemer settled in just a few areas of town, mainly Clarendon Avenue, Berkley Avenue, and Sixth Avenue, near the temple. Such proximity facilitated the requirement to walk to the synagogue during holidays when riding was proscribed by Jewish law and reflected social interaction within the

group. The Seigel-Weinstein family lived just one-half of a block from Temple Beth-El, which gave Estelle a special vantage point from which to observe certain holiday rituals and which also made the Seigel home a center of holiday festivities:

During the holidays, since the temple was so close, the Jewish community would drive their cars on Rosh Hashanah night to the temple and walk home. Then they would walk back the next morning for temple and afterwards drive back home . . . just for the High Holidays they'd do that. For Sukkot, we had a sukkah in our backyard, and we ate out there rain or shine. And in later years, as things progressed, my grandfather had the roof in the back of our house raised up so that during Passover we could eat on the back porch. . . . We always had a long Passover service and went through the whole thing twice, first day and second day.<sup>68</sup>

Silverstein's memory of people walking to the synagogue was confirmed by Jack Becker, Marvin Cherner, and Arnold Lefkovits, all of whose families walked a mile each way, and by Jerry Cherner whose family traversed a three-quarter-mile journey.<sup>69</sup>

Lefkovits, who remembers the seders and the straw and fruit hanging from the roof of the sukkah hut at the Seigel home, focused on one other element of the High Holidays. When just a boy during the early 1930s, Arnold would sit in temple on Yom Kippur between his grandfather Sam Lefkovits and Samuel Erlick listening to them sharing memories of starting the temple forty years earlier and of all the times they had spent there. But then, during the break between services,

a lot of us would walk the half block up to the Seigel's house, and quite often the High Holidays fell during the World Series. A lot of men would go up there and listen to the ball game, and then walk back to temple, and continue going back and forth.<sup>70</sup>

Silverstein remembers these occasions, too, when the children would leave Yom Kippur services and run in and out of the Seigel home and when the men "snuck up to our house to listen to the World Series."<sup>71</sup>

As well as promoting religious cohesion, Temple Beth-El offered social, instructional, and civic outlets for Bessemer's Jews. The temple sisterhood, Sunday school, Hebrew lessons, a B'nai B'rith lodge, and civic programs promoted Jewish life.

As in so many communities, women played a major role in Jewish education. For many years Stella Marks, Jacob and Rachel's daughter, was "in charge . . . [of] Sunday school every Sabbath morning. . . ." <sup>72</sup> In years to come the temple tradition was that mothers were actually their children's confirmation teachers. Elaine Becker Bercu's mother, Eva, Jack Green's mother, Beatrice, and Sam and Lenore Barr's mother, Mary, all prepared their children for this important life-cycle event. <sup>73</sup>

According to former Bessemer resident Sarah Lander Erdberg, Bessemer's Jewish teens formed a Young Judæa club, circa World War I, which consisted of ten to twelve members. They met every other week at different members' homes with the membership including Sarah, Celia Weinstein, Bernice Erlick, Gertrude Strauss, Adele Schwabacher, and twins Fannie and Sadie Cherner. The club sponsored bake sales and put on a show at neighboring St. Aloysius Catholic Church, selling tickets for twenty-five cents each. Local department stores like Erlick's would donate ten dollars to the club, all of the proceeds going to *The Birmingham News*-sponsored Milk and Ice Fund for underprivileged families. One night a month, the club also made sandwiches and gave them to soldiers traveling through the train depot. <sup>74</sup> These activities nurtured group identity and civil consciousness. They also reflected positive interaction with the broader community.

Temple Beth-El's sisterhood sponsored many different events from Chanukah programs and parties to lectures on current Jewish events. One of the most cherished functions of the sisterhood was organizing the annual temple picnic at Pineview Beach or West Lake in Bessemer. Sarah Erdberg remembers that from her time in Bessemer, she, Ida Lefkovits, and Bertha Erlick helped plan and execute the picnic with the temple funding drinks, ice cream, and prizes for the various swimming races held. <sup>75</sup> Charlotte Jospin Cohn also recalls the early 1930s picnic's being the "big event of the year":



My mother used to dress me up. I had long dark curls and wore sun suits for the affair. Mr. Sam Lefkovits, who to me was a very imposing figure, would tell my mother that she shouldn't dress me like that in such a short outfit. . . . He just didn't think little girls should go like that.<sup>76</sup>

According to Cohn, the picnic was an all-day affair. The women made fried chicken and potato salad, and the Jews in the community gathered together to socialize. Estelle Seigel Silverstein can still see images of "the men playing pinochle, the kids renting boats and going swimming, and the grandmothers looking after us."<sup>77</sup>

In the early 1940s, Temple Beth-El continued observing the High Holidays and Passover with visiting rabbinical students conducting the services. Other traditions from a generation past were also maintained. Lynne Applebaum Waggoner, whose parents, Oscar and Evelyn Stein Applebaum, ran Guarantee Shoe Company on Second Avenue, remembers playing outside with other children during part of the services: "I really felt a sense of belonging because I knew everyone. Even though [the temple] was not supposed to be Orthodox then, the men and women sat on different sides. The women did a great deal of talking."<sup>78</sup> Elaine Becker Bercu ["Sister" Becker as she was known], a teenager during the forties, confirms Waggoner's memories and adds that when Friday night services were held, men from the congregation conducted them.<sup>79</sup> She adds that confirmation and Sunday-school classes were all held in the temple, at long tables in the rear of the sanctuary because at that time there were no separate classrooms.<sup>80</sup> Apparently confirmation was the more accepted ritual in the decades leading up to Rabbi Gallinger's tenure. During this period, Jerry Seigel, Charles Weinstein's grandson, underwent the bar mitzvah ritual. Although he was the only one of those interviewed to do so, this indicates that both Reform and Orthodox traditions coexisted in Bessemer's temple.

Elaine's brother, Jack Becker, along with Arnold Lefkovits, Estelle Seigel, Jack Green, Sam Kartus, and Marvin Cherner were confirmed at Temple Beth-El in the late 1930s with

Rabbi Myron Silverman from Birmingham's Temple Emanu-El officiating.<sup>81</sup> In 1944, Elaine Becker was confirmed by Rabbi Milton L. Grafman who had replaced Rabbi Silverman at Temple Emanu-El in 1941.<sup>82</sup> These examples reflect how proximity to a larger Jewish community could foster the maintenance of ritual.<sup>83</sup>

Bessemer's Jewish population was stable from 1907 through the 1940s.<sup>84</sup> From a total of 100 individuals in 1907, the number increased slightly to 111 in 1927<sup>85</sup>, out of the city's overall population of just over 20,000 in 1930.<sup>86</sup> By 1938 there were approximately forty-three Jewish families in Bessemer.<sup>87</sup> Shortly after the end of World War II, Bessemer's Jewish population again totaled 111 people.<sup>88</sup>

During the 1940s family ceremonies and observances regarding Jewish rituals varied. While most did not keep strictly kosher, neither did they eat the proscribed pork and shellfish. As Marvin Cherner indicated, after his grandparents passed away, while his family still observed the "special rules for Passover," they modified its eating strictures.<sup>89</sup> Elaine Becker has memories of her mother picking her up from school every day during Passover and driving her home for lunch "to observe the holiday. I can still taste the 'sweetness' of the Dr. Pepper that had apparently been blessed by the Rabbi."<sup>90</sup>

Alvin Barr, who with his parents came to Bessemer every Sunday to have lunch with his paternal grandparents, Martin and Jenny Barr, and his Aunt Dora, Uncle Harry, and cousins Elaine and Sylvia Ray Hart, can still visualize the ritual of those Sunday meals:

My grandparents did the cooking. We'd eat, and what I remember most about it was my grandmother would never sit down at the table with us. She would always stay in the kitchen and wouldn't eat until everyone else had eaten. I think that's a tradition from way back in Russia. . . . Often she'd cook tsimmes, a conglomeration of meat, potatoes, and prunes. I know a lot of people wouldn't include the prunes, but I enjoyed it. She'd have homemade pumpernickel bread too.<sup>91</sup>



*Martin Barr with grandson Alvin,  
the author's great-grandfather and father,  
in Bessemer. (From the collection of Terry Barr.)*

Arnold Lefkovits, who says his family was not particularly religious, described the “typical Jewish dinners” of chicken or “roast” and matzo-ball soup his family enjoyed on the holidays. Reflecting acculturation, he also remembers

one time at the house we had a cook and had a bunch of people over for dinner. And the cook brings in, I think, some turnip greens with a big piece of white meat right in the middle of it. . . . Another time my grandfather Sam—and in the old days lunch was the big meal—had some of his religious Jewish friends over for lunch. My grandmother Ida didn’t know much about kosher, so she brings out and puts in front of Grandpa to carve a big pork roast. And Grandpa looks down and sees that it’s a pork roast in the midst of his rather religious friends, picks the platter up, goes to the window, and throws it out.<sup>92</sup>

The Beckers were, next to the Charles Weinstens, perhaps the most religiously-observant Jewish family in town. Levi Becker,

who owned Pizitz Department store (a separate store from the older and larger Birmingham Pizitz) on Second Avenue, immigrated to the United States from Vladivostok, and, according to his son Jack, he “never forgot that this country afforded him opportunities that he didn’t have before.” Levi’s wife Eva was born and raised in Birmingham, and though neither Jack nor his sister, Elaine, remembers their family keeping kosher, they do recall other family rituals. Elaine has memories of her grandfather (“Pompa”) living with them and leading their Passover seders: “We were expected to sit, read, and observe for at least two to three hours.” She also vividly remembers her mother lighting the “short, white” Sabbath candles on Friday night, “A napkin over her head, her hands sweeping over the candles, then covering her eyes with her hands as she recited the prayers. And every morning she said a prayer welcoming the new day.”<sup>93</sup>

But as with Jewish people across America, there was at least some degree of internal conflict during the Chanukah/Christmas season for Bessemer’s Jewish citizens. These tensions were reflected in the compromises Bessemer’s Jews made both within their own families and with the greater community. Estelle Seigel Silverstein’s memories are representative:

when Christmas came along, my grandfather Charles who, like I said, was very religious, would celebrate Chanukah by giving us Gelt. We never lit the menorah; he always did it and said all the prayers, and then he’d give us a quarter or something like that. We’d save the money, and then my brother and I would go to the dime store and buy Christmas presents. Every Christmas, while we didn’t have a tree, we did have Santa Claus. And Papa would get up and watch us open presents. The Cherner’s had a furniture store [Jefferson Furniture], but also carried bicycles, and one year we went downtown on a day not long before Christmas. Daddy was talking to Mr. Cherner, and I was with Mother, when I saw a bicycle there. I got on it and then noticed that it had my name on it. Mother said, “Well, you know like in the shoe business they name shoes after people like the ‘Sarah’ . . . the same thing’s true for the bicycle business.” And like a jerk I

believed her. But it wouldn't bother my grandfather at all to watch us open our Christmas presents. The same thing was true of Passover and Easter. We'd dye eggs—not using the dye that gentiles would use; instead, Mother would use either coffee or tea, and so we'd have the ugliest eggs around. We'd also get Easter baskets with chocolate candy, but we couldn't eat the candy until after Passover.<sup>94</sup>

Many Jewish merchants offered Christmas light displays during the season in order to show good faith with gentile Bessemer friends and customers. But the greatest ironies were found at home. Arnold Lefkovits, whose family did have Christmas trees, recalls that his father Norman

used to decorate our yard with lights on the bushes and shrubbery. And one time Daddy won the award for prettiest Christmas decorations in Bessemer. That's hard to believe, but it happened. All blue lights he had on the shrubbery near the front of our house . . . Later on I thought of the irony of this. And though we had trees, there was no religious significance . . . we'd never have a star or any other religious decorations. . . . It was just the friendliness, good cheer, the joy of Santa Claus. And of course we'd all go to Temple Beth-El. I remember when I was little asking my Grandpa why we went to temple. He said, "It's the custom, the custom."<sup>95</sup>

In the early 1940s, Charles Weinstein was performing the duties of lay reader for temple services on a regular basis.<sup>96</sup> Soon after, however, reflecting a refusal to compromise his religious principles any longer in that Beth-El did not hold services regularly enough, Weinstein began driving to Birmingham to attend synagogue. He would spend the weekend with the Kindling or Mayer families, and after services he and Mr. Mayer discussed the Torah until Sunday afternoon when Weinstein returned to Bessemer.<sup>97</sup>

At this point, however, Levi Becker, along with other Jewish residents, decided that to promote greater religious as well as social unity, Temple Beth-El needed a full-time rabbi.<sup>98</sup> And so in 1948, Rabbi Joseph S. Gallinger was hired as the new religious

leader. Gallinger came to Bessemer from the Valdosta Hebrew Congregation in Valdosta, Georgia. Prior to that he and his family narrowly escaped the Holocaust. Gallinger and his wife, Ann, were natives of Germany. In 1938, with their six-month-old daughter, they had the good fortune to be “passengers on the last ship to carry a load of Nazism’s victims from Germany before Hitler started his wars of conquest in earnest.”<sup>99</sup> For the next nine years in Bessemer, Gallinger performed typical rabbinical duties while also starting *The Jewish Monitor*, Alabama’s first Jewish newspaper, primarily reflecting local, national, and international Jewish concerns. *The Jewish Monitor* provided information that brought together Alabama Jews for over three decades, often challenging them to consider their ties to their own communities but also advocating that they keep the state of Israel at the forefront of their consciousness. Gallinger served as president of Bessemer’s B’nai B’rith lodge and secretary of the Alabama State Association of B’nai B’rith for four terms.<sup>100</sup> Ann Gallinger, who initially handled all of the business details, edited the paper after her husband’s death in 1976.<sup>101</sup>

Members of the congregation regarded Gallinger as a positive, unifying force for the community. Lynne Applebaum Waggoner described him as “well-liked, respected, and supportive of the community,”<sup>102</sup> and Alvin Barr deemed him a “humble” man.<sup>103</sup> Jerry Cherner remembers well Gallinger’s presence:

His first bar mitzvah student was Sydney Sokol, Buddy Sokol’s brother. In about a six-month period, Rabbi Gallinger was able to train Sydney for his ceremony. Gallinger was someone who identified well with the young people of Bessemer. He taught us well and provided us with knowledge of the Hebrew language. Just as importantly, he taught us a great deal about life and gave us an appreciation for the important values of life, like community. I thought very highly of him.<sup>104</sup>

Not only were Gallinger’s years in Bessemer marked by regular temple ceremonies and rituals, they were also the occasions of educational and civic activity. Gallinger was dedicated to

making Bessemer's congregation a center of Jewish activity, while also affording Bessemer's Jews a view beyond their provincial, small-town world to a broader one in which they, as Jews, would be aware of anti-Semitism and persecution. For Gallinger, being Jewish was not a passive identity; it meant accepting a place in the world despite, or perhaps because of, adversity and intolerance.

One of the ways he sought to do this was by inviting Nathan Sokol to the temple to speak about his visit to Israel and his meeting with Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion.<sup>105</sup> Secondly, Gallinger also helped Bessemer secure the hosting of the 1956 meeting of the Alabama State Association of B'nai B'rith, which included a two-day program of executive, business, and workshop sessions, panel discussions, music, dancing, and a midnight breakfast on Saturday.<sup>106</sup> In another instance, because Bessemer's temple was "the only one in the state not affiliated with either of the three movements since it serves adherence [*sic*] of all three,"<sup>107</sup> the temple sisterhood sponsored a three-part series on the definitions and meaning of Jewish Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reform. Rabbi Gallinger presided over the meetings, the first of which, held at the Bessemer home of Mr. and Mrs. Phillip Ripko, produced a lively debate. Rabbi Tamarkin

on the basis of extensive experience and study in the Orthodox ministry, claimed that the term 'Orthodox' is wrongly applied when used in connection with the traditional form of Judaism. He categorically maintained that this movement represents the only true form of Judaism as such; that it is the form of Judaism revealed in its entirety by God to Moses, and handed down authoritatively from generation to generation. While Rabbi Tamarkin refused to voice his opinion on the merits of other Jewish religious practices, he nevertheless stated that it is they, which need a qualifying adjective, such as Conservative, Reform, or Reconstructionist, since it is they which deviate from the form established by the Divine Revelation.<sup>108</sup>

As evidenced by this program and the debate it fostered, Temple Beth-El's ability to overcome its earlier congregational split, its welcome to worshippers of all the branches of Judaism, and its

role as a center for the religious and social needs of all Bessemer's Jews not only made this congregation unique in Alabama, it also doubtlessly provided a sense of place, comfort, and security for a people who, despite the relative harmony with which they coexisted with Bessemer's non-Jewish white majority, nevertheless knew that they were different and apart.

In the early to mid-1950s, it appeared that Temple Beth-El would remain a stable congregation. The temple board recognized that a one-room facility did not adequately accommodate a congregation that required space for Sunday school and confirmation and bar mitzvah receptions. No one then could foresee that Bessemer's Jewish population had already reached its apex and that it would decline within two decades.<sup>109</sup> In September 1955 the temple board announced formal plans to enlarge Temple Beth-El, and in June 1956 construction began on the addition that would eventually double the space of the existing structure, "provide much-needed class rooms, a vestry, a kitchen and auxiliary facilities," and give the outer structure a new facade in order to "blend well with the building style used in the neighborhood." Air conditioning added a final touch. Architect J. J. Baird worked from "designs created by Rabbi J. S. Gallinger . . . with D. K. Price of the Alabama Associated Building and Improvement Co. as contractor." The building committee headed by Hyman Weinstein, included Oscar Applebaum, Levi Becker, Jake Cherner, Gallinger, Harry Wittenstein, and Leonard Zarovsky.<sup>110</sup> During the winter of 1956-1957 the remodeling project was completed, and Temple Beth-El's congregation began worshipping in a "structure of brick veneer with Permastone trim . . . [which] incorporat[ed] the stern, utilitarian pattern of the original building into a modern architectural design which gives the effect of functional beauty . . . [it also contained] a pillared portico lead[ing] into a spacious lobby." Other features included "silent swinging doors" leading from classrooms to the sanctuary, "western pine wood paneling," "modernistic lighting," and "swinging steel windows."<sup>111</sup>

"Liberal contributions from the membership of the congregation" made the enlargement possible, and Jacob Cherner, who



died in 1956, willed the temple a “sizable legacy” to aid in the endeavor. The project received other funds both in Cherner’s name and from “free will gifts from members of the Birmingham community.” Non-Jewish citizens of Bessemer contributed “unsolicited” money to the remodeling fund, a further sign of Jewish acceptance in the town.<sup>112</sup>

Dedication of Temple Beth-El’s additions and a rededication of the original sanctuary took place on Friday, February 15, and Sunday, February 17, 1957. This occasion also marked the sixtieth anniversary of the temple as well as the twentieth anniversary of Gallinger’s ordination.<sup>113</sup> The schedule of services for the February 15th ceremony, again reflecting the great degree of acceptance Bessemer’s Jews enjoyed, included opening prayers and responsive reading led by Gallinger; the reciting of Psalm 122 by the Rev. Noble R. Edwards, past president of the Bessemer Ministerial Association and pastor of Bessemer’s First Christian Church; and a scripture reading from 1 Chronicles 29 and 1 Kings 2 and 8 by the Rev. Robert M. Man, rector of Trinity Episcopal Church, Bessemer’s oldest church. A reception, sponsored by the Marvel City Lodge of B’nai B’rith in honor of Hyman Weinstein and Gallinger, followed in the new vestry.<sup>114</sup>

Thus Rabbi Gallinger saw Temple Beth-El through a prosperous era. Nonetheless, six months after the temple rededication, he accepted the pulpit of Tri-Cities Temple B’nai Israel serving Florence, Sheffield, and Tuscumbia, Alabama.<sup>115</sup> Temple member Buddy Sokol observed that Gallinger received a better offer from the Tri-Cities temple, and no doubt serving three communities appeared to him to be a more secure opportunity as well.<sup>116</sup> Ann Gallinger, in a recent interview, remembers the move as being taken in part because, in her view, Bessemer’s Jews were “not very devoted to or interested in Judaism. . . . In Bessemer you were more connected to non-Jews. . . .”<sup>117</sup> Still, leaving Bessemer at this time meant going from a Jewish community that numbered 130 residents to one that was not even listed in the *American Jewish Year Book* records.<sup>118</sup> This move marked the beginning of Temple Beth-El’s end. While High Holiday services went on as usual in September 1957, with lay leader Sam Meer officiating,<sup>119</sup> and while

other life cycle rituals continued, without the stability and inspiration of a regular rabbi and with the other social and economic factors that were adversely affecting Bessemer, the younger generation of Jews left in increasing numbers, thereby making it difficult for the remaining congregation to support the synagogue or pay a rabbi.<sup>120</sup> Temple Beth-El never again had a regular rabbi.

The exodus, however, had actually started prior to Gallinger's resignation. From the 1940s through the 1960s, many of Bessemer's Jewish youth left for college or enlisted in the military and never moved back.<sup>121</sup> Others, especially women, moved away when they married.<sup>122</sup> Still others moved from Bessemer to Birmingham for business and/or the allure of a larger and more diverse setting with a Jewish populace sufficient to support three congregations and a Jewish community center.<sup>123</sup> As Jerry Cherner put it, "Birmingham in the 1950s became more and more a place for socializing, for trying to meet people, and for participating in interaction with Jewish people of your same age."<sup>124</sup> Those who came of age in Bessemer in the 1920s and 1930s, who raised families there, and who thus chose to live the remainder of their lives there, like Buddy Sokol, witnessed the migration of their own children and felt the angst of watching Jewish life in Bessemer collapse:

When I came to Bessemer in 1933, there were about thirty-eight Jewish families. Our temple was successful; we were able to get our services on a regular basis. But as my family grew up, we slowly lost men through death, or moving out of town. As our kids grew up, Murray [his eldest son] went to The University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa in the mid-1960s, and we got to where in order to get a minyan we had to ask him and later our other son, Jerry, to come home from college to make the ten needed. And so things depreciated enough to where we had trouble even having a service. Today in the Conservative movement you can count women in your minyan, but then you couldn't. So both Murray and Bruce Weinstein [Hyman's son] would leave college on Friday afternoon to be home for services on Friday night. They didn't want to come, but because their fathers were so

active in the temple they came when we asked them to, so that we could have a minyan.<sup>125</sup>

It could be that in Bessemer, as in other communities across America, the younger generation did not share the same ties that the preceding generations had to tradition and place, especially if that place were a small town. However, another way of looking at their exodus is that this younger generation wanted to relive the experiences of the older generation that challenged them to explore and discover new areas of prosperity for themselves and their families-to-be. While certainly the Jews who came to Bessemer in the 1880s and 1890s were also establishing traditions in a new place, the suburbanization of America in the 1950s surely caught up this younger generation, who not only wanted their own space to establish their own traditions and family but who also wanted to be like other prosperous Americans. Thus, while increasing assimilation and intermarriage with non-Jews certainly affected some of Bessemer's younger Jews and caused Bessemer's Jewish population to dwindle, the lure of greater economic mobility and prosperity and of a stronger, more secure and established Jewish community motivated others to leave home.<sup>126</sup> Additionally, Bessemer itself was declining economically by this period. In the late 1940s, the mines in south Bessemer closed, and in the 1960s, the Rolling Mill shut down, and Pullman and nearby TCI began laying off workers. In the 1950s it was clear that unless you wanted to go into your father's business, there was little opportunity to enter a new business or profession outside of practicing law. And again, without a full-time rabbi, Bessemer's temple could hardly be as attractive as congregations with regular religious leaders.

Nonetheless a definite Jewish presence remained in Bessemer through the 1960s. In 1962 the city celebrated its diamond jubilee, and Jewish citizens served prominently on the jubilee committees. In 1966 Bennett Cherner served as the Jubilee Historical Book Business Manager and was assisted by Sam Picard and Sidney Sokol. The directors of the jubilee itself included Jack Kartus, son of Kartus Korner owner Harry Kartus, Frank Sachs whose family owned Sachs Furniture Store, and Ralph Sokol. The apogee of the

jubilee was the gala pageant held at Bessemer Stadium on the evenings of April 9 to 14, 1962, with Frank Sachs as head of wardrobe and makeup and Herbert S. Goldstein, Murray Sokol, and Carol Green as actors.<sup>127</sup>

Also acknowledged for the event were the Jewish-owned businesses placing ads in *The Bessemer Story*, the jubilee's commemorative magazine, including Picard's Clothing, Sokol's, I. Rosen, ("Fair and Square since 1916"), Sachs' Furniture, Guarantee Shoe, Jefferson Furniture, Kartus Korner, The Outlet Store owned by Jack Kartus, and Pizitz of Bessemer. Julian Erlick, son of pioneer Samuel Erlick, individually sponsored an ad.

Yet the jubilee marked the twilight of Jewish-owned stores in downtown. With the death of the early patriarchs and with no younger generation to take over, many Jewish-owned retail businesses, like I. Rosen, closed in the 1960s, while others, including Sokol's, tried to survive by opening locations in recently-constructed malls, either in Bessemer or in more-economically viable and prominent communities elsewhere. Still other Jewish residents, like Jerry Cherner, while continuing to own stores in Bessemer, moved to Birmingham to be better situated to join other synagogues and the Jewish community center. Additionally, as in other contemporary southern communities, Bessemer's businessmen had to cope with the civil rights issues that were finally becoming too heated to be ignored. This was a town that through the 1950s allowed the Ku Klux Klan to post a sign on at least one highway leading into the city welcoming everyone to Bessemer. Many of Bessemer's white-owned retail stores did business with both black and white clientele (heeding the philosophy of Neiman Marcus that "Anyone alive should be considered a prospect"<sup>128</sup>). Some white and Jewish-owned businesses catered primarily to one or the other race (Nat Wittenstein's State/Dixie Clothing being an example of a Jewish-owned business catering primarily to black clientele). However, all of these stores had segregated restrooms, drinking fountains, and lunch counters. With integration and subsequent boycotting of white-owned businesses in the mid-1960s, downtown Bessemer ultimately became a shopping district patronized primarily by black citizens, the more mobile whites



*Ida Rosen with daughters Sonia Faye (right) and Beverly (left).  
The family owned I. Rosen Clothing, a prominent Bessemer business.  
(From the collection of Terry Barr.)*

first shopping in and then moving to the newer, more-upscale suburban centers. By the mid-1970s, Bessemer's Jewish-dominated "garment district" had been reduced to Picard's, The Outlet Store, Jefferson Furniture, and Sokol's. When Sokol's opened its second location in Western Hills Mall in the 1970s (in nearby Midfield), the Western Hills area, according to Buddy Sokol, was 85 percent white and 15 percent black: "Bessemer was just the opposite. It was a matter of our having to carry two entirely different inventories. Not that what the blacks were wearing wasn't quality clothing, it just got to be too expensive to carry two types of clothing, so we closed the Bessemer store in 1976." The Western Hills store subsequently closed in 1981, when it became evident that none of the Sokol children wanted to step into the business.<sup>129</sup>

Relations between Bessemer's Jews and other racial/ethnic minorities was typical of other small southern towns and cities. Several of the Jewish residents employed black maids and cooks, including the Sokols, Beckers, and Barrs. As far back as 1923, the I. Rosen store employed black workers. In a photograph from that year, at least five black men are part of the group of employees seen posing with Mr. Rosen in front of the newly remodeled store. In the 1950s, according to Lynne Applebaum Waggoner, her father, Oscar, let the black janitor in their retail shoe business wait on black customers even though he knew that the KKK "might not like it."<sup>130</sup>

Lifelong Bessemer resident Jo Ann Terry Barr remembers well an outdoor barbecue in the early 1950s that she and her mother, Ellen (Mrs. G. C.) Terry, helped plan for Ida Rosen as "an engagement party that Ida was throwing for her daughter Beverly's best friend who was marrying a man from New York." The Rosens had one of the finest homes on Clarendon Avenue, and, for the event, Ida employed several black men from the I. Rosen store, hired other black servers, and together with their regular yard man and her regular maid Jessie, had them all dressed in white to cater to the seventy-five to eighty guests. But, according to Barr, everyone, black and white, participated in the cooking including Barr, her mother, and Ida. The outdoor affair was a complete mix of southern and Jewish.<sup>131</sup> For the Jewish guests, particularly those from New York, there was barbecue beef. For those southerners who know only one definition of barbecue, pork ribs were also turning on the grill. Shrimp cocktail, potato salad, and homemade peach ice cream complemented the main course.<sup>132</sup> Other interethnic mixing was evidenced by Estelle Seigel Silverstein, whose family lived less than one block from the temple and two blocks from St. Aloysius Catholic Church. Silverstein still visualizes her days of playing with her good friends and neighbors, the Schilleci children: "Imagine! Jewish and Italian Catholic kids playing together on the streets of Bessemer! But it happened. We were so close. We all went to their weddings at St. Aloysius."<sup>133</sup>

On the other hand, Betty Beck Lipschitz did not feel that Bessemer was making racial progress:

When I graduated from college [The University of Alabama] I just made the decision that I did not want to stay in Alabama. By then I had become aware of the narrow-mindedness of a lot of the people and the thinking there, and I was just not comfortable with it. I wanted to go somewhere and find people who had more similar interests to me . . . [Social change in Bessemer] was all in the formative stage at that point. We were all not nearly as outspoken or as focused on what was right and what was wrong, but I knew things weren't right there [racially speaking]. I wanted a more liberal environment.<sup>134</sup>

Time and business can fade away, and for other Jewish congregations in small-town Alabama, this is becoming increasingly evident. Demopolis, for instance, at one time claimed 180 Jewish residents who came for many of the same reasons as Bessemer's Jews. Situated on the Tombigbee river, Demopolis offered a lively and prosperous economy until the 1970s, when the "Wal-Martization" of America occurred. Children grew up, moved to what they regarded as more vibrant locales; some intermarried and converted,<sup>135</sup> and by 1999 only one Jewish man lived in Demopolis. He travels sixty miles north to Tuscaloosa to attend temple services.<sup>136</sup> In Selma, scene of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous march to Montgomery in 1965, a Jewish population that numbered in the hundreds has now fallen to thirty-two. A reunion in 1997 brought back over three hundred Jews with Selma ties from as far away as California. Some of those returning reflected that in Selma, as in Bessemer, Jews and non-Jews had always enjoyed very close relations. Like Bessemer and Demopolis, the reasons so many left were because of the desire of younger Jews to pursue careers outside of the family business and the growth of chain stores that drove the family-owned shops out of business.<sup>137</sup>

For Bessemer's Temple Beth-El, the end came on October 24, 1974, when the following item appeared in *The Birmingham News* under the headline "Bessemer synagogue closes doors . . . Lack of Members":

Bessemer's Temple Beth-El has closed after more than three-quarters of a century serving the Jewish families of that city. The Bessemer Church of the Nazarene now worships in the building and Beth-El's remaining families have transferred to synagogues in Birmingham. A dwindling membership over the years reached the point that a quorum was difficult to maintain in order to open religious services. 'It's been years since we've had a bar mitzvah,' commented Mrs. Roland Seal, a former member, now attending Knesseth Israel Congregation. According to Rabbi Gallinger, Jewish families found Bessemer too far away to conveniently work in Birmingham, so they gradually moved away until the most recent membership crisis was reached. The ritual articles of the synagogue, including the Torah Scrolls and prayer books, have been distributed to other area synagogues.<sup>138</sup>

Still, the legacy of Bessemer's temple and its Jewish community lives on in very positive images for the vast majority of present and former Jewish residents. Those willing to be interviewed are of a generation born in the first half of this century and who remember Bessemer's unity and the sense of place and security they felt through businesses, the temple, and kinship with each other. They felt that they were generally recognized and accepted as being Jewish.

However, as in other Jewish communities in the South, unity and good feeling were not the only stories. A few incidents of anti-Semitism are also remembered. Betty Beck Lipschitz experienced some discomfort as a Jew in Bessemer. Historian of the high school National Honor Society and of the "A" Club, a member of Tri-Hi-Y, the Thespian Club, and both the newspaper and yearbook staffs, Betty was nonetheless ineligible for the Cotillion Club, which sponsored the Debutante Ball: "I remember some of my friends and my mother's friends apologizing for the fact that this club did not permit Jewish members. But I wasn't interested in being in it anyway."<sup>139</sup> For Betty, despite her accomplishments, growing up in Bessemer had its limitations.

Lynne Applebaum Waggoner believes it "was hard not to feel different in such a southern Christian community." When she



was in elementary school, a classmate once asked her why she didn't "live in Palestine. My mother told me to tell her that I was as American as she was." Her feelings of being different were further exacerbated by the daily prayer in high school that always ended with "In Jesus' name we pray." While she felt accepted as a Jew and knew that the Christian fundamentalist churches around her literally thought of her and other Jews as being God's chosen people, Waggoner also remembers seeing "hooded men walking to meetings at Roosevelt Park."<sup>140</sup>

Jerry Cherner, still a successful Bessemer businessman, also experienced a few rough spots as a Jew in the Marvel City. In the late 1940s, his father, Jacob Cherner, wanted to build a house in Bessemer's West Lake area. However, "it was suggested to him very strongly that it would be preferable if Jewish people did not build at West Lake." Jerry also recalls that when his brother Bennett ran for vice president of his high school class, all of his posters were "torn from the wall," and "Damn Jew" was written over some of them. While his family also had non-Jewish friends, Jerry believes that Bessemer's Jewish citizens "were perceived as different . . . and were tolerated," rather than being fully accepted.<sup>141</sup>

Finally, Arnold Lefkovits remembers a fight in high school where a "redneck boy" picked on a Jewish friend of his at a basketball game. This led to a behind-the-school, after-the-game fight where Arnold and his friend, badly outnumbered, were ultimately joined by Sammy Jospin, a very big, athletic, and Jewish member of the football team. At that point, the tide turned, and the fight soon ended.<sup>142</sup> Yet, Lefkovits' good memories of Bessemer, again, clearly outweigh the bad.

During the decline of Jewish Bessemer, the city showed its ability to appreciate and honor those in its midst who were of a minority faith. When Levi Becker passed away in 1967, the next edition of *The Bessemer News* included a two-column editorial celebrating his life. Noting that the Becker family arrived in America at the turn of the century from Poland, the editorialist asserted that Becker

was ever-ready to contribute his share of any community undertaking, especially when a contribution was to benefit the poor.

In those years, and in the years of his retirement, he worked tirelessly to make Bessemer a better place for us all, rich and poor alike, to live in. He had a true compassion for the betterment of his fellow man, and he spent his retirement splendidly striving toward that betterment.<sup>143</sup>

Becker, five-time chairperson of the Rotary club, tirelessly oversaw the renovation of the old post office and the subsequent moving of the Carnegie Library to a more spacious facility<sup>144</sup>

Still other Jewish residents, throughout the town's history, contributed to its civic welfare. In the 1890s Samuel Stein was a charter member and master of Bessemer's Masonic Lodge.<sup>145</sup> In 1962 the Bessemer Chamber of Commerce elected Sylvan Laufman, brother-in-law of Buddy Sokol, as president, with Bennett Cherner as vice-president of commercial activities. And in 1966, Bennett Cherner was elected to the Alabama legislature. Both Bennett Cherner and his father Jacob were very active in the Lions Club, while Jerry Cherner is still active in the Kiwanis Club.<sup>146</sup> Adolph Beck, father of Betty, became general superintendent of the Ore-Mine Division of Bessemer's TCI in the 1950s, while his wife, Rima, was president of the Arlington Grammar School PTA and of the Quest Club, a women's literary society. In 1974, Frank Sachs was named the Bessemer Area Chamber of Commerce's "Man of the Year." Sachs helped organize the Bessemer Jaycees in 1935, was a past master of Bessemer Masonic Lodge 458, organized "Teen Town," a "hang-out for students," in 1944, and in the same year helped reorganize the Chamber of Commerce. Sachs was "awarded a life membership" in the PTA and was "an early member of the YMCA . . . [and] helped design its steam bath facility."<sup>147</sup> Clearly, despite some of the problems noted above, Jewish people in Bessemer were part of every aspect of the town's life and livelihood.

Endings are difficult for most people. For Bessemer's Jewish history, the natural ending is Beth-El cemetery. The earliest



*Bessemer's Beth-El cemetery. Plaque on the left is dedicated to former caretaker, Maxine Seal. (Photo by Terry Barr.)*

marked grave in the cemetery is that of Marion Green who, four months old when she died, was buried on March 11, 1903. The earliest adult interment was Minnette Levy, born in Alsace and died July 2, 1906. In the 1960s and 1970s, Maxine Goldberg Seal oversaw the cemetery, caring for it "like it was her baby." At her death in 1983, a commemorative plaque was placed at the cemetery entrance citing her "everlasting love and devotion" to its care.<sup>148</sup> Maintenance for the cemetery next fell to Buddy Sokol who had already overseen the cemetery's future. When the temple was sold in 1974, Buddy, Roland Seal, Maxine's husband, and a few others decided to use the money to sustain the cemetery. They turned the Care for the Cemetery fund over to Arnold Lefkovits who was by then a Birmingham attorney. The use of the accrued interest from this fund eliminated the need for family assessments.<sup>149</sup>

Arnold Lefkovits detailed the events leading to the cemetery's perpetual care and solvency. Sometime in the 1920s his grandfather, Sam Lefkovits, helped establish a young cousin

of his, William Lefkovits, in Bessemer. Sam took William into his home, raised him as a son, and then started a business for him, William Lefkovits' Department Store, on the corner of Third Avenue and Nineteenth Street. William married Rebecca Odess of Birmingham, and they had one son, John, who was only two months older than his cousin Arnold. Arnold remembers that John was sick for most of his life with epilepsy: "They didn't send him to regular schools, but to a private school. He was as smart as he could be and a very nice guy." John never married or went to college, and eventually succumbed to his illness while in his late thirties. The entire family died within a little over a year, between 1960 and 1961. William died first and Rebecca second, both from cancer, with John following her only a week later. After John's death, "Everything that was centered in his estate was left to aunts and uncles. And they were good enough to come to me—I was a lawyer then—and say, 'Arnold, we want to give \$10,000 to the cemetery. First, we want a chain-link fence around it used from the money from John's estate. And then we want to take \$10,000 and want you to draw up a trust for the perpetual care of the cemetery.'" Thus was established the John A. Lefkovits Beth-El Cemetery Trust. By January 1997, the original \$10,000 trust had grown to \$28,000 and the original \$45,000 temple trust to \$120,000.<sup>150</sup> Expenditures are minimal today, and as Buddy Sokol says, "When we're all gone, there will be enough money to continue the cemetery's upkeep." The only person buried in the cemetery in the last five years was Norman Lefkovits, Arnold's distant relation from Columbiana, Alabama, in 1997. Sokol also acknowledged that a potential problem exists in that he is the only person now with knowledge of the procedures to follow when someone requires a plot.<sup>151</sup>

One of the strangest requests concerning the cemetery came from Harry and Esther Kartus whose graves are the first encountered upon entering the site. The Kartus plot is in the bottom left corner of the cemetery as the Kartuses desired. For decades Harry and Esther lived on the corner of Clarendon and Twenty-first Street in Bessemer, and of

course, his business from 1902 to his death in 1966 was The Kartus Korner.

The 1998 *American Jewish Year Book* lists only seven cities in Alabama with Jewish populations over 100 people, with 250 Jewish people categorized as living in "other places."<sup>152</sup> In the following year only one Jewish-owned business remained in Bessemer: Torme Foods, run by Merv and Marvin Torme, who do not reside in the city.<sup>153</sup> In a town whose population as of 1999 is approximately thirty-five thousand, there are only four Jewish individuals. Their words offer a perspective on the fullness, irony, and sorrow of the life and death of Jewish Bessemer.

Nat Wittenstein, who came to Bessemer from Brooklyn, New York, in the late 1940s and ran a clothing business on First Avenue for over thirty years (variously known as Grand, State, and Dixie Clothing), was happy living in Bessemer: "I have no licks against Bessemer. If I did, I'd go live with my kids. No, Bessemer is fine. I've had no rough times here."<sup>154</sup>

Alvin Barr, whose grandfather owned Barr Hatters and who moved to Bessemer in 1952, when he married Jo Ann Terry, grew to love the city. But before his move, while traveling back and forth in 1946 from his home in Birmingham to the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, his Greyhound bus always stopped in Bessemer: "I remember the Bessemer bus station, and I also remember saying 'Boy, this is one place I'll never live'. . . . Bessemer looked like a little run-down town to me, compared to Birmingham. Of course, when you make statements like that you live to regret them."<sup>155</sup>

As for Buddy Sokol (whose wife Polly is the fourth Jewish resident), the memories are bittersweet:

The only thing that bothers me is how the Jewish people have more or less migrated, because we had a viable Jewish community here and we were respected because we had the temple and kept it up. And to the end people admired the fact that only fifteen or so families could keep the temple going. I'm proud of our cemetery . . . proud of the fact that it will keep going when I'm

gone. . . . I really have enjoyed the time I've lived in Bessemer, and I think that the Jewish community in itself did a remarkable job of doing what they did do while we were there. When I moved here in 1933, there were about thirty-eight families. I can visualize the sixty-seventy families that we had at one time. But we have all remained close friends, even the ones who have moved away.<sup>156</sup>

That closeness is attested to by former Bessemerites who maintain ties, visit each other for high school reunions, hold monthly lunches, and make frequent phone calls. Perhaps Elaine Becker Bercu best captures the nostalgia for Jewish life in these disappearing small Jewish communities. She has lived in Shaker Heights, Ohio, since her marriage in 1953, and her parents, Levi and Eva, were integral to the community history. Bercu writes,

As you get older you begin to reflect. I live now in a much bigger home. I belong to *The Temple*. Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver and his son Rabbi Daniel Silver were our chief rabbis before their passing. But I must tell you, there isn't a time when I stand for the "She-Ma" that I don't think of our family in that little wooden temple in Bessemer, Alabama.<sup>157</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In a *Jewish Monitor* story from January 1957, the temple was referred to as Congregation Beth-El, perhaps its original name as remembered by Mrs. H. Goldberg, who at the time was the only person still living who was there at its founding in 1891. Otherwise, in this same article and in all other found sources, Beth-El is referred to as Temple Beth-El. "Bessemer Celebrates Anniversaries In State's Second Oldest Synagogue," *Jewish Monitor*, January 1957, 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Jewish Monitor*, January 1957, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Albert (Buddy) Sokol interview conducted by Terry Barr, December 24, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ralph Sokol to Terry Barr, July 16, 1997.

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<sup>6</sup> Charlotte Jospin Cohn interview conducted by Terry Barr, June 12, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> J. E. Mulkin interview conducted by Terry Barr, July 17, 1998. See below for additional reasons.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Edward Cohen, *The Peddler's Grandson: Growing Up Jewish in Mississippi*, (Oxford, MS, 1999); Deborah R. Weiner, "The Jews of Keystone: Life in a Multicultural Boomtown," *Southern Jewish History* 2, (1999): 1-18; and Lee Shai Weissbach, "East European Immigrants and the Image of Jews in the Small-Town South," *American Jewish History* 85 (September 1997): 231-262.

<sup>9</sup> Weissbach, "East European Immigrants," 236-237.

<sup>10</sup> See especially Leonard Rogoff, "Synagogue and Jewish Church; A Congregational History of North Carolina," *Southern Jewish History* 1 (1998): 43; Hollace A. Weiner, *Jewish Stars in Texas: Rabbis and Their Work* (College Station, 1999); and Gary P. Zola, "Why Study Southern Jewish History," *Southern Jewish History* 1 (1998): 8-9.

<sup>11</sup> Gerald Sorin, *The Jewish People in America: A Time for Building, 1880-1920* (Baltimore, 1992), 160-161, 168.

<sup>12</sup> "From the Rough," *The Bessemer Story*, Diamond Jubilee 1887-1962, (Bessemer, 1962), 21-23.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>14</sup> *The Bessemer*, August 11, 1888, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Jews were not the only immigrants to choose Bessemer as a desirable site to work and live. In the late 1880s and 1890s, attracted by the booming industry and higher wages it paid, Italian immigrants came to Bessemer from Louisiana and formed their own parish with the first church structure built in 1897. "From the Rough," 65.

<sup>16</sup> *The Bessemer*, June 25, 1887, 1.

<sup>17</sup> "From the Rough," 31.

<sup>18</sup> *The Bessemer Weekly*, Special Illustrated Edition, May 18, 1901, (reprinted: Bessemer Hall of History, July 1977, 17).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>20</sup> "From the Rough," 41, 43.

<sup>21</sup> Marilyn Davis Barefield, Compiler, *Bessemer, Yesterday and Today, 1887-1888*, (Birmingham, 1986), 55.

<sup>22</sup> "From the Rough," 43.

<sup>23</sup> *The Bessemer*, November 19, 1887, 1.

<sup>24</sup> Weiner, "Jews of Keystone," 7.

<sup>25</sup> Barefield, *Bessemer*, 26.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>27</sup> See Ewa Morawska, *Insecure Prosperity: Small-Town Jews in Industrial America, 1890-1940* (Princeton, 1996); Weiner, "The Jews of Keystone," and Sorin, *Jewish People in America*.

<sup>28</sup> *The Bessemer Weekly*, May 18, 1901, 79.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, January 6, 1906, 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, May 18, 1901, 79.

<sup>31</sup> Marilyn Watson, "In the Good Old Days of Saloons!" *West Jefferson Historical Society Journal of History* (Spring 1980): 12.

<sup>32</sup> *The Bessemer Weekly*, May 18, 1901, 41.

<sup>33</sup> Barefield, *Bessemer*, 12-13.

<sup>34</sup> *The Bessemer Weekly*, May 18, 1901: 41.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., January 7, 1893, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Jay Howton, ed. "Bessemer's Earliest Merchants," West Jefferson Historical Society *Journal of History* (Winter 1987): 46.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>39</sup> Arnold Lefkovits interview conducted by Terry Barr, June 13, 1997.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. Arnold Lefkovits currently has two of these plates in his possession; a third resides in Bessemer's Hall of History.

<sup>41</sup> *The Bessemer Weekly*, January 7, 1893, 1.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., January 28, 1893, 4.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., May 18, 1901, 35, 23.

<sup>44</sup> This reality was true of other small-town Jewish communities. See for example, Richard L. Zweigenhaft, "Two Cities in North Carolina: A Comparative Study of Jews in the Upper Class," *Jewish Social Studies* 41 (1979): 298.

<sup>45</sup> "From the Rough," *The Bessemer Story*, Diamond Jubilee 1887-1962, reports that "The Jewish population was small in the early days of the city. Provision for the building site of a temple was made in 1887 by the Bessemer Land and Improvement Company, when it set aside the lot located at Sixth Avenue at Seventeenth Street. However, there was not yet a Jewish congregation in Bessemer. By 1889 Jews were worshipping in private homes. The congregation was organized in 1892. No permanent rabbi was available; therefore, services were conducted by lay readers. The deed of the lot donated by the Town Company [the first name of the Land and Improvement Company] was received in 1894. During the interim between 1894 and 1904, plans were made for the construction of the temple. Temple Beth-El was completed and dedicated in 1906. The first worship was held in September of that year at the beginning of the Jewish New Year or Rosh Hashanah." There are a number of discrepancies in the information reported here, as will be discussed in the main text.

<sup>46</sup> *The Jewish Monitor*, January 1957, 7. The 60th Anniversary commemorative bulletin noted that the rededication ceremony took place July 7, 1956; Program, Temple Beth-El Dedication Worship and Community Reception, Rabbi Milton Grafman collection. This collection was graciously made available by Stephen Grafman.

<sup>47</sup> *The Jewish Monitor*, January 1957, 7.

<sup>48</sup> "Bessemer Pioneer Laid to Rest," *The Jewish Monitor* (June-July 1953), 7.

<sup>49</sup> "From the Rough," 65.

<sup>50</sup> *The Jewish Monitor*, September 1974, 3; Walter Bryant, "Bessemer synagogue closes doors," *The Birmingham News*, October 24, 1974.

<sup>51</sup> *The Bessemer Weekly*, May 18, 1901, 28.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 17, and Mark H. Elovitz, *A Century of Jewish Life in Dixie: The Birmingham Experience*. (University, Alabama, 1974), 58-59.

<sup>53</sup> Lefkovits interview.

<sup>54</sup> Cohn interview.

<sup>55</sup> See, for instance, Sorin, *Jewish People in America*, 161-163.

<sup>56</sup> Milton Weinstein to Terry Barr, September 9, 1997. This account is corroborated in part by *The Jewish Monitor*, January 1957, 7, which states that services in the temple "were conducted according to the Reform Ritual" through Rabbi Hirsch's tenure.

<sup>57</sup> "From the Rough," 65. Rogoff describes a similar pattern of Orthodox/Reform interaction in "Synagogue and Jewish Church," 63.



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<sup>58</sup> Weissbach, "Image of Jews," 243.

<sup>59</sup> This reality for small town Jewish congregations is corroborated by Weissbach, "Image of Jews," 251–252; Rogoff, "Synagogue and Jewish Church," 43–81; Weiner, *Jewish Stars in Texas*.

<sup>60</sup> Weiner, "Jews of Keystone," 14.

<sup>61</sup> Lefkovits interview. For a similar story, see also Weiner, *Jewish Stars in Texas*, Chapter 7, "Perl of the Rio Grande: The Making of a Lay Rabbi Sam Perl, Brownsville," 120–139.

<sup>62</sup> Estelle Seigel Silverstein interview conducted by Terry Barr, September 27, 1997.

<sup>63</sup> Marvin Cherner to Terry Barr, August 21, 1997.

<sup>64</sup> Silverstein interview.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. Other Jewish families in Bessemer adopted a similar pattern to the Weinstein-Seigel's of observing kosher-Orthodox practices in deference to the older generation but seeing these practices erode over time and with the death of that older generation. Weissbach discusses this pattern as being typical to the experience of other small-town southern-Jewish families in "Image of Jews in Small-Town South," 244–245.

<sup>67</sup> Weissbach, "Image of Jews," 245.

<sup>68</sup> Silverstein interview.

<sup>69</sup> Jack Becker interview conducted by Terry Barr, December 23, 1996, and Lefkovits interview; Cherner; Jerry Cherner audiotape to Terry Barr, July 6, 1997.

<sup>70</sup> Lefkovits interview.

<sup>71</sup> Silverstein interview.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>73</sup> Elaine Becker Bercu to Terry Barr, July 28, 1997; Jack Green to Terry Barr, October 29, 1997; Lefkovits interview.

<sup>74</sup> Sarah Lander Erdberg interview conducted by Terry Barr, July 5, 1997.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Cohn interview.

<sup>77</sup> Silverstein interview. One year at West Lake a friend of Estelle's, Jack Green she believes, dared her and some others to swim to the other side of the lake [roughly 300 yards]: "We tried to do it, but the lifeguards came and got us and we couldn't go back out there for a week."

<sup>78</sup> Lynne Applebaum Waggoner to Terry Barr, July 28, 1997.

<sup>79</sup> Bercu letter.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Becker interview.

<sup>82</sup> Bercu letter.

<sup>83</sup> This, too, was a recognized pattern for smaller Jewish communities throughout the United States. See Abraham D. Lavender, ed., *A Coat of Many Colors: Jewish Subcommunities in the United States* (Westport, Conn., 1977), 8.

<sup>84</sup> This stability was no doubt maintained by both immigration and emigration patterns, a reality in other small Jewish communities. See Weissbach, "Stability and Mobility in the Small Jewish Community: Examples from Kentucky History," *American Jewish History* 79, (Spring 1990), 355–375.

<sup>85</sup> The *Jewish Monitor* story from January 1957 numbers the Jewish families in 1920s Bessemer at "more than 70."

- <sup>86</sup> *American Jewish Year Book* 9 (New York, 1907–1908), 123; *American Jewish Year Book* 30 (New York, 1928–1929), 180.
- <sup>87</sup> *Polk's Bessemer City Directory* VII (Birmingham, 1938).
- <sup>88</sup> Guy McConnell, "The Jews in Alabama," photocopied document, Grafman collection.
- <sup>89</sup> Marvin Cherner letter.
- <sup>90</sup> Bercu letter.
- <sup>91</sup> Alvin R. Barr interview conducted by Terry Barr, June 15, 1997.
- <sup>92</sup> Lefkovits interview.
- <sup>93</sup> Bercu letter.
- <sup>94</sup> Silverstein interview.
- <sup>95</sup> Lefkovits interview.
- <sup>96</sup> *The Jewish Monitor*, September 1974, 3.
- <sup>97</sup> Silverstein interview.
- <sup>98</sup> Becker interview.
- <sup>99</sup> "The Jewish Monitor: In '48 an idea, in '53 big paper," source unknown, Grafman collection.
- <sup>100</sup> *The Jewish Monitor*, August 1957, 1.
- <sup>101</sup> A partial collection of *The Jewish Monitor* is available at The University of Alabama in Birmingham library, while the complete collection is housed at the library of The University of North Alabama in Florence.
- <sup>102</sup> Waggoner letter.
- <sup>103</sup> Barr interview.
- <sup>104</sup> Jerry Cherner audiotape. See also telephone interview with Harvey Applebaum, September 23, 1997.
- <sup>105</sup> "Nathan Sokol Speaks in Bessemer Temple," *The Jewish Monitor*, December 1953, 8.
- <sup>106</sup> "Ala. state Ass'n of B'nai B'rith Meets in Bessemer," *The Jewish Monitor*, January 1956, 3.
- <sup>107</sup> "Study of Religious Movements Presented By Birmingham Rabbis," *The Jewish Monitor*, February 1956, 14.
- <sup>108</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>109</sup> Albert (Buddy) Sokol telephone interview conducted by Terry Barr, December 23, 1999.
- <sup>110</sup> "Bessemer To Enlarge Its Temple Soon," *The Jewish Monitor*, September 1955, 19; "Bessemer Builds Modern Edifice," Ibid., June 1956, 22.
- <sup>111</sup> "Bessemer Celebrates Anniversaries In State's Second Oldest Synagogue," Ibid., January 1957, 7.
- <sup>112</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>113</sup> Ibid., 8.
- <sup>114</sup> Official program, Temple Beth-El dedication service, Grafman collection.
- <sup>115</sup> "Dr. Gallinger Called To Tri-Cities Temple," *The Jewish Monitor*, August 1957, 1.
- <sup>116</sup> Albert (Buddy) Sokol, telephone interview conducted by Terry Barr, February 20, 2000.
- <sup>117</sup> Ann Gallinger telephone interview conducted by Terry Barr, July 4, 1997.
- <sup>118</sup> *American Jewish Year Book*, 59 (New York, 1957–1958), 18.
- <sup>119</sup> *The Jewish Monitor*, September 1957, 6.
- <sup>120</sup> Jerry Cherner audiotape.

<sup>121</sup> Among these were Jack Green, Janice Green, Betty and Billie Beck, Harvey and Lynne Applebaum.

<sup>122</sup> Elaine Becker, Charlotte Jospin, Lenore Barr, and Beverly Rosen, for instance.

<sup>123</sup> Jack Becker, Sam Kartus, and Jerry Cherner, for instance.

<sup>124</sup> Jerry Cherner audiotape.

<sup>125</sup> Sokol interview. He has been a member of Birmingham's Conservative Temple Beth-El since the early 1970s.

<sup>126</sup> Weissbach notes that for many second and third generation Jews in these small southern towns, traditional Judaism, quality Jewish education, and everything associated with the Old World were either not possible or desirable. See "Image of Jews in the Small-Town South," 256-258. Bessemer's overall population did not effectively change during this period, for even as Jews left, their declining numbers were counterbalanced by others, including a growing black community. By their exodus Jews proved to be more mobile than other white southerners. See Weissbach, "Stability and Mobility in the Small Jewish Community," for more detailed analysis. White Bessemerites also left the city, but their flight came over a decade later when the reality of school integration took hold.

<sup>127</sup> "From the Rough," 49.

<sup>128</sup> Sorin, *Jewish People in America*, 159.

<sup>129</sup> Sokol interview.

<sup>130</sup> Waggoner letter.

<sup>131</sup> See Marcie Cohen Ferris, "'From the Recipe File of Luba Cohen': A Study of Southern Jewish Foodways and Cultural Identity," *Southern Jewish History* 2 (1999), 129-164, for complementary discussion of black-Jewish cooking, and of the "communication of human values" that food produces between diverse cultures.

<sup>132</sup> Jo Ann Barr interview conducted by Terry Barr, June 13, 1997.

<sup>133</sup> Silverstein interview.

<sup>134</sup> Betty Beck Lipschitz, interview conducted by Terry Barr, January 7, 1998.

<sup>135</sup> A study undertaken in 1953 concluded that one of the "major disadvantages" of Jews living in smaller cities and towns were the perceived "fears of intermarriage and loss of Jewishness on part of children." Such fears remained through the 1970s for Jews in small towns throughout the country. See Lavender, ed., *A Coat of Many Colors*, 4, 28, 73-75. Certainly this was a perception in Bessemer, too, as many of those interviewed, such as Buddy Sokol and Betty Beck, affirmed that while they were not forbidden or did not forbid their own children to date gentiles, their parents' hope was that they would marry within the faith. Sokol interview; Betty Beck Lipschitz, interview conducted by Terry Barr, January 7, 1998.

<sup>136</sup> Tom Gordon, "Last Jew laments city's loss: Demopolis follows other towns losing Jewish population," *The Birmingham News*, February 22, 1999, 1, 3A; see also Jacob Koch, "A Special Heritage: The Demopolis Jewish Community," Jerry Elijah Brown, ed., *An Alabama Humanities Reader* (Macon, 1985), 137-145.

<sup>137</sup> E. Thomas Wood, "Jews Return to Selma, Underscoring Exodus," *The New York Times*, October 6, 1997, A8.

<sup>138</sup> Walter Bryant, *The Birmingham News*, October 24, 1974.

<sup>139</sup> Lipschitz interview.

<sup>140</sup> Waggoner letter.

<sup>141</sup> Jerry Cherner audiotape.

- <sup>142</sup> Lefkovits interview.
- <sup>143</sup> "Levi Becker," *The Bessemer News*, January 11, 1967, 6.
- <sup>144</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>145</sup> *The Bessemer Weekly*, May 18, 1901, 79.
- <sup>146</sup> Jerry Cherner audiotape.
- <sup>147</sup> "Frank Sachs is man of year," *The Jewish Monitor*, February 1974, 17.
- <sup>148</sup> Sokol interview; Cohn interview; and Lefkovits interview.
- <sup>149</sup> Sokol interview.
- <sup>150</sup> Lefkovits interview.
- <sup>151</sup> Albert (Buddy) Sokol telephone interview conducted by Terry Barr, June 27, 1999.
- <sup>152</sup> David Singer, ed., *American Jewish Year Book* 99 (New York, 1998), 174.
- <sup>153</sup> Kathy Kemp, "Torme Twins: 'Mel got talent,'" *The Birmingham News*, December 24, 1998, 1B.
- <sup>154</sup> Nat Wittenstein telephone interview conducted by Terry Barr, July 4, 1997.
- <sup>155</sup> Alvin Barr interview.
- <sup>156</sup> Sokol interview.
- <sup>157</sup> Bercu letter