

Where to worship in the 1940s

Written by Rick Reed

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We've been following the experiences of Manny Lutsky, father of Leesburg resident Linda Bork, during the rainy Florida summer in 1943 when he was training at a military base just outside of Leesburg.

Lutsky was born in Boston in 1915, and joined the Army Air Corp after attending MIT for one year. He was stationed in Texas and attended training in Orlando and Leesburg, before being deployed overseas where he was stationed in Grantham England.

He arrived in Orlando in early June and was sent to Orange Home, the base west of Leesburg toward the end of June. While there, he wrote a series of four letters to his sweetheart and future wife, Natalie.

We've taken a bit of a break and learn a lot about the USO in Leesburg and a few other stories but now it's time to get back to the letters,

Manny wrote his last letter to Natalie Friday, July 2 6:35 p.m.

He wrote it "sitting in that little park" during a beautiful evening. It was hot all day but about 30 minutes earlier a breeze sprung up that he called "just grand."

It was also the first day it didn't rain at Leesburg. And he spent most of it sleeping. This climate has made the servicemen very lazy. But they were leaving the next day.

Toward the end of his letter he began double-tasking.

"I've been trying to write and at the same time I'm talking to a young Jewish wife from Los Angeles," wrote Manny who was also Jewish. "She's trying to convince me I should go to the services tonight but I'm declining. I've got too much writing to do. She was telling me about having been stationed at one little town, Santa Anna, in California where they didn't care for Jewish people. It was the first time I heard of any discrimination. Lots of Army wives in this town since all married men live off the post. Was talking to a couple from Brooklyn yesterday and their accents made me homesick. Lots of guys from New York here. In fact everywhere."

The first Jewish services held in Leesburg took place in 1942. Since there was no synagogue in Leesburg prior to World War II, the City Hall auditorium was used for this purpose by Jewish servicemen stationed in the many auxiliary bases in the area.

In 1943, when Manny was in Leesburg, there were three Jewish families in town. Prior to World War II, the few Jewish families living in Leesburg had to travel to Orlando, Daytona Beach, or Tampa for religious services, wrote Jo Anne Burka, a daughter of a founder the Leesburg's congregation in a history of the congregation.

"With the advent of WWII, army bases opened in and around Leesburg; these bases were auxiliary bases to the home that in Orlando, Army personnel included many Jewish soldiers, both enlisted men and officers and their families," wrote Burka. "These soldiers found the 3-plus-hour trip each way to Orlando a hardship.

"At the request of the commanding officer, the few Jewish families obtained permission from officials of the city of Leesburg to hold services in the auditorium of the City Hall."

The first Jewish Sabbath service was held in the autumn of 1942. It was conducted by two enlisted men, Bob Adler and Kalman Mintz. Four months later, services were transferred to the old Women's Club above the Lassiter Ware building on 6th St. and continued there until the summer of 1944 when services were discontinued because there were too few Jewish men.

Ironically, the War also brought Roman Catholics into Leesburg for Mass. Vi Paler, who has written a history about the of St. Paul Catholic Community, heard but never found documentation that the Catholic Church was banned in Leesburg. But that's likely the reason their first church was built in Fruitland Park in 1921.

Because of the war and gas rationing, the Woman's Club allowed the Catholics to hold Mass in their second floor auditorium, which was also used for the Jewish services while Manny was in town.

More on the local Jewish history next week.

Rick Reed is a columnist who lives in Mount Dora. To reach him, call 383-1458 or e-mail him at RICOH007@aol.com.

Jewish Community finds a home in Leesburg

Written by Rick Reed

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World War II proved to be ecumenical for Leesburg. With the inflow of servicemen of all faiths and religions, as well as gas rationing, Leesburg saw its first Jewish and Catholic services in the 1940s.

The first Jewish Sabbath service was held in the autumn of 1942 in City Hall's auditorium. Four months later, services were transferred to the old Women's Club above the Lassiter Ware building on 6th St. and continued there until the summer of 1944 when services were discontinued because there were too few Jewish men.

The War also brought Roman Catholics into Leesburg for Mass. The Woman's Club allowed the Catholics to hold Mass in their second floor auditorium, which was also used for the Jewish services.

More on the history of the local Jewish congregation, written by Jo Anne Burka, a daughter of a founder of the Leesburg's congregation.

After services stopped in 1944, Jewish parents in Leesburg often drove their children to Orlando for Sunday school, holy day observances and festivals.

"In fact, for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Jewish merchants closed their stores and families traveled to larger cities and stayed in hotels to observe these sacred holy days," wrote Burka. "Of course, an added bonus was that family and friends from other small towns did the same, thus enabling all to enjoy reunions."

When Getzel Mularsky moved to Leesburg in 1949, there were only 10 Jewish families in town and they took turns holding services on Friday evenings at the houses of different members. Later, Shabbat services, holiday festivals and High Holiday services were held at various locations in downtown Leesburg.

In the early 1950s, there were 12 Jewish men and their families in Leesburg and the surrounding smaller towns of Tavares, Eustis, and Fruitland Park.

These original families were those of Walter and Max Kessler (brothers), William Lieberman, Max Idelson, Getzel Mularsky, William Lipshitz, Joe and Teddy Ehrlich (brothers) of Leesburg; Jack and George Satin (brothers) of Tavares; Irwin

Silverman of Eustis, and Ben Park of Fruitland Park. The closest synagogue was 40 miles away in Orlando.

"They were separated because of business interests and familial ties," wrote Burka. "Nevertheless, these 12 Jewish families did not lose their Jewish identity; they did not assimilate into the background of the non-Jewish society in which they lived; they did not forget the ancient heritage of a people with whom G-d had entrusted Torah and the Jewish faith."

It became obvious a stand-alone Temple building was needed and committed to by the Congregation members. Early that year, because of the strength of warm inter-community relationships between the Temple member merchants on Main Street and the Leesburg area Christian and African-American communities, \$5,000 was received from public solicitations in \$5 and \$10 contributions.

The young congregation bought a plot of land at 13th and Center Streets in Leesburg. On August 11, 1954, ground was broken to begin the construction of "Congregation Beth Sholom of Lake County," the first Jewish synagogue in Lake County.

The women of the Temple raised money from rummage sales to furnish the new building. A \$4,000.00 shortfall on the roof construction was underwritten by loan from a local bank, for which five Jewish business leaders personally signed a note. The Temple Sisterhood held further sales to pay off the note. Also, members of the local community had voluntarily assisted in some of the construction work.

After five weeks of construction, Congregation Beth Sholom opened for Rosh Hashanah Services in the fall of 1954.

"Rabbi" Getzel Mularsky, one of the Temple founders, a Dachau Concentration Camp survivor and owner of a local dry goods store known as Getzel's, conducted the New Year Services.

Mularsky had studied for the rabbinate in Europe, but was never formally ordained. His training served him and the congregation wonderfully as acting Rabbi. He continued conducting religious services for 50 years, until his death Dec. 22, 2004. Jackie Wexler was hired to replace Mularsky as the congregation's rabbi in June 2005.

During the 60s and 70s, the local Jewish community grew with the addition of numerous retirees moving down from the North and, later, others moving north from Southern Florida.

Many events, both secular and religious were held in the synagogue, including observance of holy days and Sabbaths, celebrations of festivals, bar and bat mitzvahs, Seders, confirmation ceremonies, a wedding, talent shows and memorial and Kaddash services.

The current Social Hall was added through a donation of Manfred Kohn, another Holocaust survivor, in honor of his wife, Ilona.

After several years with the services of interim rabbis, Rabbi Karen Allen, became the new Rabbi of Congregation Beth Sholom in July 2008.

Rick Reed is a columnist who lives in Mount Dora. To reach him, call 383-1458 or e-mail him at RICOH007@aol.com.