

Jewish Presence in Leesburg, Florida

Leesburg, Florida, is a small town in central Florida; it's 30 miles below Ocala, northwest of Orlando and until the 1970's consisted of several thousand fresh water lakes and orange groves. It was a sleepy, Southern town where most of its 9-10,000 inhabitants knew almost everyone else. Students for the most part started nursery school together and graduated from high school together. Those of us presenting the information below grew up in the Leesburg of the 1940's, 1950's and 1960's. Our purpose is to present a history of the Jews living in Leesburg to explain how the community began and the emergence of a Jewish community, which continues today.

In 1943, there were 3 Jewish families in Leesburg.

Prior to World War II, the few Jewish families living in Leesburg had to travel to Orlando, Daytona Beach, or Tampa for religious services. With the advent of WWII, army bases opened in and around Leesburg; these bases were auxiliary bases to the home base in Orlando. Army personnel included many Jewish soldiers, both enlisted men and officers, and their families. These soldiers found the 3+-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, 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 to form a minyan.

During this hiatus, 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. Of course, an added bonus was that family and friends from other small towns did the same, thus enabling all to enjoy reunions.

In the early 1950's, 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. They were separated from other, larger Jewish communities with the closest synagogue being 40 miles away in Orlando. "They were separated because of business interests and familial ties..."¹ 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."¹ By 1960, other Jews had moved to Leesburg including Sam Lewin, Sam Brown, and Lou Heller, which increased the number of Jewish families to 16. Unrelated families in Leesburg, Eustis,

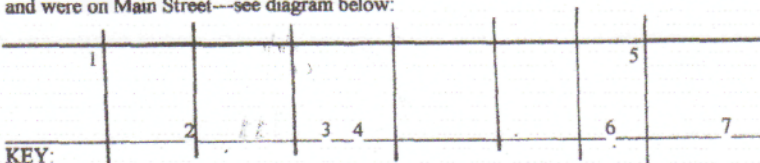
Tavares, Fruitland Park, and Mt. Dora became "extended" families and the adults became "aunt" and "uncle" to the children.

In the late 1940's and early 1950's, the Jewish community in Leesburg held Sabbath services on Friday nights, celebrations of Chanukah and Purim, and communal Seders on Pesach in the home of Blanche and Max Kessler at 404 W. Dixie Ave. Later, services were held in the Weir Building and eventually moved into the newly built Women's Club on South 9th St.. In early 1953, plans began for building a synagogue in Leesburg, the first in the city and the first in Lake County.

Collections began. Contributions came from the Jewish and non-Jewish community. "We are yet to be turned down towards donations by our many friends here in Leesburg. We've received \$5 and \$10 by the hundreds. People throughout the state who we did not even know sent us money...it's marvelous what Americans will do for other Americans. Many fine Christian people in the community, upon hearing of our project voluntarily contributed toward our building fund." 2

When \$5000 had been collected, land was purchased at 13th and Center Sts. On August 11, 1954, at 3p.m., ground was broken to signify the beginning of construction of the new synagogue known as Beth Shalom Congregation of Lake County. The building contractor Paul Banzohf was hired to construct the new building, which would accommodate 100+ worshippers. What optimism for 16 families totaling fifty people including children!

The next major undertaking was to furnish the synagogue. The "sisterhood" consisted of 6 women. Lillie and Blanche Kessler, Dorothy Lieberman, Bertie Bloch, Betty Mularsky, and Jenny Ehrlich. They decided to hold rummage sales. They collected clothing from friends, neighbors, acquaintances and themselves. On a given Saturday, they'd rent a canopy from a local Negro funeral home and set up on the empty lot next to the National Bank of Leesburg on Main Street. The women "spelled" each other during the day as each of them was needed to work in her own store. Nearly all the general dry goods stores, shoe stores, and ladies ready-to-wear stores in Leesburg were run by Jews and were on Main Street—see diagram below:



1. Idelsens--- Max & Freida Idelsen; their niece Betty and her husband Getzel Mularsky
2. Max Kessler's on the Corner--- Blanche & Max Kessler
3. The Fashion Shop---Dorothy & Bill Lieberman
4. The Bargain Store---Bertie Bloch & her brother Bill Lipshitz
5. Kessler's---Lillie & Walter Kessler (later sold to Sadie & Sam Brown)
6. Ehrlich's Dept. Store---Jenny Ehrlich and her brother [unclear] & Teddy

7. Geiger's---Ray Geiger and his mother; store originated by Ish Kessler, a brother of Walter and Max

The sisterhood earned enough money to furnish a kitchen, including cabinets, appliances, and 2 sets of pots and pans to make it kosher; to furnish two bathrooms; to furnish two anterooms for Sunday school classes, and to provide books, paper, crayons, pencils, etc. for the Sunday school classes; and to provide chairs for seating for the entire congregation. Sunday school classes involved all the children (7) of varied ages who met in the two anterooms and were taught by Blanche Kessler and Dorothy Lieberman; after all, the students were their children!

Almost complete, the building committee found itself short \$4000 necessary to pay for the completion of the new roof. A local bank made a loan for which 5 men signed a note: Walter and Max Kessler, Max Idelsen, Bill Lieberman, Bill Lifshitz and Getzel Mularsky. This was surely an optimistic undertaking, as all these men knew repayment was their responsibility. Again, their women worked to raise the monies to repay the loan. It was years before the sisterhood could pay to have the building air-conditioned, a welcome improvement in the Florida heat.

Temple Beth Shalom was complete in time for Rosh Hashanah in the fall of 1954. Services were held and conducted by Getzel Mularsky as "acting Rabbi" and Bill Lieberman as the Reader. The congregation consisted of Reform, Conservative and Orthodox Jews. They shared the space in their individual ways at the same time. Each family selected its place of seating and for years to follow, those chairs were theirs. It was quite a scene to watch Getzel chant the prayers while his wife Betty sat in the front row on the left and proudly kvelled while her uncle stood several chairs to her left davening at his own pace. Children sat with their parents and observed everything. As Cohanim, Walter and Max Kessler were called to the Bima first. The children looked forward to being called up for the Kiddush when they were served grape juice and pretended it was wine. Following Friday night services, everyone enjoyed the delicious Oneg Shabbat prepared by the women. After working all week, this socializing made everyone feel relaxed and comfortable to be together as a Jewish community. We took pride in our traditions.

Through the years, decisions regarding the Temple or community were made in a democratic manner; everyone had his or her say. "Meetings" took place after services, via the telephone, even at weekly Mah Jong games.

In 1957, the congregation incorporated and the original charter was signed. Original signers included Walter and Max Kessler, Max Idelson, Bill Lieberman, Bill Lifshitz, Getzel Mularsky, Joe and Teddy Ehrlich, Sam Lewin, Benjamin Park, Jack and George Satin and Joseph Alpert.

From 1954 to the early 1960's, more Jewish families moved to Leesburg and the community has continued to grow with the inclusion of many retirees from the North as well as those who relocated from southern Florida into the Clermont area.

Over the years, many events, both religious and secular, were celebrated in the synagogue. The observance of holy days and Sabbaths; celebrations of festivals including Chanukah, Purim, Succoth, bar and bat mitzvahs; communal Pesach seders; a confirmation ceremony; a wedding; talent shows; and memorial and Kaddash services for our loved ones.

The Jewish community and Temple played a large part in the lives of the children. We dressed in our best clothes for the High Holy Days; we dressed in homemade costumes for Purim parties and ate homemade hammentashen; we looked in awe as the Succoth booth was built for our benefit with grownups hanging fruits and vegetables; we watched our mothers and "aunts" chop fish and prepare chicken soup with matzo balls in preparation for the communal seder. We children laughed because we knew if the matzo balls were soft and fluffy, each lady would take credit but if they were hard, someone else made them. We children knew the difficulty in obtaining matzo, kosher foods, etc.; we were aware of the trips to Jacksonville, Miami, and Orlando to acquire what was needed to make the holidays traditional. We learned about our heritage. We felt wanted and loved and definitely special to everyone in our Jewish community. We learned to be proud of our Jewish traditions and our uniqueness. By example, our parents and extended "family" showed us that we could be part of two communities, the Jewish one and the larger non-Jewish community. We were taught to stand tall and be vocal when confronted by ignorance or anti-Semitism.

The Jews in Leesburg had friends, relatives and acquaintances in towns throughout Florida; i.e., Deland, Daytona Beach, Orlando, Cocoa, Tampa, Dade City, Ocala, Plant City, Jacksonville, Tavares, Eustis, Mt. Dora, Sebring, and Miami. The families visited and shared many occasions providing everyone with a sense of comfort and acceptance. These same Jewish merchants in Leesburg were active within the general community; they were active members and leaders of the Moose, Odd fellows, Rebecca's, Elks, and Women's Clubs; they were liked and respected by the majority of both the white and black communities. They integrated into the Leesburg community yet retained and nurtured their Jewish identity.

FACTS:

Children raised in the Jewish community of Leesburg 1930's-1960:

Helen & Elsa Kessler (Lillie & Walter)

Ninion & Sheila Block (Bertie Bloch)

Sara Jo, Jo Anne, Robert Kessler (Blanche & Max)

Sandra, Paul*, Susie*, and Eddie Lieberman (Dorothy & Bill) *deceased

Melvin & Freddie Mularsky (Betty & Getzel)

Joel Satin (Jack &

Roger, Nancy & Howard Satin (Sybil & George)

Ceremonies and Occasions observed in the Temple:

Bar Mitzvahs: Roger Satin, Robert Kessler, and Eddie Lieberman

Bat Mitzvahs: Corine & Suzanne Gelfand

B'nai Mitzvah: David & Mark Kessler (twin grandsons of Blanche & Max)

Confirmation: Sara Jo Kessler, Sandy Lieberman, & Roger Satin

Wedding: Susie Lieberman

The entire building of Temple Beth Shalom was complete in 5 weeks.

Paul Banzhof, the contractor, from an old cabinet, built the Holy Ark personally.

The ark's lining, the Torah cover, and the Bima covers were hand sewn and decorated by Grandma Lieberman. The children remember her painstakingly decorating and handstitching the Lions of Judah.

Sadie Kahn, whose husband had built a synagogue in Sebring, Florida, in 1925, donated the Torah itself. Years later, Elsa Kessler, daughter of Lillie and Walter, married Marvin Kahn, Sadie's son.

The eternal light came from a synagogue in Stamford, Connecticut, one of the oldest in New England. Jack & George Satin, owners of a candy factory in Tavares, originated from there. When their 98-year-old father was relocating from Stamford to live with them in Tavares, he brought with him the eternal light from his synagogue. His synagogue was relocating to a newly built building and the old building became a Negro church, which still displays a round stained glass Star of David above the entry.

The first president of the congregation in Leesburg was Walter Kessler.

The first president of the sisterhood was Blanche Kessler.

The first female president of the congregation was Blanche Kessler.

The first rabbi (acting) was Getzel Mularsky.

The first lay reader was Bill Lieberman.

The journey from living room to synagogue was personal for each of the founding families. What was shown by example, taught by tradition, and shared as an extended family left a profound and lasting effect on the children of these founding members. The "children" are now scattered throughout the country but their memories persist. We have lost two of our children's cluster. Most of the children married Jewish spouses and have continued proudly to teach and practice their Jewish heritage. The significance of this synagogue and community on these children is monumental.

The seeds of Sarah and Abraham and the spirit of Judaism as exemplified by the founders continue the traditions of our forefathers. What the parents built together continues to enable others to enjoy its existence and to practice their religious traditions. We hope this information about what was accomplished by fewer than 15 families enables the hundreds who enjoy the fruit of their efforts to recognize the enormity of their accomplishment---you have a place to worship, gather and be a community.

1. Goldman, Rabbi Jack, spiritual leader of Etz Chaim Synagogue, Jacksonville, FL, THE SOUTHERN JEWISH WEEKLY, 3/4/1960.
2. Kessler, Walter, interview with Jerome Weiner of THE SOUTHERN WEEKLY, 1955.