



DO YOU REMEMBER: The first Temple Beth Ha-Sholom House of Peace at the northwest corner of Mulberry and Front Streets? Erected in 1871-72, the brick edifice served the city's Jewish community until September, 1904, when the congregation built a new synagogue at Edwin and Center Streets. In 1892, when this photograph was taken, the congregation had 50 members. Its leader was Rabbi G. A. Levy. The Italian Christian Church, built in 1823, stands on the site of the old synagogue.

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## NINETY-FIVE YEARS OF BETH HA-SHOLOM

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*[This history of the congregation of Temple Beth Ha-Sholom was written for the dedication of its community center and religious school in 1961.]*

From the small and intimate prayer meetings which were held in the rooms of private homes more than a century ago, to the present elaborate modern facilities in which nearly a quarter of a million dollars has been spent, our congregation has made great strides, and is now looking forward to provide greater advances for our community's religious, educational, social, and cultural needs for the decades ahead.

How has all this come about, and who were the men and women responsible for the many advances that took place through the years? This brief article shall endeavor to give to our present members a glimpse into the past history of Temple Beth Ha-Sholom and its early leaders who courageously carried on the spirit of Jewish faith through the most difficult and trying periods of our community.

The nearly one hundred years of Jewish life in Williamsport was a period beset with constant changes and tribulations. There were changes in our religious concepts, changes in the physical structures and locations, changes in the leadership of our Jewish community during the past century.

Early in the nineteenth century, stout-hearted, brave, pioneering men and women from many countries started migrating to the United States, seeking new opportunities and new frontiers to conquer. A number of them found their way into this West Branch Valley, settling in the agricultural and lumbering communities in Central and North-eastern Pennsylvania. They sought the opportunity for a better way to provide

a livelihood for their families and to enjoy political and religious freedoms which this nation offered to all who set foot on its soil. The task they faced was not an easy one -- they encountered many hardships and difficulties in a new and strange country. Unfamiliar as they were to the customs and the language of its people, they were compelled to depend upon their own resources and personal ingenuity in order to be accepted by the people and to establish themselves among the residents of this isolated, rugged, pioneering territory.

In many ways these Jewish immigrants were quite different. They had a different culture and religion. They spoke a different language and had strange and varied social backgrounds. Yet, they were a hardy and persevering people. They met each and every challenge and were determined and resolute in the desire to establish themselves in the new land they found.

When the first Jewish settlers came to this section of the state, Williamsport was a small village with less than fifteen hundred inhabitants. Most of the dwellings were situated within a short walking distance from the river front. Therefore, it was convenient that the early Jewish settlers would also reside in that neighborhood. It is not quite clear just who the first Jewish settler was, but it is known that a number of Jewish pack peddlers and itinerant merchants came to this valley early in the eighteen thirties, taking their wares to folks in the country and the lumber camps stretched along the river basin, and to the folks in the villages. Lycoming County history records that a Jewish pack peddler by the name of Solomon Huffman was killed on February 1, 1838, in the vicinity of Trout Run. The murderer, whose intention was to rob the Jewish peddler of his goods and money, was later

apprehended and brought to trial in Williamsport. He was found guilty of the crime in the county courthouse on July 27, 1838, and was hanged in the jail yard on West Third Street.

During the eighteen thirties and the eighteen forties, some Jewish families came here to settle and to establish themselves in various occupations. The first known families to settle here permanently and who founded the Jewish community were members of the Ulman families. They included Henry, Moses, Isaac, Sadock, and Simon Ulman. They emigrated early in life from Manheim, Germany, and found opportunity to become successful in their chosen fields of occupation. They in turn encouraged the Strasburgers, the Wittenbergs, the Lindheimers, the Kuhns, and others to bring their families here and seek their fortunes. Many were related, and they became a very intimate group. With limited capital and pioneering spirits, their ambition to make good permeated their enthusiasm to become successful citizens of the new land. They engaged in such trades as retailing, tailoring, liquor stores, real estate, manufacturing, and merchandise distribution, including peddling. From such humble beginnings, these local Jewish settlers soon became engaged in banking, finance, etc., and were among the community's best known business men and largest tax payers.

As was the history of many minority groups, the Jewish people faced many complex problems. The great need of the community was for the establishment of a religious congregation, one that would provide the spiritual and social needs of a small Jewish community. During the early years, the social and religious activities were held in private homes. The Jewish community was a friendly group; each family welcomed its neighbors and co-religion-

ists in its home. The Aaron Strasburger family with many daughters, residing on Front Street, furnished a frequent meeting place for young and old. The daughters who were talented in music and voice always provided a friendly atmosphere, with a cup of tea, a snack, and good cheer.

As the Jewish population grew with the influx of new families, the need for permanent quarters to house the Holy objects and to conduct services soon developed. Some rooms were acquired on the third floor of the Ulman Opera House where religious services were conducted. Even these quarters were soon inadequate. For the high Holy Days, they rented the Reno Post Hall on West Third Street and the German Lutheran Church sanctuary on East Third Street. Because the small Jewish community had not been organized and did not have a sanctuary of its own, they could not afford a full time Rabbi. When an occasional itinerant Rabbi would visit the city and lecture to the group, it was an important religious and cultural event. Often these roving spiritualists would conduct Sabbath services and earn a few dollars through small personal donations. Periodically, cantors were brought into the community on a contract basis to officiate at services.

The Civil War affected the small Jewish community in several ways. The shortage of rabbis made it necessary for the local Jews to conduct their own services, while two of the young men, Abram Jacobs and H.C. Ulman, answered the call to service, with the latter attaining the rank of Captain.

Before the congregation applied for its charter to officially organize a religious body, the community faced a cemetery crisis. It needed a place to bury its deceased. Such a plot was purchased on March 13, 1863, in what was then known as Lloyd Addition at

the corner of Wyoming and Almond Streets. This burial place was known as the Williamsport Jewish Cemetery Association, and continued as a burial site until 1895. The first persons to be buried there were Hiram Ulman, 1859; Samuel Kuhn, 1868; Jacob Silverman, 1872; and Jacob Ulman, 1873. Later on, the cemetery proved inadequate for the growing Jewish community. The congregation purchased a large section of land from the Grandview Cemetery Association on September 19, 1894. (Wildwood). On September 16, 1895, they petitioned the court for authority to remove all the bodies buried at Almond and Wyoming Street, and at Cemetery Street, to the new section at Wildwood.

#### *Congregation Formed*

With the termination of the Civil War hostilities, travel was made easier. New Jewish families once more moved into the area, and the Jewish community took a deeper interest in establishing a congregation. A meeting was held at the Henry Ulman home on April 24, 1866, and it was decided to apply to the courts for a formal charter. The following persons became the first officers of the congregation, which was known as "BETH HA-SHOLOM -- THE HOUSE OF PEACE": Henry Ulman, Sadock Ulman, Benjamin Levi, Abraham Newman, I.H. Greenwald, and Samuel Ulman. Others among the first members included Elias Kuhn, L.C. Myers, William and Sol Silverman, Isadore Sampson.

As a non-profit organization, the charter specified in part: "We, the undersigned, do hereby certify that we have agreed to associate ourselves together for religious purposes under the following articles and conditions. First, The said Association shall be known as THE HOUSE OF PEACE. Second, Its object shall create the more perfect enjoyment of the Jewish religion

in which we believe. Third, Its officers shall consist of a President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer to be elected by a majority of the members of the Association on the first Monday of March each year." And thus an organization which brought hope and spiritual comfort to the small group of proud and pious people was born.

When new immigrants came to this community, having little money or knowledge of the problems they faced, they often needed assistance. To provide help to the needy, the sick, and the stranger, the local Jewish women formed an organization on August 21, 1869, at the home of Mrs. Moses Ulman, known as "THE HEBREW LADIES BENEVOLENT ASSOCIATION OF WILLIAMSPORT, GERMUNDE No. 1." The dues were four dollars per year, and the by-laws provided that every Jewish woman of eighteen years or over and of Israelish faith shall be eligible to become a member. Its purposes were to assist the needy, the widows, and the orphans. The first officers included Caroline Ulman, Caroline Myers, Clara Ulman, and Therisha Kuhn.

At the annual election of the congregation in March 1870, the following officers were elected: Gabriel Rothchild, president; Isidore Sampson, vice-president; and Isaac Ulman, treasurer. The years ahead saw feverish action in planning, fund raising, holding bazaars, dances and other events designed to raise funds to enable the building of a synagogue. A committee made up of the three officers purchased a lot for the congregation on Mulberry and Front Streets. After much deliberation, the plan of the architect was approved, and the contract was let for the erection of a two-story brick edifice with a high tower. In a residential neighborhood of small dwellings, the building looked impressive and attracted much attention from Jews and Christians in the vicinity. The building

provided space for meeting quarters and classrooms on the first floor, an auditorium on the upper floor for prayer services. The building was heated with coal and wood iron stoves, and illumination was provided by gas and kerosene lamps. Almost all the interior furnishings, including chairs, pulpit and carpets, were contributed as gifts. For the corner stone ceremony on August 23, 1871, Dr. Meyer, a Cleveland rabbi, came to Williamsport for the event. En route from Elmira, his train broke down and he made the journey from Blossburg by horse and wagon. The summer of 1872 saw the completion of the building and its dedication. Many prominent persons and official dignitaries attended.

In the decades that followed the Civil War, the ranks of the congregation were increased as new families moved into the valley, and its members became active in civic as well as religious affairs. Lemuel Ulman served on the Williamsport City Council for eight years, and Lew Cohen also held posts on this civic body. Before the turn of the century, Temple members also served on the school board. In 1912, Ansel Ulman was elected to the State Legislature, and in 1916 Jonas Fischer was elected Mayor of the city.

#### *First Full-Time Rabbi*

Owning a synagogue sanctuary, the need for a full-time spiritual leader became evident. The Rev. Samuel Friedlander, a German educated scholar, was the first full-time rabbi and served the congregation from about 1866 to 1870. He was succeeded by the Rev. Henry J. Messing, who was the teacher and preacher during the following years.

The annual budget was less than one thousand dollars per year. The rabbi's salary in the 1870's was six hundred dollars per annum. Other items of expense included five dollars monthly for the janitor, Mr. Simpson; fuel for heating; gas for illumination; insurance; and other maintenance items such as prayer books and ritual paraphernalia. Membership dues ranged from three to twelve dollars per year, based upon the person's ability to pay and the size of the family that needed Jewish education.

#### *Moses Ulman*

Moses Ulman was one of the most successful citizens in Williamsport. During the many years that he lived here he was an active member and liberal supporter of the Temple. He was one of the charter members in 1866 and served as an officer and Beth Ha-Sholom's president. It was from the estate of his daughter, Miss Rosetta Ulman, that the Temple became the beneficiary of a large sum of money to build the Community Center. The Williamsport Hospital was among the many charities benefiting from her estate.

Moses Ulman was born on July 3, 1830, in Manheim, Germany. He was next to the youngest in a family of fourteen children. Mr. Ulman was an ambitious and adventurous youth, sailing for the United States at the age of eighteen. He settled in Liberty, Pa., where he became a pack peddler, and in 1850 he opened a store there. When the small farming community offered little hope for success, he moved to Williamsport in 1856, where he had relatives, and started a clothing business. He became successful, acquired much real estate and farm land. Interested in finances, he was elected a director of

the Merchants National Bank at Pine and Third Streets. He retired from his business in 1882, turning over his store to his sons, Hiram and Lemuel. The sons were active in politics, served on city council. Hiram was a school director and a nominee for Mayor. After Mr. Ulman's retirement, he devoted much time to Temple affairs. His wife, the former Caroline Strasburger, was one of the first Jewish women to organize a Ladies Aid Group.

The Lycoming County History, published in 1906 by Emerson Collins, says of Mr. Ulman, "He was a self-made man, starting in life empty handed, with no capital save a pair of willing hands and a young man's bright hope for the future, and from a humble position steadily worked his way upward to wealth and affluence. Mr. Ulman was possessed of more than ordinary business ability, but he had other commendable qualities. He was always courteous and considerate to those in his employ, charitable in his opinion of others, and dispensed with a liberal hand the wealth which he had accumulated during his many years of business life. In his gifts to charities and to the poor and needy he followed the scriptural injunction, 'Let not thy right hand know what thy left hand doeth.'"

Death came to Moses Ulman on August 20, 1905, as the result of a kidney infection, a short period after the family had celebrated their Golden Wedding anniversary.

#### *Isidore Sampson*

Isidore Sampson was a charter member of the congregation and one of its most colorful personalities during the 1860's and 1870's. He was an organiza-

tion man, taking a personal interest in all phases of Jewish life. He served the congregation as treasurer and president for many years, and was active in all Jewish social and fraternal groups. With his wife Fanny, he operated a millinery and specialty shoppe at 42 East Third Street. Their residence was at Mulberry and Canal Streets, just a short walk from the Temple.

Others who served the Temple during that period were secretaries Isaac Weill and Aaron Strasburger.

The era saw families like those of Sol and William Silverman, Simon Hart, the Goldenbergs, Jonas Fischer, L.C. Meyers, Michael and Louis Levi, and others settle here. Each found some occupation or business and prospered. These families became actively associated with Beth Ha-Sholom congregation and provided a broader and more active Jewish life.

There came a need for the formation of social and fraternal organizations. In 1875, The Independent Order of The Free Sons of Israel, Chapter No. 86, was formed with the following officers at its helm: Lemuel Ulman, Simon Schloss, and Abraham Hart. Monthly meetings were held in the social rooms of the Front Street sanctuary. Two years later, another group organized The Independent Order of B'nai B'rith Lodge No. 120. They, too, met in the same rooms on alternate Sundays. Its officers were Aaron Strasburger, Moses Ulman, Isidore Sampson, and Sadock Ulman. Because the early Jewish settlers of the community yearned for close fellowship with their own people and desired to have the sense of belonging, of togetherness, they were anxious and eager to join and participate in new social and fraternal organizations. It was a period during which these organizations practiced elaborate ceremonies and rituals. The officers would attend the meetings in

formal attire, wearing tail coats, high hats, and striped trousers. During initiation ceremonies, the new members would pledge their allegiance to the constitution and bylaws of the order and join in lengthy ceremonies. A social group for men and women formed on March 4, 1891, was known as The Young Men's Social and Literary Club, with its object to provide more social life for the community. They set up club rooms in the upper floors of the Ulman Opera House on Market Square, holding dances, parties, card games, and all types of social events. Its first officers were Harry A. Jacobs, Isidore Sampson, Solomon Silverman, Samuel E. Ulman, and Henry Myers.

#### *Constant Changes In Spiritual Leadership*

When liberal Judaism spread throughout the country during the latter part of the nineteenth century, Beth Ha-Sholom became affiliated with the Reform movement and made many changes. The congregation installed an organ and organized a choir. Jennie and Ida Strasburger, girls of musical talent, were in charge of the organ music. The earliest members of the choir included Blanche Goldenberg, Hortense and Myrtle Kaufman, Miss Hart, and Tillie Strasburger. The Strasburger sisters were paid twenty-five dollars a year for their services as organists. A testimonial was given to Miss Tillie Strasburger for her service in the choir. The economy-minded officers specified that not more than five dollars should be spent.

In the eighteen seventies, the congregation paid its rabbis the sum of six hundred dollars per year, and as late as 1907 and 1908 the local rabbi's income was only nine hundred dollars per annum. The total budget in 1913 was \$1,550.00. The rabbi was paid \$1,200; choir, \$120; janitor, \$100; and \$130 for all incidentals. For that reason

Beth Ha-Sholom faced the problem of constant changes in spiritual leaders.

In the thirty years from 1874 to 1904 the following rabbis served this congregation: Michael Wurtzel, A.M. Block, August A. Levy, A. Myers, Lewis Schreiber, M. Nathan, and Alexander Bassil. Many of these clergy preached their sermons in the German language for most members spoke and understood German. Some of the early Jewish settlers observed strictly kosher dietary laws and insisted on using the old Hebrew prayer books (Sidrim and Chamusim). Others favored the German translation prayer books. It created much confusion and many heated debates.

The rabbis who served the congregation during its first half-century were a variety of types and backgrounds. They included German-educated scholars and graduates from American Yeshivas and theological seminaries. Some were older men, and others young students. Some were family men, and others single or widowed. Some rabbis stayed only a few weeks or months, while others remained for sixteen years.

Beth Ha-Sholom's spiritual leaders not only served its members but took an active part in all phases of civic and community life. One rabbi served on the faculty of Lycoming College as a professor of religion, others were chaplains and officiated at the community penal institutions. Each one, in his own way, left an imprint on the membership and on the community in the preparation of a confirmation class, the marriage of newlyweds, the eulogy at a funeral, or just paying a friendly visit to a parishioner.

#### *William Silverman*

For more than a decade William Silverman held the leadership of the

congregation, serving as its president from the mid-eighties to the mid-nineties, and he was responsible for much of the progress of the Temple. Mr. Silverman came to the United States from Bavaria while a young man and settled in Williamsport. He became successful, operating a variety store on West Third Street, which later became known as the Bush and Bull Department Store. When he was about to leave the city, it was such a loss that the congregation appointed a committee, including H. N. Goldenberg, George Rubinstein, and Isaac Weil, to express the regret on his departure. The following resolution was adopted September 23, 1895:

"Whereas our president, William Silverman, is about to sever his connections with the congregation and move to the city of New York, and

"Whereas the present prosperous condition of the congregation is due in a large measure to his unremitting labor and great liberality,

"Therefore, be it resolved that the gratitude of the congregation is due him for his many years of faithful service, as their president; and while they regret his departure from among them, yet they are conscious of the greater usefulness in the larger field which his new home will afford him.

"The congregation will never forget his continued devotion to their welfare, and trust that his usefulness and present prosperity will continue to be with him."

Mrs. Silverman, who remained in Williamsport with her son Jack, died on February 26, 1949, at the age of 91.

### *Frequent Arguments and Debates*

Debates about ritual policies and headwear took place frequently. A compromise resolution was adopted at the December, 1891, meeting, with the following resolution: "And it is further resolved that the members of this congregation over the age of sixty years, who in accordance with their personal beliefs desire to retain their heads covered, shall be allowed to wear black skull caps. Signed, L.C. Myers."

The devastating flood of 1889 so severely damaged the Temple structure that it needed expensive repairs and renovations. The congregation engaged Mr. Casper Ready, a local contractor, to make the repairs. Additional flooding in 1901 weakened the building so that it became unsafe to be used for services and social events. It had to be abandoned, and the congregation was faced with the problem of finding other quarters. During a three-year interim, services and meetings were held in the Reno Post building, the Ulman Hall on Market Street, and several East Third Street churches. Hiram Ulman was appointed chairman of a committee to seek a suitable location away from the river front flood area and centrally located nearer to the expanding Jewish residential section. The committee recommended the purchase of the site at Edwin and Center Streets as a desirable location for a new temple building.

[To be continued.]