

University of Illinois at Springfield

Norris L Brookens Library

Archives/Special Collections

Louis Schwartz Memoir

SCH95. Schwartz, Louis (1893-1986)

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 55 mins., 28 pp.

THE JEWISH EXPERIENCE PROJECT

Schwartz, native resident of Springfield, discusses the Jewish community in Springfield: Temple B'rith Sholom and Temple B'nai Abraham, rabbis and congregations, anti-semitism and zionism.

Interview by Syma Mendelsohn, 1973

OPEN

See collateral file

Archives/Special Collections LIB 144
University of Illinois at Springfield
One University Plaza, MS BRK 140
Springfield IL 62703-5407

PREFACE

This manuscript is the product of a tape recorded interview conducted by Syma Mendelsohn for the Oral History Office on October 22, 1973. Syma Mendelsohn transcribed the tape and edited the transcript. Louis Schwartz reviewed the transcript.

Louis Schwartz was born in Springfield, Illinois on March 6, 1893. After graduating from Springfield High School he worked in the ladies clothing business. Later he went into the scrap business and for 28 years was president of the Midwest Scrap Dealers Association.

A prominent member of the Jewish community in Springfield, Mr. Schwartz has served twice as president of Temple B'rith Sholom and as president of the Springfield Jewish Federation.

Many words and phrases in Yiddish appear in this transcript. Most have been translated according to The Joys of Yiddish by Leo Rosten, (New York; McGraw-Hill, 1968). Because Yiddish is a very "flavorful" language it is impossible to present all the nuances of a given word within the scope of the footnotes. The reader is therefore encouraged to check the fuller explanations in The Joys of Yiddish.

Readers of this oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

Louis Schwartz, October 22, 1973, Springfield, Illinois.

Syma Mendelsohn, Interviewer.

Q. Let me ask first about your father. Was your father born in Springfield?

A. No. He was born in Poland.

Q. When did he come to America?

A. Well, let's see. I would have to have my birth certificate. I think he was here about five years before I was born.

Q. How did he happen to end up in Springfield?

A. He had other relatives here.

Q. What was your father's occupation?

A. When he came here he was very religious. In Europe he served in the army as a musician under the Czar of Russia. In fact we always had his sword and his clarinet that he used to play in the army and I think my sister has it now.

Q. What did he do here in Springfield?

A. They were in the tobacco [business], made cigars, cigar manufacturing.

Q. You said he was very religious. Was he involved in the B'nai Abraham congregation?

A. Yes.

Q. Was your mother from Poland, too?

A. Yes.

Q. Did they come as a couple?

A. Yes.

Q. They'd been married in Europe?

A. Right.

Q. What was your father's name?

A. Simon.

Q. And your mother's?

A. Cecile.

Q. You were born here in Springfield. At the time you were born where was your family living.

A. 627 North Fourteenth Street.

Q. At the time that you lived on North Fourteenth Street, were there many Jewish families living in that neighborhood?

A. No. One within two blocks and Hank Kellner's mother lived about six blocks from us.

Q. Where did you go to school?

A. Palmer School.

Q. Were there many Jewish children at Palmer School?

A. Not too many.

Q. Was there any reaction on the part of your classmates or teachers because you were a Jewish child?

A. No.

Q. Where did you go from Palmer School?

A. Springfield High School.

Q. Did you go to religious school?

A. Well, they had a Hebrew teacher here two or three times a week after school.

Q. At B'nai Abraham?

A. No, we'd go to his home. He didn't live too far from the school, fortunately.

Q. Do you remember his name?

A. No, I do not.

Q. Is that how he earned his living, teaching Hebrew?

A. Well, I believe at that time he was a what they called a shochet¹,

1

The authorized slaughterer of animals, according to kosher requirements. Leo Rosten, The Joys of Yiddish, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968, p. 365.

he killed chickens and so on. If I remember correctly, I'm sure that was it.

Q. You say that your father was very religious. Was your family very observant?

A. Yes. A kosher home.

Q. Did your mother ever have any difficulty getting kosher meat?

A. At that time we had a Jewish butcher shop in Springfield. They delivered every morning.

Q. Did your family do special things at holiday time?

A. Everything that a family would do, build a sukkot² and so forth. Well, they were very observant; on Saturday they had a neighbor boy come in and light the fire.

Q. Let me just pick a holiday at random. What was Passover like when you were a young boy?

A. We had [a set of] dishes that we kept strictly for Passover purposes and the regular style of cooking Passover dishes.

Q. After you graduated from Springfield High School what did you do then?

A. I was with a brother of mine in the clothing business in Missouri

2

A booth that is set up outdoors, decorated with flowers and fruit, during the holiday of Succoth. Ibid., p. 382.

for a while. Then he and his family moved back here and he operated a ladies ready-to-wear store and I was with him.

Q. What was the name of his shop?

A. Schwartz Ladies Shop. (phone rings)

Q. You were just saying that you had been in the ladies wear business with your brother.

A. I left him to go into the scrap business. That's that (pointing to plaque on wall). They later formed an association and I was president of it for 28 years.

Q. Is that what this plaque is?

A. Yes.

Q. What does the M-S-D-A stand for?

A. Midwest Scrap Dealers Association. Then it became national but we retained the name.

Q. So you were in the scrap business for many years?

A. Until I retired, sold out and I became interested in Thrifty Drug. Oh, it's been about 25, 27 years ago, while I was still in the scrap business I invested my capital with Mr. Victor and that's why I'm here.

Q. Was that the beginning of Thrifty Drug?

A. They had a small store across the street and they were in business

for a while but really the first large store was this one here. We bought a store and remodeled the building, put in offices.

Q. Thrifty Drug has certainly been a success in Springfield.

A. Yes, it's a large organization.

Q. Let me ask one other thing, Mr. Schwartz, did you marry?

A. Yes.

Q. What was your wife's name?

A. Cecile.

Q. When did you marry?

A. At the age of 25.

Q. Was your wife from Springfield?

A. Yes.

Q. Did you know her as you grew up?

A. Yes.

Q. When you were growing up did your family often go to temple? To B'nai Abraham?

A. Oh, yes. You mean as I grew up? Well, the folks did, yes.

Q. After you were married were you involved in the B'nai Abraham congregation?

A. For a while and then my daughter started going to the Sunday school of Temple B'rith Sholom and I joined there. I felt that I should belong.

Q. How did your daughter happen to go there?

A. Well, there was no Sunday school [at B'nai Abraham] and I wanted her to have a Jewish education. And that's how the Sunday school [at B'rith Sholom] grew because ever so many of the old Orthodox families whose children now are leaders in the Reform congregation joined.

Q. Can you tell me what time that would be? About how old was your daughter when you made this change?

A. She was probably eight or nine years old.

Q. Is that when Rabbi Snyder was the rabbi?

A. Yes.

Q. Did you know Rabbi Snyder well? What kind of a man was he?

A. Very fine person. Very fine person.

Q. Before Rabbi Snyder came to Springfield it seemed that there were many rabbis.

A. Yes. (phone ringing)

Q. We were just talking about the rabbis. Why was there such a big turnover?

A. Well, mostly the turnover was in the Reform congregation. At that time

various leaders of the Reform congregation wanted a little more power than the other fellow, jealous possibly, and they'd get another rabbi.

Q. I see. You suggest that that did not happen at B'nai Abraham.

A. No, they kept them as long as they could.

Q. When Rabbi Snyder came he stayed a long time.

A. I believe he came after they moved, didn't he?³ Yes, the temple was more settled after they moved and Snyder came and it became a very good congregation as far as harmony was concerned.

Q. Why did Rabbi Snyder leave?

A. Why do all people leave? (laughter) More money, larger congregation, better congregation.

Q. After Rabbi Snyder left, after World War II, B'rith Sholom had a rabbi named Rosenthal, who was a refugee from Nazi Germany.

A. Yes.

Q. What kind of a man was he?

A. I will differ with what you have with Mrs. Meiers possibly, both Mrs. Meiers. [Mrs. C. Meiers and Mrs. Myers] He was a radical in my opinion.

3

After Temple B'rith Sholom moved to its present building at Fourth and Scarritt. Ed.

For instance at that time we tried to get the younger folks that were going to our Sunday school to meet with the younger group at B'nai Abraham and he objected very much. He didn't want our children to associate with them. He made that remark one time at a Federation meeting. I think I was President of the Federation at the time. And I differed with him, really got into an argument with the rabbi over it. I asked him if he didn't think those children over there were just as human as ours and shouldn't we associate with some of them. In fact some of the best friends I had were members of the B'nai Abraham congregation. That didn't make any difference to me.

At that time there was still a social barrier, let's put it that way, between the Reform and the Orthodox. He didn't want the children to intermingle. The B'nai B'rith organization was strictly controlled by the Reform and they finally broke down and took in three or four Orthodox members.

Q. You mean before that it had been strictly a Reform group?

A. Yes. I can recall when I joined they broke down and asked, I think, two or three of the--as they called it--Congregation B'nai Abraham members. I think I attended one meeting; I just didn't like the atmosphere of looking down upon. . . . Two or three men controlled the meeting. That went on for a few years, gradually broke up. Mr. Myers, Louis Myers, he was the father of Morris and Allan, was very much opposed to the Orthodox.

Q. I've been told that after Rabbi Rosenthal was here for a couple of

years the board decided not to renew his contract and that there was a big "to do" about that.

A. That's right. Yes, there was.

Q. Why was there such a big "to do" about it?

A. Well, because there were enough of the younger generation that came from Temple B'nai Abraham that wanted things more equal and they didn't feel that the Reform, the original Reform, was superior. But Rosenthal was of the opinion that they [Orthodox Jews] were inferior.

Q. Then you must have been glad to see him go?

A. Oh, yes, no question about it. From then on we had more harmony in the congregation.

Q. When you were president of the board, in 1955-1958, was there some consideration of B'rith Sholom and B'nai Abraham merging?

A. Yes.

Q. How did the idea that the congregations should merge come about?

A. Well, we both needed larger quarters for one thing. And we thought it would be a very good thing to build. In fact Barker, Goldman and Lubin at that time owned a very fine piece of ground out near Pasfield Park and they were willing to donate it to us to put up a new temple and merge. We had an idea that we could build a small sanctuary for the strictly Orthodox and they could have their

Friday night services in there if they wished. But we had a few of the congregation, the strictly Reform, and I don't mind telling you it was Cecile Harris, Florence Myers and the Victors, and a few more, that threatened to start a temple of their own. Now the Victors, that is, Ben Victor, came from a strictly Orthodox background. They used to go to services on Friday night, wear a shawl or whatever they wore in those days and I can recall his father sitting there with his hat on. It was quite controversial and we dropped the idea.

Q. It never got very far?

A. Well, we thought we had it along pretty well but with all the threats and so on, we dropped it.

Then the present temple wanted to move. That's why I took the presidency at that time because the congregation was so divided over whether they should rebuild this temple or move, that the congregation threatened to fall apart and it was really serious. A group came to me and thought that I was the only one with an even balance that could bring them back together again which, I'm patting myself on the back, I did. We had a vote on it in the congregation, for and against, and the against won. We decided to build that building next door to the temple, the Memorial Building.

Q. Before the Memorial Building was built I believe there was a house on that property called The Center?

A. Yes, it was just a dwelling.

Q. But the congregation used that . . .

A. For a [Jewish] center and Sunday school.

Q. What other kinds of things went on there?

A. Really nothing. They had some classes there once in a while.

Q. When the congregation decided to put up the Memorial Building you were the president of the congregation. Were there any problems in putting that building up?

A. Usual problems. Some people wanting more room, but really nothing too serious.

Q. You were president of the congregation again in 1965-1966. Was it unusual for one man to serve twice?

A. Yes.

Q. How did you manage to accomplish that?

A. Well again, they more or less drafted me. I don't recall what the argument was at that time but there was quite a serious difficulty, I think. I was on the board at the time and I was willing to take over the presidency. I think Satlow was the rabbi then. Was he? Is that what you have?

Q. I think he was the rabbi before. Didn't Rabbi Abramowitz come in 1957?

A. Oh, I was president then. In fact I hired him in California.

Q. Could you describe for me the process that the congregation used to

hire a rabbi.

A. We had a committee for that purpose and they had interviewed several rabbis which they didn't think would fit the bill.

Q. What kind of a man were you looking for?

A. More or less level headed, that wasn't partial to Reform or Orthodox, and primarily someone that was good for the community as far as our relations with the Gentiles. That was, in my mind, a first because . . . I was even asked to join the Ku Klux Klan here and could have joined the KCs if they'd have taken in Jews.

I was president of a boat club when they first organized the lake here. I was the only Jewish member in the club and they elected me president. So in all my life in this community I never knew what anti-Semitism was as far as I was personally concerned and it never was bad, as I said.

I recall when the committee came over and asked me to join the Ku Klux Klan. They said they had nothing against the Jewish people, it was the Catholics and the Negroes that they objected to, which to me was neither here nor there. And at that time, one of the committee that called on me to join passed away. He was City Detective and his wife called me up to be a pallbearer. His name was Delaney and I said, "Well, Mrs. Delaney, I could not be a pallbearer." At that time the Klan members used to put on their robes and come right up to the cemetery with the pallbearers. I said, "I would probably drop the casket and run if they'd come over the hill." They had a procession. She said, "I understand

that, Mr. Schwartz, and I have asked them to stay away and it will not be a Klan funeral." So I accepted and I was a pallbearer at the funeral. We're off the subject now, but I don't recall what you asked.

Q. You were talking about the hiring of Rabbi Abramowitz.

A. Oh, yes. I happened to be in California on a leisure trip. We had heard that this rabbi in California wanted to come back east. He was originally from New York. So I called him up when I was there, met with him and was very favorably impressed. That's the one we have here now.⁴ And I asked him if he couldn't have his wife come down. I said, "It's very important in our community that we have a rabbi's wife who can mingle as well with the non-Jews as the Jews. I'd like to talk to her and meet her." And the next day I met them at the hotel and we had lunch together and I thought she would fill the bill quite well. He told me that he was going east to be interviewed by another congregation and I said, "Would you mind stopping off in Springfield, Illinois if the salary and conditions [are all right] and spend a couple of days there." And he said no, he wouldn't mind at all, that he'd be glad to. He didn't know anything about Springfield. This was out of the clear sky to him, too. So I called the chairman of the committee to hire a new rabbi back in Springfield and I told him this man was coming, would he take care of him. He did and they interviewed him and were favorably

4

Rabbi Meyer Abramowitz. Ed.

impressed. That's how Rabbi Abramowitz was hired.

Q. How was the decision made to give Rabbi Abramowitz life tenure?

Is that a usual kind of thing?

A. First time in Springfield. It is usual amongst congregations where a rabbi has served so many years.

Q. I assume that if it was decided to offer Rabbi Abramowitz life tenure that he must have made a big success.

A. That's right.

Q. We talked about the relationship between B'nai Abraham and B'rith Sholom, which seemed to have had its ups and downs. Do you know anything of the Kanner Memorial?

A. Yes.

Q. How did that come into being?

A. By Mrs. Kanner. I don't recall the exact details. When her husband died she wanted B'nai Abraham to change its name, I think, to Kanner. Is that the information you have?

Q. Nobody that I've talked to really knows.

A. When I was a youngster this Mr. Kanner thought a good deal of me and he had always promised he would remember me in his will, [I was] one of his favorite boys. I can recall when I was Bar Mitzvah he gave me a very large gold watch for a Bar Mitzvah present. So I knew a little bit about the family. They had no children, but a lot

of relatives. When he died, I presume it was the Chevra Kadisha organization here that takes care of the deceased, they asked her for some money for something and she refused to give it. Finally she had to or they wouldn't handle the body. She wanted this congregation, B'nai Abraham, to change their name to Kanner [and they wouldn't]. So she decided she had enough relatives, she built a synagogue of her own.

Q. She must have been quite an incredible woman.

A. She was. She used to drive around with a horse and wagon and collect all the rents. She had a row of shacks, property, here in town. I can see her today driving this old horse and wagon.

Q. What did she look like?

A. Well, she was quite heavy and mannish looking, a little bit.

Q. How long did the Kanner Memorial exist for?

A. Not too long, four or five years, I don't recall exactly. Those that attended services there I think did go thinking they would be remembered in the will by Mrs. Kanner. Bernard Friedman is a relative. Sy Friedman, the attorney, and Isidore Friedman, who played the violin during the High Holy Days, were also relatives of hers. And Thersa Bergheim's mother received most of the money.

Q. Did many people from B'nai Abraham beside Mrs. Kanner's family join her?

A. No. I don't think there were any to speak of, that I can remember.

Not unless they had a personal mercenary idea, some money or something. She didn't have too many friends. In other words she lived for herself and would do nothing for the good of the community or herself either. [She] dressed shabbily.

Q. I'm fascinated with her because I think it would take quite a lady just to go off and build her own synagogue.

A. It would. Yes, that's true.

Q. I've been told that the building she built was very similar to B'nai Abraham.

A. Well, yes, it copied after that style.

Q. How did the people in B'nai Abraham feel about her?

A. Oh, I don't think any of them were concerned about it.

Q. Did they think maybe she was a "little off?"

A. No, they thought that she was just a tightwad and didn't want to spend any money with them or do anything for them and they let her go. I don't think anyone was concerned about it.

Q. You mentioned that you had a very brief membership in B'nai B'rith.

A. Membership?

Q. Yes, were you a member of B'nai B'rith?

A. Yes, I guess I was old enough, sure, I was married. Yes, I had a

membership. Oh, yes, for years. Would never attend meetings but paid my dues.

Q. Why didn't you attend meetings?

A. I told you.

Q. That's right, you did. You said that you were president of the Springfield Jewish Federation?

A. Yes.

Q. What did the Federation do?

A. Only fund raising. It was for distribution of funds.

Q. You started to mention anti-Semitism just briefly. Was there much anti-Semitism in Springfield?

A. No.

Q. What about Illini Country Club?

A. I guess you would call that anti-Semitism. That still exists.

Q. Was the Sangamo Club ever restricted?

A. I think they had one or two Jewish [members]. It was more or less restricted. I know when I joined, I think I was among the first that broke the barrier there.

In fact, this was one of the members that just called me. We're having a dinner Wednesday night at the Sangamo Club. There's a little group of us--the past couple of governors have been members,

the older local citizens are members--and we have a gourmet dinner once a month and meet and discuss everything on earth. The editor of the newspaper's there. It's been going on for years. They've always looked towards me as the president and the secretary. He called to see if it was all right that he was inviting his brother and a couple of more to dinner. Well, it's always been the policy that whoever was a host could invite anyone he wanted as long as it did not exceed nine or ten altogether because we always liked a table where we could be intimate.

Oh, you're talking about anti-Semitism. There is no anti-Semitism in the Sangamo Club today and there hasn't been for years.

Q. When did you first join the Sangamo Club?

A. It's probably been fifteen years ago or so.

Q. What about Oakcrest Country Club? Is that restricted?

A. That was at one time. Yes. Mr. Fish, he was vice president of the Marine Bank, called on me one day. He and I were very close. And he said, "Lou, we've decided the Oakcrest Country Club would like to take in a few Jewish members. And there's no use me kidding you, I know that you knew we weren't taking them in." And I said, "Yes, I understand that they're in destitute circumstances as far as money is concerned. So that's how you're going to raise some money." And he said, "Well," and then he laughed. "Talking as friends then," he said, "We've decided to take in three of them at the present time." I said, "Well, why did you select me? I'm no better than the other Jewish fellows in this [town]. There's a lot of young Jewish men

in this town who'd be eligible." And I said, "Who are the other two?" And he said, "One of them is Louis Roberts and one of the Myers brothers." I said, "Well, George, you can count me out right now because I don't want to belong and as long as you're restricting it to three--I'm not better than so many in this city that I'm not even interested."

And I called up Louie and I told Louie what I had done. He said, "Well, I'm glad you called me. I'm going to tell him the same thing." And he did. But one of the Myers did join. I think it was Stanley Myers' father. And he was the only one for a long time and then Stanley joined, I think the father died and Stanley joined.

Then there were a couple of Jewish fellows that put in their applications and they were blackballed and Stanley belonged. He came over to see me. I can remember helping him compose a letter he wrote. He told them he was handing in the name of a prospect for membership and if this fellow were not taken in he was going to resign. And really they couldn't have had anything against this fellow. His name was Bob Sherman. And he was blackballed. So Stan resigned and for a number of years they had no Jews as members. Then, I don't know, it sort of healed. Different generation. They had a golf course and a good many of the Jewish fellows joined on account of the golf course.

Q. Was there any discrimination economically toward the Jewish businesses in town?

A. Not to my knowledge.

Q. You never experienced any difficulty?

A. No.

Q. I've been told that Jews have never served on bank boards in Springfield.

A. Well, not till a few years ago. I'm chairman of the board of a bank in Springfield.

Q. May I ask what bank?

A. First State Bank.

Q. But Jews have never been involved at Springfield Marine? [Springfield Marine Bank]

A. No, they haven't. Oh, I don't think the First [First National Bank] has Jewish members. The Illinois [Illinois National Bank] broke down and took in Bill Gingold. But until the last few years they would really not accept anyone of the Jewish nationality on any one of the boards.

Q. Did the banks, particularly the Springfield Marine Bank, hire Jews?

A. No.

Q. Even today?

A. I don't think there's a Jewish person working at that bank. I recall Harry Stern, who has passed away, did a lot of business with the Marine Bank. He and I discussed it. There was an employee of his, a Jewish girl, now I don't recall whether it was an employee

or a friend, who was capable and he sent her over there just to see. They were looking for someone. They turned her down immediately. We all felt it was because she was Jewish. So none of the banks had any Jewish employees.

Q. Did Mr. Stern, or any other Jewish businessmen, ever feel they should withdraw their business from Springfield Marine?

A. Well, we couldn't. (laughter) You going to go to any other bank? We couldn't. Sure, we would have. If someone had organized a Jewish bank, why certainly.

Q. Governor Horner was Jewish, I believe.

A. Yes.

Q. Was he involved in the Jewish community much?

A. Not too much. Friendly, but not involved.

Q. Someone suggested to me that when Governor Horner came to Springfield a lot of Jews were appointed to positions in state government.

A. Not because they were Jews. I think that was all politics. There were Jewish people working for the state. . . . The first real job I had was as a page in the Senate as a youngster going to high school. There was no discrimination as far as State House employees. They needed the Jewish vote.

Q. I believe that over the years B'rith Sholom has had a special relationship with the First Congregational Church. How did that come about?

- A. They had a fire and burned out completely. And the rabbi called me and said, "You know the First Congregational Church had a fire?" And he said, "What do you think about offering them the use of our temple when we're not using it?" I said, "Rabbi, that would be a wonderful gesture. I will call or you can call, either way. It probably would be better if you would call the minister, but I would be in favor of it." And that's how it started. And when they laid the cornerstone I deposited quite a few papers pertaining to that in the cornerstone of their new church.
- Q. Was anybody in the congregation upset because the church was using the congregation's building?
- A. Oh, I couldn't recall the names. There was always someone that's upset about something. Yes. You can't have a 100 percent agreement on that.
- Q. In your early years in Springfield were there any organizations here that were Zionist in nature?
- A. Not to my knowledge. There were a few people accused of being Zionists but they were never strong.
- Q. When you say, "accused of being Zionist" . . .
- A. Well, said that they were narrow minded, that they were Zionists.
- Q. Were there more people in B'nai Abraham who were interested in Zionism than in B'rith Sholom?
- A. Really, to be frank with you, I don't think there were too many

people in either congregation, enough to mention, that you would say were Zionists, as far as I knew.

Q. Were you interested in the creation of the State of Israel in the 1940's?

A. Well, I looked with favor upon it. Yes. I contributed and was president of the Federation whose function was to raise funds for Israel.

Q. Did the Jewish community generally support that effort?

A. Yes. We had much better support then than we have now, I think. Much better. I recall a meeting in my home when I sent out invitations and said unless you can contribute \$1500 or more this invitation does not apply to you. I was very frank because I was tired of people wanting to come in and donate \$100 or so. That wasn't for an opening night dinner; they would ruin the [contribution of the] others. And [when] we raised \$35,000 in those days it's like \$200 today.

Q. When was that?

A. Oh, I don't know. When the Federation was just started, or two or three years afterwards. I was the chairman of the drive.

Q. You were talking before about the Klan and that they solicited your membership. I assume if they solicited your membership that the Klan wasn't particularly anti-Semitic in Springfield.

A. No. As I say, I have been invited to join practically every organi-