

# JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF CENTRAL JERSEY



Spring 2015

NEWSLETTER

Nissan-Iyar

## RUTH MARCUS PATT

Author, Historian, Philanthropist, and Woman of Valor



On Sunday, February 22, we heard the sad news of the passing of Ruth Marcus Patt, founder and benefactor of the Jewish Historical Society of Central Jersey. Ruth's vision and devotion brought together Jewish leaders and community members in 1977 to create and develop our organization, with a mission to archive and maintain the documents which tell the story of the Jewish community in Central New Jersey. Ruth obtained official status for the JHSCJ and went on to provide financial support, reach out to other organizations with related interests, and implement many of the Society's activities. She coordinated speakers for each year's American Jewish Experience Lecture Series, and Ruth herself researched and presented a lecture every year. Those of us who believe in the importance of remembering our past owe Ruth an enormous debt of gratitude for the legacy she has created.

This newsletter is dedicated to the memory of Ruth Marcus Patt. Her energy, intellect, generosity, and warmth will be missed by everyone who knew her.

## President's Column

It is with great sorrow that the Jewish Historical Society of Central Jersey reports the passing of our founder and guiding force, Ruth Marcus Patt. Ruth not only founded our Society 38 years ago, but from then right up to the present was a continuing source of new ideas, motivation, enthusiasm, and just plain hard work. Having lived in Central New Jersey for all of her life, she was keenly aware of the important role that the area's Jewish inhabitants have played in our community's growth and development. To document their contributions, she wrote several books on the subject, organized lectures, and started an oral history project that has continued throughout our Society's existence.

Central New Jersey has changed a lot since Ruth was growing up here. During that time, businesses were primarily small, and were owned and operated by local families. Much of the Jewish population was composed of immigrants — later including many Holocaust survivors. Much of Central New Jersey was dedicated to agriculture — a significant portion of it operated by Jewish farmers. Those of us who live here now might never be aware of any of this, were it not for Ruth's imagination and diligence in documenting it all. As our society becomes more mobile and increasingly hectic, the need for documentation and for preserving history becomes all the more important. Ruth will be greatly missed, but the Jewish Historical Society of Central Jersey, with your help and participation, will do all that it can to keep her dream alive.

Nathan Reiss

## From the Archives

As I work on this newsletter in the office of the JHSCJ, it is hard to imagine that Ruth Patt will no longer be stopping in to ask, "What's new?", or calling me with suggestions and ideas for new projects. Perhaps nowhere is her presence and impact felt more than in the archives. Within every collection, a researcher will recognize her distinctive tiny handwriting. Names and dates on the backs of photographs, index cards with lecture notes, and minute slips of paper with several words to jog her memory or provide bits of information to a later visitor all leap out with the unmistakable message: Ruth was here! Ruth created order out of the chaos of her own papers, research notes, and memorabilia, and for all the similar documents donated to the JHSCJ. Her fingerprints are literally on every folder.

On a shelf nearby is Ruth's first book, *The Jewish Scene in New Jersey's Raritan Valley 1698-1948*. I have referred to it countless times. Ruth's lasting contribution to scholarship is indispensable to those who are interested in the history of our Jewish community. While writing it, Ruth pored through newspapers and libraries; but more importantly, she mined the memories of her own extensive network of family, friends, and acquaintances, collecting many previously unrecorded facts before they were lost or forgotten. No one will ever be able to replicate her work. How fortunate we all are that Ruth loved her community so much. I hope she felt how much we loved her back.

Deborah Cohn



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## Ruth Marcus Patt: A Short Biography

Ruth Marcus Patt was born in 1919 in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Ruth was very proud of her family's history in the city. Her uncle, Abraham S. Marcus, and her grandfather, Israel Laurie, became partners in the scrap metal business and founded the New Brunswick Iron and Metal Company in 1906. Ruth's father, Joseph D. Marcus, later joined them and became sole proprietor of the business after the early death of his brother. All three men were great philanthropists in the Jewish community and beyond, working with others to found the Y.M.H.A. and the first Hebrew School in New Brunswick, and leaving bequests for many secular and Jewish organizations. Joseph Marcus and his wife, Bessie Laurie Marcus, had five daughters, of whom



*Passover at the home of Joseph Marcus, 1938. Ruth is seated at the far left.*

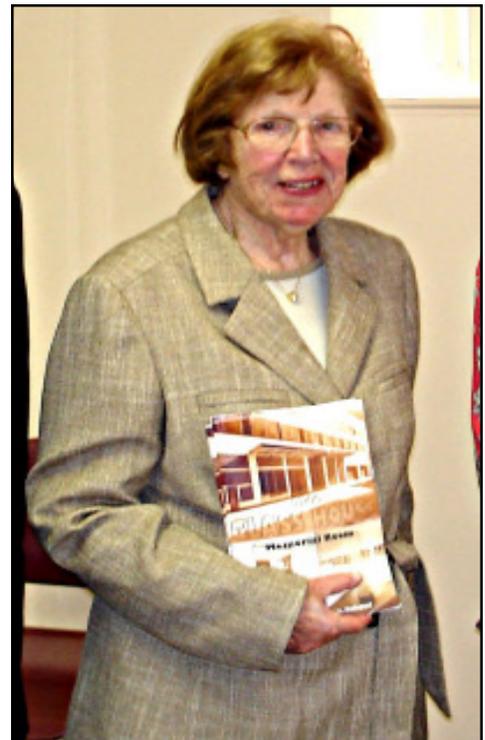
Ruth was the 4th, following unexpectedly on the heels of her twin sister Adelaide.

Ruth graduated from Douglass College in 1940 with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology. She worked as a psychiatric social worker with the Marlboro Psychiatric State Hospital before marrying her husband, Milton Patt, in 1942 and traveling with him during his World War II service in the United States and overseas. Soon after returning to New Jersey, after the conclusion of Milton's service, Ruth began her real career as a mother and a devoted member of her

Temple. The rest of her adult life was filled with work in numerous philanthropic organizations. Ruth was deeply devoted to Hadassah and the State of Israel since 1948. She served as President of the Sisterhood of Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple in New Brunswick, and for many years she wrote a column for the Temple's monthly newsletter, entitled "Patter".

In 1977, Ruth began research for her first book, *The Jewish Scene in New Jersey's Raritan Valley 1698-1948*, which was published in 1978. She soon recognized the need for a permanent home for the documents she was collecting during the course of her research. She formed the Jewish Historical Society of Central Jersey, which was officially incorporated in 1977 as the Jewish Historical Society of Raritan Valley. To help make it a reality, she invited 25 Jewish professors, historians and history buffs to her home to decide how to proceed. Ruth served as President of the newly formed society for nine years, and worked to organize her collection of documents into a formal archive. In 1998, she began coordinating the JHSCJ's American Jewish Experience Lecture Series, and was a popular speaker not only as part of the series, but with many other area groups as well. Ruth created a number of special exhibits on behalf of the JHSCJ, and worked with other organizations, including a

*(Continued on Page 8)*



*Ruth in 2008*

# IN HER OWN WORDS

by Ruth Marcus Patt

*Editor's Note: Ruth had a delightful folksy writing style. These autobiographical notes demonstrate her warmth and wit, and may serve as an introduction to her personality for those who never had the opportunity to meet her.*

I arrived unexpectedly on the heels of my twin, Adelaide, on September 29, 1919. Amazingly enough, neither Dr. Salisbury nor Bessie and Joe—our parents—suspected I was there! As a matter of fact, “Pop” had already called the relatives to announce Adelaide Shirley’s arrival, and now had to repeat the calls that another daughter had arrived. No name had been planned for, and finally Mom and Pop came up with Ruth, after a maternal grandmother, Raisel. I, however, missed having a middle name all my life. In my early years, I adopted the name of Laurie, and when I started writing, I took on the middle name of Marcus as my pen name.

I went to the public schools of New Brunswick and was elected to the National Honor Society in my junior year. Mom was so pleased she had to take me over to show Grandpa Laurie the announcement because “Grandpa had always appreciated the importance of education.”

While Adelaide proved to be quite the “tomboy”, I much preferred playing with dolls and sewing clothes for them. I sang in the “a cappella” choir, although I doubt I could do this today. I went to New Jersey College for Women (now Douglass), majored in sociology and minored in psychology. I was aiming to become a psychiatric social worker and was accepted for an internship at Marlboro, a state mental hospital, and I loved my work. I only complained that no one in the family (except for Milton) would come to visit me. My first day there, however, brought me some

consternation. Upon my arrival, I was shown my room on the top floor of the Women’s Senile Building and it was pointed out that I would be sharing a bathroom with two attendants in the next room. While unpacking, I decided to go to the bathroom, but as soon as I closed the door, I realized there was no handle on it and was thus no way to open it.



Ruth Marcus, 1940

What a predicament! I started yelling “I am the new social worker and am locked in the bathroom. Please help me!” After repeating this several times, I realized that patients in all the buildings were yelling similar pleas for help and no one would answer the calls. So I settled down to wait, with all kinds of fears arising. No one knew I was there, nor did they know my name. Maybe the attendants next door were on vacation. Maybe with no windows in the bathroom, I might run out of air. The other social workers all in the main office may not even know I had arrived, and would not come to look for me. To save you all from wondering any longer, two

and a half hours later, the two attendants returned to their room and heard me call to them. With an abject apology, they said the handle had just pulled off that morning, and they had not had an opportunity to get it fixed. This story, by popular demand, has been repeated over 100 times. This will be its last time, now that it is in print.

The virtual entering of the Patt clan into the Laurie Family began with my marriage to Milton S. Patt on March 22, 1942, after five years of “going steady.” The marriage might have come off earlier, but Joe and Bessie had certain protocols which had to be followed. The future sons-in-law of all five daughters eventually had to be able to support their brides in the manner in which

*(continued on next page)*

*“In Her Own Words”, continued from Page 4*

they had been raised, meaning of course a good income and a bright future. Furthermore, that point being acceptable, the daughters would be given a good start with a completely furnished home, a more than adequate trousseau and a lovely marriage ceremony. The fact that the young man was Jewish was automatically assumed. A pre-nuptial meeting with Joe and Bessie to discuss all of these concerns was a must, and strictly adhered to, but no young man was ever to fail!



*A young Ruth and Milton Patt, c. 1942*

Milton survived the interview, but not before several postponements had to be made to accommodate Pop's schedule. It actually took place on December 7, 1941, the day that Pearl Harbor was attacked, a date we would never forget. The wedding took place the following March, at the Hotel Astor in New York, with Rabbi Nathaniel Keller officiating. After a lovely honeymoon in Florida, we settled temporarily in an apartment on Livingston Avenue, with Aunt Blanche and Uncle Irving's bedroom and living room furniture, as they were redoing their own home. The married couple was awaiting Milton's call to the Army for Officer's Training in the Transportation Corps. It would come 6 months later.

In 1943, Milton was accepted into the Army's officer training school. His first assignment in basic training

was to drive a garbage disposal truck, assumed by some sergeant to be a natural for a former transportation executive! He would become an officer several months later and sent to the Brooklyn Army Base. Later he was transferred to the Oakland Army Base in California, soon after I gave birth to our first son, Richard. Our second son Steven arrived three years later, and by then the family was finally ensconced in their home on Edgeworth Place in New Brunswick.

My Hadassah experience was my first major community experience. As early as my first meeting I went home with the job of Jewish National Fund Chair, responsible for taking orders for trees to be planted in Israel. Before I knew it, this job led to many others. I was eventually to be a group chair, and following that our chapter chair. This would be followed by going up the ladder on the Southern New Jersey Regional Board, covering every angle but the presidency, because I would not be able to drive to the southern part of the state alone and had no one to rely on to go with me. My final position was editing the Regional Bulletin which I loved doing. It became a job which honed my skills as a writer and a speaker. This led to my newest interest in researching our area Jewish history, writing books and pamphlets for publication, creating an archives, and developing the Jewish Historical Society of Central Jersey, which has grown these last 30 years. I was also very much involved in working on behalf of our Temple, Anshe Emeth, including writing the monthly bulletin for fifteen years.

This last interest brought me to the attention of our mayor in 1978 who asked me to consider planning the 300<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration of New Brunswick, to be celebrated throughout 1980. It was a great honor and I happily took up the challenge. I had over 100 people on the main committee, many of whom I had never met before. The mayor appointed about 50 members to my central committee—mostly former mayors, current politicians and wives of important men in the community—and at the first meeting, I made it clear that there would be no honorary, non-working members allowed. If they were not willing to take on at least one important responsibility, I would ask them to allow me to replace them. In addition, all women would have to work using their own names. Everyone assured me

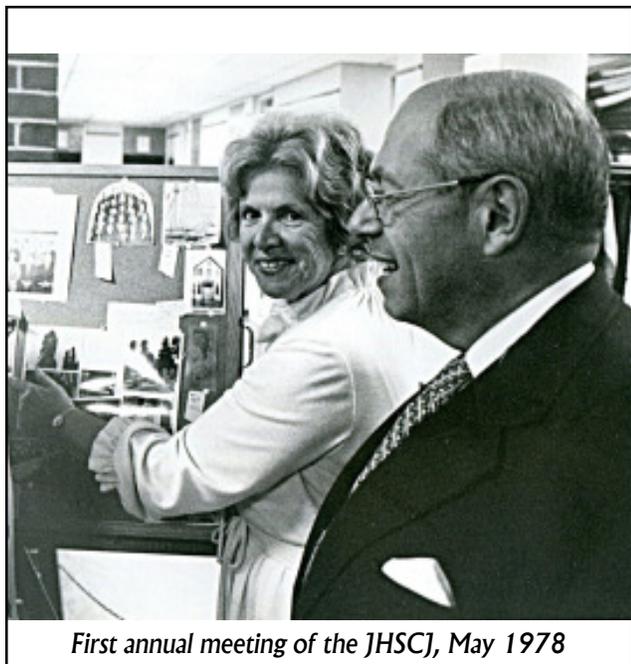
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## OUR MEMORIES OF RUTH

I lost a friend and mentor with Ruth Patt's passing.

When I came to New Jersey in 1951, Ruth was already well ensconced in local activities. I hardly knew her but actually knew her sisters much better. When Ruth planned the JHSCJ she contacted my husband, Stuart Kahn, who was a life-long resident of the area. I came along for the ride.

I attended the lectures and meetings, learning all I could about the local Jewish scene. Eventually I ended up as secretary and, before I knew it, I was president. We met where we could and finally Ruth arranged for us to have a small space in the lounge of the Central New Jersey Jewish Home for the Aged on DeMott Lane as our home. We tried getting a larger area in the Home but were unsuccessful. When I found the remains of somebody's lunch in our archives, we knew we had to move.



*First annual meeting of the JHSCJ, May 1978*

Milton Patt, Ruth's husband, came up with the idea that we use the small house which belonged to Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple as our new home. It took a long time and much negotiating (as well as many sleepless nights on my part) before a lease was drawn up and the renovations began. Ruth's association with the Laurie Foundation funded the changes in the building and we now had a home of our own. We had come a long way to house our archives—from Ruth's apart-

ment closets to the Jewish Home to our own home. When that building was demolished for the Temple enlargement, we moved to our area in the new section of Anshe Emeth where our archives are now housed.

During all this time, Ruth planned and arranged the lecture series. At first we met where we could and then we moved to a movie house on Route 130. When this theater closed, Ruth arranged for us to use Congregation Etz Chaim in Monroe Township, and then the Jewish Family and Vocational Services offices in the Concordia Shopping Center. Additional lectures were held at Anshe Emeth and then the Highland Park Conservative Temple.

I was pleased to consider Ruth as my friend and hope that she felt the same. We met at times other than Jewish Historical Society connections. We visited in New Brunswick, Florida, Monroe Township, and even down the Jersey shore when the Patts happened to rent a cottage one season right next door to my brother's home in Harvey Cedars.

We are planning to continue Ruth's work as best we can without her, but she most certainly will be missed.

*Doris Kahn Gunsher  
Past President, JHSCJ*

.....  
Growing up in Highland Park, there was never anything strange about "seeing double" at family events. There were two sets of identical twin women in our family: my mother Dorothy Perlgut (z"l) and her twin sister Sally Shure, together with my aunt, Ruth Patt (z"l) and her twin sister, Adelaide Zagoren (z"l).

Some of my most cherished childhood memories are of sitting around the Seder table hosted by my aunt and uncle, Ruth and Milton, in their home. Our traditional extended family Seder with my grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins always ended up being an exciting evening.

As I grew up, I became more aware of my Aunt Ruth's huge contribution, on so many levels, to the Jewish community in New Jersey. I was a proud niece: proud of my aunt's writing, of her books and her many honors, and of course of her establishing the JHSCJ. Due to Aunt Ruth's influence, I volunteered to teach Hebrew to seniors at the Central NJ Jewish Home for the Aged, work that

*(continued on next page)*

## OUR MEMORIES OF RUTH

*(continued from page 6)*

piqued my interest in Jewish genealogy. And the list goes on and on...

My aunt's support for Israel began way before I was born. But when I made aliya over 35 years ago, I always felt that she was especially proud of her family in Israel. When Aunt Ruth gave us a copy of her book "Uncommon Lives" over 20 years ago, she inscribed: "It is a pleasure to inscribe a book to you. In one fell swoop, my fame spreads far beyond New Jersey!"

Visiting Ruth whenever we were in NJ was such a pleasure (and her own visit to Israel in 1998, for the country's Jubilee Celebrations, was particularly memorable). My aunt was always so interested in our lives in Israel, in discussing books, Jewish art, culture, history and proudly sharing stories of her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Aunt Ruth, you have enriched our lives with so many memories, thank you.

*Lynn Perlgut Kra-Oz  
Ra'anana, Israel*



I have relatively few regrets of my 35 years of living in Australia, but missing Ruth Patt's funeral is now one of them. Ruth Patt was my aunt: she married my mother Dorothy Patt's brother Milton Patt, who in turn had graduated from New Brunswick High School in the same year as my father, Meyer Perlgut. I grew up spending a great deal of time with the extended Patt family, including Ruth's sons, my first cousins Richard and Steven.

Ruth meant many things to me and to our family. I still tell stories about Ruth and Milton, and as we approach Passover again they will be with me in spirit, as they are every year. For many years now I have led our extended Sydney family seders. And here's the thing. My models are Ruth and Milton. It's not just what I grew up with, it was and is my idea of how you head up Jewish family rituals and keep the proceedings going.

Ruth's leadership achievements are many, however the founding of the Jewish Historical Society of Central Jersey is one of the most significant and profound. She recruited both of my (late) parents to leadership roles in the Society, and both of them participated enthusiastically. Ruth meant a great deal to my parents, and in my father's final years (as he outlived my mother), she played an important role as his friend and advisor. She did this with all of her admirable personality traits—authority, firmness, grace and care—and for that alone I am forever in her debt.

As a person and a public figure, Ruth was "larger than life." She commanded respect, not by "commanding" but by her personality and her leadership ability. She asserted authority, not because she necessarily wanted to be authoritative, but because that's who she was, a person who could do things, and who would make things happen. She was gracious, articulate and expressive.

As I have traveled in the Jewish world in the USA and here in Australia, meeting traveling Jewish leaders in different settings, it is astonishing how many of them

knew Ruth. It opened doors and added to my credibility to be able to introduce myself as "Ruth Patt's nephew." In my adult years, a number of my interests converged with hers, including Jewish history, communal life and philanthropy. I currently sit on the board of directors of a Jewish residential college of the University of Sydney, and at many meetings I can almost hear Ruth's voice in my ear, guiding and advising. Having my aunt Ruth as one of my role models has added immeasurably to my life, as it has to so many. I join with my first cousins, my sister, Lynn Kra-Oz, and with the rest of the Central New



*Ruth in 1963*

Jersey Jewish community to mourn her passing.

*Don Perlgut  
Sydney, Australia*

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joint exhibit in 2008 with the American Hungarian Foundation in New Brunswick.

In 1986, Ruth used the personal resources and recol-



Ruth lighting candles at an Interfaith Seder at Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple, 1971.

lections of the Society's members to write another book, *The Jewish Experience at Rutgers*. Seven years later, she published *Uncommon Lives: Eighteen Extraordinary Jews from New Jersey*. All royalties from the books were given to the Jewish Historical Society of Central Jersey. Ruth also wrote several historical brochures covering subjects such as the Sephardim of New Jersey, the Workmen's Circle, and Jewish life in New Jersey's rural areas, and she was the editor of *The Tercentennial Lectures New Brunswick, NJ* published by The City of New Brunswick in 1982.

Ruth served on the boards of the Jewish Federation of Greater Middlesex County and Rutgers Hillel, and was a board member for many years of the Blanche and Irving Laurie Foundation, which was started by her uncle. In 1980, Ruth was asked to chair the tercentennial celebration of New Brunswick's 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary, at which time she planned and chaired over 130 events throughout the year. Ruth's many honors and awards include Citizen of the Year by the City of New Brunswick, Woman of the Year by the Raritan Valley Jewish Federation, the Crown of Torah Award from Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple, and several awards from Rutgers University and Rutgers Hillel. Ruth's biography was included in *Past and Promise—the Lives of 300 Women of New Jersey from 1600 to the Present*.

Ruth is survived by her sons and their wives, Dr. Richard and Althea Patt and Steven Patt and Deborah Jamison, her two grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren.

### • • • Herman Harris • • •

The JHSCJ lost our friend Herman Harris on February 14. Herman had a warm smile to match his heart, a neat little mustache, and an accounting office that was a Highland Park institution for many years. He was a good accountant and for many years, as a devoted member of the Board of JHSCJ, he did our accounting. Herman liked to say that one of his major claims to fame was sitting next to Alan Ginsberg in Paterson High School. Herman was a wonderful person. Our sympathies go out to his wife Renee, his family and friends.

*Edith Neimark, JHSCJ Past President*

Herman once told a group how he had applied for a scholarship to a day camp sponsored by the YMHA of Paterson, NJ. A representative of the Y came to his home to interview him. She was a heavy-set woman who had to climb several flights of stairs to speak to him. She expected to see a puny little boy and was surprised to see Herman, who was stocky and robust. Since she had made the exhausting trip to see him, she awarded the scholarship to Herman. When Herman returned to his seat behind me, I asked if the interviewer was Belle Bernstein. Herman was shocked that I knew her! I had been a counsellor at Belle's private day camp in the Paterson area many years ago. Small world!

*Doris Kahn, JHSCJ Past President*

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Thank you to our generous members for contributions to our Archives Development Fund:

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Judith Bronston	The Family of Ruth Patt	In memory of Ruth Marcus Patt

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they were willing to go along with these stipulations, and no one ever let me down. It was an extraordinary experience and the city was elated with our success. We highlighted all the ethnic groups, we held programs in our oldest and most interesting houses of worship, we had three lecture series on the town's history (all filled to capacity), we had programs for seniors, we developed a musical with professional actors put on in every school in the city. Many similar events have continued to the present day.

Well, that's enough for my story. My tennis was pretty good, my golf lousy, my piano playing worse, so I guess I'll have to stick to writing.

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