

JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF CENTRAL JERSEY



Summer 2011

NEWSLETTER

Tammuz/Av

100 Year Yahrzeit for Aunt Lost in the Triangle Factory Fire

by Ellen Rosenthal

When the tragic fire occurred at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory 100 years ago on March 25, 1911, two of my mother Ruth Rosenthal's aunts were eyewitnesses. Sadly, one aunt, Rachel Grossman, perished in the fire at age 17, one of 146 who died that day. Another aunt, Pauline, 18, survived with serious injuries; she spent a year recuperating.

The sisters came to New York with their mother, Sophie, Ruth's grandmother, and six siblings from Podu Iloaiei, a small town in the Iasi district of Romania in the northeastern portion of the country. Strong-willed Sophie, third wife of wealthy land owner Hyman Grossman, sought to avoid military conscription for her three young sons. Upon arriving in New York around 1908, Sophie and her children settled into a comfortable apartment on the Lower East Side. The older six children, teenagers and young adults, worked to keep the youngest two in school.

Rachel and Pauline went to work at a factory that produced women's blouses, known as "shirtwaists." The factory normally employed about 500 workers, mostly young immigrant women, who worked nine hours a day on weekdays plus seven hours on Saturdays.

On the morning of the fire, Rachel, who had taken the name Rose to seem more American, found that she had lost a button on her ankle boots, the footwear commonly worn in those days. Her 21-year-old brother Morris, Ruth Rosenthal's father, went down to the corner to buy a replacement. It did not match the other buttons. It was this mismatched button that allowed Morris to identify Rachel's charred remains.

As a survivor, Pauline was interviewed by several papers at the time. Here is an excerpt and quote from the *New York Times*, March 26, 1911:

Pauline Grossman, 18 years old, who was injured by leaping from a window of the factory as the fire was gaining headway on the eighth floor, says three male employees of the factory made a human chain of their bodies and swung across a narrow alleyway to the building fronting in Greene Street. She declares a number of persons passed across the men's bodies and escaped from the burning building by entering a window of the building opposite.

"As the people crossing upon the human bridge crowded more and more over the men's bodies the weight upon the body of the center man became too great and his back was broken. She said he fell to the passageway below and the other two men lost their holds upon the window sills and fell. Persons who were crossing upon the human bridge dropped with them to the passageway."



Graphic front page coverage of the Triangle Fire, March 26, 1911

An article from a March 27, 2011 article in the *Hudson Republican* tells Pauline's story of "the heroism of her three fellow employees."

From a lower floor she watched as a man hung head downward from an eighth-or-ninth-floor window, "held by the ankles by the second man, who was in turn lowered by his ankles... The human chain swayed backward and forward with an increasing momentum until at last the lowest man was able to grip the wall of the Greene Street building. Bit by bit... he raised himself until he had a firm grip on the window edge across the alley. Then the human bridge was complete. A long file of trembling men and women began crawling across the narrow pathway of bone and muscle. Suddenly, there was the sharp cracking sound of breaking bone. The form in the center of the chain relaxed and the man's grip on the ankles of his companion's clinging to the win-

(continued on Page 4)

President's Message

By all accounts, our June 14 bus trip to the National Museum of American Jewish History, located on Independence Mall in Philadelphia, was very successful. By organizing the trip in conjunction with the Raritan Valley Chapter of Hadassah, we were able to fill a bus and thereby hold down costs.



Some of our group gathered to board the bus

The museum itself is of very modern design, with many extremely interesting multi-media exhibits. Many historical documents and other items that I had only heard of before, and many that I hadn't, were on exhibit there. The museum worked hard to accommodate our group, with kosher meals, with a variety of choices. Everyone agreed that it was an enjoyable day and a worthwhile experience.

We owe our Society's trip planner, Bernice Bernstein, a giant "Thank You!" for her extensive efforts in arranging the details of the trip. Thanks also to Debbie Cohn for managing the reservations and payments, and to Rose Reiss for helping to coordinate with Hadassah.

If you have an idea or suggestion for our next Heritage Trip destination, please contact me so we can plan another excursion soon.

Nathan Reiss

Archives Corner

Thanks to the dedication of Peggy Mombert, our collection of materials for the Central NJ Jewish Home/Wilf Campus has expanded from 5 boxes to 17 boxes. You can read about the process on Page 3. If you are inspired to create an archive for your own organization, please contact me--it is not difficult, and you will make a permanent contribution to the history of the Jewish community in Central New Jersey.

Recent Donations:

From Ruth and Ellen Rosenthal: Information on the Triangle Fire, and on two aunts who were victims (see page 1 of this Newsletter.)

From Edgar Rosenberg: Bulletins from Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple, Sept.-Nov. 1959, May 1960.

Deborah Cohn

Donations

The JHSCJ is grateful for financial contributions from the following:

Bernice & Eugene Bernstein
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*Be sure to visit our Web site at
www.jewishgen.org/jhscj
 for an expanding list of archival
 materials to be found
 in our collection.*

Jewish Historical Society of Central Jersey continues to build its collection of original photographs, documents, and artifacts relating to Jewish life in Central New Jersey. We also accept letters, diaries, clothing, and original works of art and music with a local connection. The Jewish Historical Society assumes full responsibility for its long-term care and storage and commits itself to making this material accessible to the community. Please call Debbie Cohn at 732-249-4894 if you have something that you think we might be interested in for our collection.

EDITORIAL STAFF		CONTENTS	JHSCJ OFFICERS	
Editor	Deborah Cohn	Archives Corner.....Page 2	President	Nathan M. Reiss
Contributors	Peggy Mombert Ellen Rosenthal	Creating the Wilf ArchivePage 3	Vice President	Harvey Hauptman
Graphic Artist	Deborah Cohn	Donations.....Page 2	Treasurer	Susan Marchand
		Fight for Jewish Chaplains..... Page 5		
		Editorial Page.....Page 2		
		JHSCJ Officers.....Page 2		
		Membership.....Page 4		
		Triangle Fire.....Page 1		
		Tributes.....Page 4		

Creating the Wilf Campus Archive

By Peggy Mombert

Eight months ago, Elaine Rand Fromkin and Susan Harris, Chief Executive Officers of the Oscar and Ella Wilf Campus for Senior Living, approached me to ask if I would be interested in working on the archive for the Wilf Campus. Elaine felt that there was a need for an extensive archive to be housed at the Jewish Historical Society of Central Jersey

2010 to fruition. With the help of Debbie Cohn, archivist of the Jewish Historical Society, and the support of Susan Harris and members of the Wilf Campus staff, the archive is now complete and available to those interested.

My assignment was to look through the many accumulated



Architects' drawing for the original Central New Jersey Jewish Home for the Aged

and the Wilf Campus itself. I did not hesitate. The Central New Jersey Jewish Home for the Aged was the foundation of what is now the Oscar and Ella Wilf Campus for Senior Living. I looked forward to reliving the events that brought the Home I had worked for from 1983 until my retirement in

documents, articles and photographs showing how the Home evolved into the Campus of today. The numerous photographs brought back memories of the residents who resided in the Home, the importance of the volunteers, the Boards, the Auxiliary, and the Life Members. The photos also provided fond memories of the many dinner dances and fashion shows, the gift shop, coffee shop, and other fundraising activities that provided the finances for many services enjoyed by the elderly persons entrusted to our care.



Peggy Mombert and Debbie Cohn in the JHSCJ Archive Room, ready to shelve the 12 new boxes containing the Wilf Campus Collection.

I found minutes of a Steering Committee meeting discussing the feasibility and need for a nursing home in the Central New Jersey area. To my surprise, the first meeting took place in May, 1963. It was to be twelve years before the Janice and Philip Levin Wing of the Central New Jersey Jewish Home opened in April, 1975, consisting of 120 beds. Fanny Nagy was the first resident to enter the Home and resided there until March, 1977.

It was amazing to read the scope of the planning efforts by so many people in the Jewish community. Representatives from the Federations of Central New Jersey, Raritan Valley and Northern Middlesex County were all part of the planning process.

Ruth Jacobson of Perth Amboy and Sylvia Sand of Westfield were two women who were very involved from the initial planning stages. I found notes from an interview which related how the idea and the support from the Founders blossomed and grew throughout the community. This was an example of documents that I found, which confirmed the importance of this archive project.

(continued on Page 4)

TRIBUTES

From	To	Occasion
Ruth M. Patt	Herman and Renee Harris	In memory of Dorothy L. Fertig
Jerry and Doris Kahn Gunsher	Herman and Renee Harris	In memory of Dorothy L. Fertig
Jerry and Doris Kahn Gunsher	Sydell Seiden	In memory of Milton Seiden
Muriel and Stanley Haber	Rose and Nathan Reiss	In honor of their new grandson
Renee and Herman Harris		In memory of Dorothy L. Fertig

MEMBERSHIP NEWS

Welcome to our New Members

Israel & Marsha Eisenberg
Merna Levinthal
Esther & Raymond Sabin

Thank You to our Newest Life Members

Roberta & Lawrence Fachler
Edna Sherber

Thank You for Renewing at the Patron Level

Beatrice Beck
Roberta Belsky
Dr. & Mrs. Eugene Bernstein
Irving Bussel
Francine Derman
Dr. Norman Reitman
Betty Saltiel
Helen Solomon

(Triangle Fire continued from Page 1:)

dow ledge gave way. In a second, the center man shot down through the narrow alley and landed on the ground.”

The other two men also fell, and Grossman said she thought several others “went crashing to the ground at the same time. Whether they had been crossing on the bridge of bodies, or had leaped from the windows, I couldn’t make sure. The sight so sickened me that I fainted.”

(Wilf Campus continued from Page 3:)

Reading through the minutes and articles, and looking at the photographs, I was able to relate more to the planning process. The photos captured every part of the construction of the Home from the site dedication, to the groundbreaking and the actual completion of this wonderful facility.

As I continued building the archive I looked at the growth of the Home and the addition of the other entities. Each time something was discussed regarding adding beds to the Home or other services for the elderly, I found that the thought and dedication was the same as in 1963. According to the minutes, everything was thoroughly thought out before pursuing a new project. The Home grew from 120 beds to 125 to 255 when the Lydia and Morris Goldfarb Pavilion was constructed and opened in 1988.

A feasibility study showed a need for a low income HUD building, and after many years of planning the Lena and David T. Wilentz Senior Residence (formerly Somerset Residence) was opened in 1985 for 100 low-income elderly residents. In October, 2002, the campus was dedicated as the The Os-

Rachel was buried on March 27, 1911 in the Romanian American Burial Society at the Washington Cemetery, Brooklyn. The ceramic image on the granite memorial is one of only four Triangle graves that still retain the image of a victim.

Ellen Rosenthal is the President and CEO of Connor Prairie Interactive History Park in Fishers, Indiana. She grew up in East Brunswick and is the daughter of JHSCJ member Ruth Rosenthal.

car and Ella Wilf Campus for Senior Living at a ceremony attended by Joseph Wilf and several members of the Wilf family. In 2003, the Martin and Edith Stein Assisted Living Residence (formerly SomerBrook) welcomed its first residents. On May 3, 2005, the Martin and Edith Stein Hospice served its first patient.

The documents discussing all of the entities on the campus are included in the archive. I was always proud to be associated with the Home and each entity as it was added, but doing this project made me even more proud. I feel that it is an important addition to the Jewish Historical Society and I am sure this will be an ongoing project as the Campus grows.

Peggy Mombert, a Somerset resident for 41 years, began working at the Central NJ Jewish Home in March, 1983 as the Executive Secretary to Executive Director Elliott Solomon. She then became Chief Administrative Officer for the Home, and at her retirement in 2010 was the Executive Director of the Foundation of the Wilf Campus. She now serves on the Boards of both the Foundation and the Wilf Campus.

Create an archival collection for your own organization--a labor of love that will preserve your work for posterity. Contact Debbie Cohn at the JHSCJ office to learn how you can help our archives grow.

The Fight for Jewish Chaplains

For Jews who wish to observe the rituals of their faith, wartime can pose seemingly insurmountable challenges. The exigencies of war make the observance of the Sabbath, holy days and *kashrut* rules difficult. As the Arab attack on Israel during Yom Kippur of 1973 made clear, Jewish soldiers must sometimes subordinate religious observance to combat. Yet, while wartime needs must often take priority over religion, there are times, such as at the funeral of a fallen Jewish soldier or at the bedside of a wounded Jew, when war policies can be shaped to accommodate religion, and in ways that treat all faiths equally.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Jews could not serve as chaplains in the U.S. armed forces. When the war commenced in 1861, Jews enlisted in both the Union and Confederate armies. The Northern Congress adopted a bill in July, 1861 that permitted each regiment's commander, on a vote of his field officers, to appoint a regimental chaplain so long as he was "a regularly ordained minister of some Christian denomination."



Rev. Rabbi Arnold Fischel

Only Rep. Clement L. Vallandigham of Ohio protested that this clause discriminated against soldiers of the Jewish faith. Vallandigham argued that the Jewish population of the United States, "whose adherents are ... good citizens and as true patriots as any in this country," deserved to have rabbis minister to Jewish soldiers. Vallandigham thought the law, which endorsed Christianity as the official religion of the United States, was blatantly unconstitutional. However, there was no organized national Jewish protest to support Vallandigham, and the bill sailed through Congress.

Three months later, a YMCA worker visiting the field camp of a Pennsylvania regiment known as "Cameron's Dragoons" discovered to his horror that the officers had elected a Jew, Michael Allen, as regimental chaplain. While not an ordained rabbi, Allen was fluent in the Portuguese *minhag* (ritual) used in Philadelphia's Rodeph Shalom Congregation and taught at the Philadelphia Hebrew Education Society. As Allen was neither a Christian nor an ordained minister, the YMCA representative filed a formal complaint with the Army. Obeying the recently enacted law, the Army forced Allen to resign his post.

Hoping to create a test case based strictly on a chaplain's religion and not his lack of ordination, Colonel Max Friedman and the officers of Cameron's Dragoons then elected an ordained rabbi, the Reverend Arnold Fischel of New York's Congregation Shearith Israel, to serve as regimental chaplain-designate. When Fischel, a Dutch immigrant, applied for certification as chaplain, the Secretary of War, none other than Simon Cameron, for whom the Dragoons were named, complied with the law and rejected Fischel's application.

Cameron's rejection of Fischel finally stimulated American Jewry to action. The American Jewish press let its readership know that Congress had limited the chaplaincy to those who were Christians and argued for equal treatment for Judaism before the law. The position taken by the Jewish press irritated a handful of Christian organizations, including the YMCA, which resolved to lobby Congress against the appointment of Jewish chaplains. To counter their efforts, the Board of Delegates of American Israelites, one of the earliest Jewish communal defense agencies, recruited Reverend Fischel to live in Washington, minister to wounded Jewish soldiers in that city's military hospitals and lobby President Abraham Lincoln to reverse the chaplaincy law. Although today several national Jewish organizations employ representatives to make their voices heard in Washington, Fischel's mission was the first such undertaking of this type.

Armed with letters of introduction from leading Jewish and non-Jewish political leaders, Arnold Fischel met on Dec. 11, 1851, with President Lincoln at the White House to press the case for Jewish chaplains. Fischel explained to Lincoln that, unlike many others who were waiting to see the President that day, he came not to seek political office, but to "contend for the principle of religious liberty, for the constitutional rights of the Jewish community, and for the welfare of the Jewish volunteers." According to Fischel, Lincoln asked questions about the chaplaincy issues, "fully admitted the justice of my remarks ... and agreed that something ought to be done to meet this case." Lincoln promised Fischel that he would submit a new law to Congress, "broad enough to cover what is desired by you in behalf of the Israelites."

Lincoln kept his word, and seven months later, on July 17, 1862, Congress finally adopted Lincoln's proposed amendments to the chaplaincy law to allow "the appointment of brigade chaplains of the Catholic, Protestant and Jewish religions." Historian Bertram Korn later wrote of Fischel's accomplishment in persuading Lincoln to intervene that "his patience and persistence, his unselfishness and consecration, had ... won for American Jewry the first major victory of a specifically Jewish nature ... on a matter touching the Federal government." Korn concluded, "Because there were Jews in the land who cherished the equality granted them in the Constitution, the practice of that equality was assured, not only for Jews, but for all minority religious groups."

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