

## A JEWISH RETROSPECTIVE: BLENDING IN BROOME

## Anti-Semitism didn't rear its head, but it peeked

By JEFF DAVIS

In 1941, the late Felix A. Link wrote an angry letter demanding reasons for not having a Jew at Binghamton's Link Aviation Ltd.

The aged industrialist later received his reason and it is remembered by Susan and her father as a lesson in the Jewish community. But Rabbi Lavin J. Sussman and other community leaders agree that Link's 1941 letter and such position exemplify a "valuing class attitude" in Binghamton through the first half of this century.

"Historically, there has been very little public animosity," said Sussman, project leader and author of *Beyond the Catskills: A Brief*

History of the Jewish Community of Broomeville. "Anti-Semitism here was more subtle than populist."

Social conscience and the local economy grew in the post-war years, and the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant "elite" class lost ground to a burgeoning middle-class that included many ethnic and religious groups, Sussman said. And in that transformation the ability to discriminate against Jews all but disappeared.

"In my book, anti-Semitism is hardly coming from anywhere today," Sussman said in a recent interview. "As long as there is no leadership, there is no issue. Certainly, private citizens harbor personal feelings, but no one is mounting an active campaign."

However, as Ed Link's letter shows, that wasn't always the case. Anti-Semitism was on the rise nationally in the years between the two world wars, and in Sussman's years in *Beyond the Catskills*, "Binghamton Jews were not spared from the effects of this attack."

"Exclusion of Jews from a variety of social clubs — adult and youth — intensified during the 1930s, and two of the area's new and rising industries — IBM and Link — like many engineering firms across the country, often discriminated against Jews in hiring practices."

In a story published by the *Sun-Stateline* on July 26, 1979, writer Richard Green reported that in the 1940s Link did not hire Jews for

executive jobs. It is the industrialist's opinion, "It was not good business for us to do so, for, as you know, sometimes there is prejudice against Jewish-controlled or operated concerns, and I did not wish to brand our company as a Jewish-operated concern."

Elsewhere in the letter, which Green found with a set of papers donated by Link to the library at the state University Center at Binghamton, the aviation pioneer said he would Jews be morally — if not legally — diskused. He also blamed "his father's business failure on a 'Jewish concern's unfair advantage of the bankruptcy laws, which forced the failure of the Link Plate Company and made our family penniless."

But Rabbi Emeritus Jacob Schwartz of Vassar's Temple Israel said attitudes changed. "Anti-Semitism is by no means virulent in this community," he said.

Herwitz came to Temple Israel — which was then located at 18 Exchange St. — in the fall of 1944. Schwartz arrived in Binghamton in March 1951. Jews still were excluded from such established institutions as the Binghamton Club and the Junior League in those days, but during their careers here Herwitz and Schwartz have seen those and other barriers fall, thanks to a combination of practical business concerns and more enlightened social attitudes.

The old social barriers may be

gone, but memories remain to underscore the sensitive nature of bigotry. For example, Charles L. Rosenthal recalls that in the mid-1930s he was kept out of Alpha Zeta, a fraternity at Binghamton Central High School, because he was Jewish. Yet Rosenthal's father, who graduated from high school in Binghamton in 1914, had been a member of the same fraternity.

"Today, I don't think where you came from or what you belong to matters as much as it was many people," he said. "I think working class people found they had more in common than was different. It shows you how the social world has changed — largely for the better. It doesn't mean all the problems have been erased. But there has been substantial positive change."

# THE HISTORY OF JEWISH IMMIGRATION IN BROOME

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** The following is a summary of Lavin J. Sussman's brief history of the Jewish community in Binghamton. Excerpts from Sussman's text appear in indented type.

In the introduction to his brief history of Binghamton's Jewish community, Rabbi Lavin J. Sussman relates an anecdote that sets the tone for the essay that follows it.

Sussman teaches history at the state University Center at Binghamton. Soon after arriving on campus, he was visited by an undergraduate who accused that he was pro-semitic because from New York City he took to the hills of the Southern Tier. When Sussman told the student he lived in this community, but shocked response provoked the title he has opened and the 10-day exhibit that is scheduled to run on campus May 17.

"You're the student responded in disbelief. 'I didn't know that Jews live beyond the Catskills.'"

*Beyond the Catskills: A Brief History of the Jewish Community of Broomeville, N.Y., 1750-1975* is the result of two years of cooperative research and community site-visitings. It also marks the initial phase of a work very much in progress.

The 40-page catalog that will accompany the exhibit of photographs and memorabilia in the University's Rosenthal Gallery "represents only the first step toward the writing of a comprehensive, critical history of the Binghamton Jewish Community," Sussman writes in the exhibit's catalog. "Its principal goals are to describe the basic historical development of the community and give some insight into the Jewish experience of over 125 years of Jewish life in New York's Southern Tier."

From Sussman's perspective, 125 years of Jewish life in Broomeville from 1829-75 was distinguished by seven major characteristics. First, he notes that the size of the Jewish community of Broomeville and Broome County has never been particularly large. The *American Jewish Year Book* reports that the Binghamton Jewish community at its largest of Broome County's total 1970 population of 240,000. Today, Sussman estimates, 2,500 Jews live in present areas of Broome County and another 3,500 Jewish residents are at SUNY-Binghamton.

Sussman says the Binghamton Jewish community developed relatively late in the Jewish settlement of the Southern Tier. For example, the first known Hebrew workers record of Jewish immigrants in this area appeared in 1851, but Binghamton's first synagogue wasn't built until 1895.

A high rate of residential mobility also characterized Jewish life here. The



The Binghamton Sons of Israel's congregation gathered for a picnic on Water Street around 1905. The group built its Exchange Street sanctuary in 1923.



At left are doughboys (in the back row, left to right: Sam [Shavel] Schwartz, Arnold, Sam [Shel]ovsk, Frieda Konnick and Eva Benstein are in their line at the Kaulah Temple in 1920.

majority of Jewish families that initially settled in the area remained for a generation or less, Sussman says. So, while the Binghamton Jewish community has remained relatively small, the number of different Jewish families who have resided in the area is quite large.

The Binghamton Jewish community also maintained a largely middle-class socioeconomic profile, Sussman reports. Retail was the primary economic activity, and many Jewish businessmen kept their careers as peddlers. By the 1930s and 1930s, however, the number of Jewish professionals had increased significantly. Their social connections with the expression of IBM after World War II.

The presence of other strong ethnic groups also helped to shape the local Jewish community. Sussman says, "Relations between Jewish and non-Jewish ethnics were generally cordial and many basic patterns of Jewish ethnic interaction were established."

Despite some Old World ethnic differences, anti-semitism was strongest among the older, upper classes of Binghamton society, as Sussman puts it.

In this community, that most of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who held sway during the first half of this century. After World War II, ethnic and anti-semitism declined, Sussman notes.

Diverse, middle, largely middle-class and occasionally discriminated against, the Binghamton Jewish community developed in a series of stages. Four distinct periods can be discerned. The "German Period" began in the 1810s with the arrival of Central European Jews. . . . The "Age of the East European Jew" starts in 1825 with the formation of the Sons of Israel Congregation. . . . The "Americanization of Binghamton Jews" symbolically began in 1823 with the construction of Sons of Israel's large downtown sanctuary on Exchange Street. It also attracted the professional efforts of a Jewish Community Center and the beginnings of a local Jewish Federation. . . . "Suburbanization" extends from the end of World War II (1945). It was characterized by demographic growth, the relocation of several of the area's major Jewish institutions to new, suburban settings and the expansion of local Jewish religious and educational activity.

Sussman says it's not possible to

identify the first Jew or Jewish family to settle in Binghamton. "It is reasonable, however, to assume that permanent settlement had been preceded by years of peddling activity," he writes. "By the time the first shot was fired at Fort Sumter, approximately 20 different Jewish families had taken up residence in Binghamton."

While the initial wave of German Jews were mostly peddlers, others were attracted by the growing cap-making industry, which dominated the local economy from 1870 to 1890.

But only could Jews from Bendinck, Minsk and Pinsk want to come to Binghamton, N.Y.? Apparently, the primary reason for leaving beyond the Catskills was Jewish emancipation. Chain migration, as it is generally referred to, helped build Jewish communities. . . . Many of Binghamton's older Jewish families, for instance, can trace their ancestry back to the tiny Lithuanian village of Kovno, which remained a source of Jewish immigration for almost three decades.

As Binghamton's Jewish population grew, the majority of newcomers settled in the Susquehanna Street area and

generally benefited from the period of prosperity that followed World War I.

Largely because of Endicott Johnson's inability, the Southern Tier was spared the worst of the Great Depression.

Binghamton Jews prospered along with the community as a whole, and, by notes. They began to ride the so-called "ethnic escalator" up to suburban, middle-class neighborhoods. In those days, that meant the West Side of Binghamton, which followed the Susquehanna Street area as the seat of local Jewish population center.

Throughout this period, a variety of local Jewish organizations and institutions — both religious and secular — developed and grew. By the mid-1970s, the organized Binghamton Jewish community was functioning at a new and unprecedented level. It had received heavily in its local membership and created an impressive organizational infrastructure. It was busy, diverse and strongly committed to its own survival, as well as helping Jews around the world, particularly in the State of Israel. After 125 years of settlement, a lively Jewish community had developed beyond the Catskills in Binghamton, N.Y.

— JEFF DAVIS

## Project links past, present experiences of Jews in Broome

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Why is Rosenthal willing to pay a tab that's likely to exceed \$4,000? "The exhibit is dedicated to my son and to Harry Rubin (a family member who helped the Rosenthal build The Fair Store, one of Binghamton's most successful mercantile operations)," he said. "They devoted themselves to the Jewish community and the Jewish cause as well."

"Also, my feeling is that every community needs a sense of history that will give us a sense of where we've been and where we need to

go from here." As for "where we've been," the photographic selections allow for an undistorted view of Jewish experience. "It's very extensive, the life of the community in general."

Sussman and local Jewish leaders suggest that it coincides with the overall relationship between the two communities. "The Jewish community here never isolated itself from the rest of the community," said Ethel Schragin, rabbi emerita of Binghamton's Temple Emanuel. "That helps to explain the assimilation isn't a problem today."

Rabbi Jacob Herwitz expressed similar sentiments. "We're well integrated in this community," said the rabbi emerita of Temple Beth El. "We've been very fortunate in that respect. There is no discerning among the different groups here."

Sussman agrees. "There were so many other ethnic groups active at the same time," he said. "This was a positive example of how to build a cohesive ethnic community." In other words, Binghamton — with its rich ethnic heritage — supplies a practical definition of the cultural "melting pot," as Sussman sees it. He rejects the

notion of a "melting pot," which by definition, implies a blended uniformity. Instead, the historian prefers the image of a social "salad bowl." Various ethnic groups and their traditions are mixed in the bowl, but they retain their own identities and enrich the overall community in the process.

Sussman came to this community to teach history at SUNY-Binghamton and preside on a particular basis at Temple Beth El in Endicott. He and his wife Elizabeth have five young children and live at 75 Beethoven St. Binghamton is "being an outsider helped."

Sussman said. "I wasn't really influenced by institutionalism. And what I discovered is that the local Jewish community mirrors national patterns. Ethnic life is quantitatively America, and so are Jews in much of it."

Migration patterns in the Southern Tier were "typical," Sussman says. "Chick migration" — in which family members and occasionally entire villages followed early settlers to one location — was common. The cosmopolitan was accompanied by enough surprises, however, to satisfy Sussman's sense of scholarly adventure. "That there are size or 10 clothing stores owned by Jewish men (not surprising me, I've seen 100 Jewish men in suits) was a little surprising. I've never discovered I had a cousin in Canada."

Sussman also found a new sense of purpose here. "As far as I can determine, this is the last Jewish community of any size in New York state to have a history written of it," he said. "In that regard, I feel honored early settlers to one location — was common. The cosmopolitan was accompanied by enough surprises, however, to satisfy Sussman's sense of scholarly adventure. "That there are size or 10 clothing stores owned by Jewish men (not surprising me, I've seen 100 Jewish men in suits) was a little surprising. I've never discovered I had a cousin in Canada."