

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 130)

Rav Shimon Schwab, ZT”L (1908 – 1993) (Part III) Saving Lives – Shearith Israel

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Note: *The following is quoted from the article **Memories of Shearith Israel** written in December 2000 by Rabbi Moshe Schwab, Rav Schwab’s eldest son. I have edited and modified it somewhat, and he has kindly given me permission to include it in this article.*

Last month’s Glimpses Into American Jewish History dealt with Rav Schwab’s arrival in Baltimore, MD from Germany in 1936 when he assumed the position of Rov of Congregation Shearith Israel, his adjustment to life in America and his mastery of the English language as well as some difficulties he encountered when he insisted on maintaining the synagogue’s policy that only those who were Shomer Shabbos could be members.

From 1936 on the situation of Germany Jewry continued to deteriorate under the Nazis. People were desperate to leave Germany, but this was not easy or even attainable. Many German Jews who might have escaped before the Final Solution took full effect discovered that their efforts were often thwarted by US bureaucracy. Rav Schwab and his kehilla were in the forefront to provide German Jews with the proper papers needed for immigration to America.

Affidavits That Saved Lives

My father, [The reader should keep in mind that we are quoting from Rabbi Moshe Schwab’s *Memories of Shearith Israel*.] with the help of many good hearted members and congregants of the Shul, worked very hard during 1937 - 1941 to obtain “Affidavits” to bring many people who were fleeing Hitler's Nazi Germany to America - and particularly to Baltimore. Mr. and Mrs. Myer Strauss were especially helpful in freely giving “Affidavits” to their desperate brethren in Germany to enable them to come to America. And there were many others, who also helped greatly in this undertaking.

The advent of these “refugees” from Germany, greatly enriched the population of the Shul, and they were a great asset to the Congregation, and felt very comfortable and welcome in “Rabbi Schwab's Shul,” which had the familiar German Minhag to which they were accustomed. Our house was a center of encouragement and welcome for these penniless people. My father and mother helped many of them with housing and employment, in the face of the Great Depression which still affected America at that time.

Respect for a Beis Hakneses

On a personal note, we children were taught by my father to have the greatest respect for a Beis Hakneses and to conduct ourselves with great dignity while in Shul. When I was about seven or eight years old, I must have become a little impatient in Shul, and began moving and walking around. My father immediately looked at me sternly and ordered me to my seat - directly in front of him. Observing this scene, one of the congregants approached my father and said, "Rabbi, here in America we are not that strict with our children." Whereupon my father retorted: "You will have to leave the education of my children completely up to me." Needless to say, that was the end of anyone's interference with our education.

Simchas Torah

I remember the early Simchas Torah celebrations at Shearith Israel. First of all, there were no evening Hakofos on Simchas Torah until Rabbi Schwab initiated this Minhag in Shul, and this was not too happily accepted by the old guard. It was a beautiful sight to watch my father dancing with the Sefer Torah on Simchas Torah, night, as well as day. He would dance gracefully, including doing full 360 degree twirls, with a big smile on his face. This was especially entertaining for the children, who could see their rabbi "loosening up" to show his happiness with the Torah.

Leon Rivkin, the Hebrew School principal, would organize the children, distribute flags to them, and supervise their participation in the Simchas Torah Hakofos processions around the Shul. I also remember how Jerry Senker would lead the children in their chant of "*Meeeeeh*," *imitating* the bleating of sheep, as he would call out "Tzon Kodoshim" between Hakofos.

An unofficial Simchas Torah "Hashkomo" Minyan was organized by the Gradman - Hirschberg families together with a small group of the Germans. This was followed by a delicious "Kaffe and Kuchen" Kiddush breakfast at the Gradman house. I was very proud to have been asked to join this group shortly after my Bar Mitzvah, because they needed me for Minyan. This group was purposely kept small not to interfere with the main Minyan, and the Hashkomo davening was timed to end shortly before 8:30 AM, when the main davening would begin. One year, a minor crisis erupted when the Hashkomo Minyan took a few minutes longer, and Mr. Rauneker - who was not in favor of the Hashkomo - walked in and was quite upset. He said: "Why are you interfering with the '*Ohring*' (old German for Davening) of our Shul; I am running this, not you!"

Needless to say, a cool, calm and wise Rabbi Schwab soothed things over, as he had done on so many other occasions.

Hosting Gedolim

I proudly remember some of the Gedolei Yisroel who graced our home and Shul in

those early years. As mentioned earlier, Rav Elchonon Wasserman spent a Shabbos in our house and davened in the Shul. Arriving home from shul on Friday evening, my father wanted to honor him by giving him his seat at the head of the table. Reb Elchonon would have nothing of it, nevertheless, my father insisted, until a compromise was reached whereby my mother set up two places side – by – side, at the head of the table. My father fondly remembered seeing Reb Elchonon peacefully asleep in his room during the night, with his two hands folded under the side of his head - he had left his door open - and compared his look of total trust and *Bitochon* in Hakodosh Boruch Hu, to that of my infant brother Myer, who was also peacefully asleep nearby with full trust that all of his needs would be taken care of by his parents. This is a vivid lesson in *Bitochon*.

Then there was the charismatic Ponivesher Rav, Rav Avraham Kahaneman, who attracted large audiences, both in our house, and in Shul, when he spoke on several occasions. He was a master story teller, especially about his recollections of the Chofetz Chaim.

There was Reb Chatzkel Pertchovitz, an emissary of the yeshivos in Yerushalayim, who would usually come in the summer. I remember him crying bitterly while saying one of the “Tzion” Kinnos on Tisha B'Av. The practice in the Shul at that time, in accordance with the German Minhag, was to divide the saying of the Tisha B'Av Kinnos among the members of the Congregation. Some members had specific Kinnos which they said every year.

There was the Mirrer Rosh Hayeshiva, Horav Eliezer Yehudah Finkel, from whom my father received Semicha. This great Gaon and Tzadik spent a week in our house. He always davened Shacharis “*K'Vosikin*,” in which the Shemoneh Esrei is said exactly at the moment of sunrise. In conformity with this timing, he davened Shacharis privately in his room in our house. Otherwise, he davened with us in Shul.

There was a nephew of the Chazon Ish, Rav Shmaryohu Karelitz, who was a big Tzaddik. Of course, the famous Rav Avraham Kalmanowitz, fiery leader of Vaad Hatzalah, and later Rosh Hayeshiva of the Mirrer Yeshiva in Brooklyn, was in our house and in Shul many times during the war years.

At the request of Rav Kalmanowitz, my father organized an appeal in Shul on behalf of Vaad Hatzolah, in which he publicly auctioned off his own personal Sefer Torah, which he had brought from Germany, for the benefit of the cause. I remember that it was sold for \$2000, which was quite a large amount of money in 1944.

One of Baltimore's “Favorite Jewish Sons” was Rabbi Mordechai Gifter of the Telzer Yeshiva. He was a guest in our house on many occasions, and spoke in Shul many times. I remember having quite a spirited discussion with him at one Shabbos lunch concerning the topic of “Torah im Derech Eretz”. My father kept wisely silent and smiled at my sophomoric efforts in attempting to argue this great philosophical issue with one of the great Torah leaders of the day. (I was about 15 years old at the time.)

There were many, many, more Torah and lay leaders who graced our home and Shul. These people, their greatness, and the thoughts which they expressed, contributed greatly to our education and growth in the home of my parents.