



Rav Shimon Schwab, zt"l

Recollections of His Years in Baltimore

On the occasion of his 13th *yahrtzeit*

Adapted by Dr. Yitzchok Levine

Introduction

Rav Shimon (Simon) Schwab, zt"l, was born on December 30, 1908/7 Teves 5669, and was *niftar* on February 13, 1995/14 Adar I 5755. He was a Rav and communal leader in Germany, Baltimore and Washington Heights. Born in Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany, he attended the *Realschule* there, founded by Rav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch, zt"l, as his father and grandfather had before him. This school combined religious and secular studies in the spirit of Rav Hirsch's *Torah im derech erez* philosophy. After completing the ninth (and highest) grade, Rav Schwab studied full time for a number of years in the local yeshivah founded by Rav Shlomo Breuer, zt"l.

In 1926, Rav Schwab went to Lithuania to study in the Telshe Yeshivah for three years, and then to Poland to continue his studies in the Mir Yeshivah for two more years, something not at all common for young German Jews. After receiving *semichah*, Rav Schwab returned to Germany, where he married Recha Froehlich of Gelsenkirchen. He served first as assistant rabbi in Darmstadt and then as district rabbi in Ichenhausen, Bavaria.

Rav Schwab and his family immigrated to Baltimore in 1936, where he served as the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel until 1958. That year he was invited to join Rabbi Dr. Joseph Breuer, zt"l, as Rav of the German-Jewish community in Washington Heights, K'hal Adath Jeshurun. This

community is widely regarded as the spiritual continuation of the prewar Frankfurt *kehillah*. With Rabbi Breuer's increasing age and infirmity, Rav Schwab took on many leadership roles. After Rav Breuer was *niftar* in 1980, Rav Schwab led the community (later joined by Rav Zechariah Gelley, *ybl"c*) until his passing in 1995.

The following is quoted from the article "Memories of Shearith Israel," written in December 2000 by Rabbi Moshe Schwab, Rav Schwab's eldest son.

Leaving Germany

During 1936, with Nazi anti-Semitism growing daily in Germany, my father, who was then the *Bezirksrabbiner*, or district rabbi, of Ichenhausen, Bavaria, Germany, was especially targeted by the local Hitler Youth thugs for persecution, and he knew that he must leave Germany as soon as possible for his life was in peril. During the early part of the summer of 1936, my father met with Rabbi Leo Jung, zt"l, of New York, in Zurich, Switzerland, and asked his help in obtaining a rabbinical position in America.

Rabbi Jung told my father that he had read his book, *Heimkehr ins Judentum*, which was published the year before, and that based on the views expressed in this book, there would be only one suitable rabbinical position for him in

America — at Shearith Israel in Baltimore; the position had been vacant since the passing of Rabbi Dr. Schepsel Schaffer in 1933. Rabbi Jung advised my father to contact his friend Mr. Nathan Adler, who was one of the most influential leaders of the congregation and who happened to be a distant relative of my father, to apply for the position.

Congregation Shearith Israel

It is a well-known fact that Congregation Shearith Israel was established as a result of the breakup, in the late 19th century, of the Green Street shul in downtown Baltimore. Two distinct congregations were formed. The more liberal group became the Chizuk Emunah Congregation, which was known as the Friedenwald shul because it was led by Dr. Aaron Friedenwald, and the other, more traditional group formed the Shearith Israel Congregation, which became known as the Strauss shul because of the influence of the Strauss and Adler families. The home of Shearith Israel Congregation for many years was on McCulloh Street, near North Avenue.

In the early twenties, the North Avenue neighborhood had begun to change, and several affluent members of Shearith Israel moved “uptown” and settled in the upper Park Heights area of northwest Baltimore. To accommodate these members, whose numbers were growing, a “suburban” branch of Shearith Israel was built; it was completed in 1926.

America

To make a long story short, arrangements were made for my father to come to Baltimore as a candidate for the rabbinical position on Shabbos *Parashas Ki Seitzei*, August 29, 1936. My father spoke in shul, in a labored English, on Shabbos morning, and in the afternoon he gave *shiurim* in Yiddish for the *baalei batim*. On the following Sunday evening, he again addressed the congregation in English. Afterward, he was told that the congregation would have a meeting to decide on his candidacy between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and my father returned to Ichenhausen to await the outcome.

On 4 Tishrei/September 24, 1936, my father received a telegram with the words “Unanimously Elected” and the signature “Rauneker,” that of the man who was then president of the congregation. My father’s English was so

rudimentary that he did not understand the meaning of the word “unanimously,” thinking it had a negative connotation since it began with “un.” It was only after he consulted his well-thumbed English-German dictionary that he made the *brachah* “*Baruch Hatov Vehameitiv.*”

To further condense a long story — filled with *nissim* — our family (my father, mother and their three children) arrived in New York on 10 Teves/December 24, 1936. About 10 days later we moved into the house at 3808 Glen Avenue, which the congregation had rented for us.

Those first few weeks in Baltimore were filled with my parents’ orientation to a new and peaceful world. My father’s days and nights were filled with his new duties as rabbi of an English-speaking congregation, and my mother’s with caring for the children and meetings with the ladies of the congregation. Father spent a great deal of time preparing his Shabbos-morning sermons in his newly adopted language. I can remember clearly my father

telling us children, “We are in America now, and the language spoken in our house from now on will be English.”

Learning English

We owe a special debt of gratitude to Miss Grace Blondheim, a“h, who volunteered to help my father with his English speeches, which he read word for word in those early days. However, within a year, he became quite fluent in English, and slowly but surely, he no longer had to rely on a written text to deliver his sermons. He would humorously reminisce about the time his written speech was blown away by a gust of wind from an open window, and he was forced to continue without it. He then realized that he had mastered the English language. To further improve his English, my father would listen carefully to President Roosevelt’s speeches on the radio to pick up the nuances of English pronunciation.

Rav Ruderman and Rav Neuberger

Almost immediately upon his arrival in Baltimore, my father was befriended by Harav Yaakov Yitzchok Ruderman, *zt”l*, the Rosh Yeshivah of Yeshivas Ner Yisrael. My father soon became a regular, albeit unpaid, *maggid shiur* there. On Fridays, he would give a special *Chumash shiur* to



Rav Schwab’s official student ID from Telshe.

the entire yeshivah. My father's close association with Harav Ruderman and his very capable *menahel*, Rabbi Herman Neuberger, *zt"l*, lasted for the rest of his life, long after he left Baltimore in 1958.

Dissension Over Shabbos Observance

When my father came to Shearith Israel, he found a very traditional shul governed by dedicated officers who maintained all the familiar, time-honored German *minhagim* and *tefillos*. The famed Roedelheim *siddurim* and *machzorim* were the official texts for the *tefillos*, and the *Shulchan Aruch*, was the final arbiter in all questions of Jewish law and practice.

However, all of this was only a beautiful veneer covering a major problem that had been seething within Shearith Israel for many years; the congregation had – and probably still has – an old but then unwritten statute that limited voting membership to *shomrei Shabbos*. All others, although welcome in the shul, could only be “seat-holders,” with no voting privileges. The majority of the congregants were very unhappy about this because they wanted more of a voice in the functioning of the synagogue, which they considered too rigid in its German-style Hirschian Orthodoxy. This group was in favor not only of abolishing the “Shabbos statute” but also of allowing the shul to sponsor social events that featured mixed dancing. Despite many congregants’ requests to liberalize the shul, Nathan Adler, Leon Strauss and other like-minded officers



Rav Schwab is standing fourth from right at the Ner Israel Institute for Adult Education closing exercises, May 18, 1949.



At yeshivah in Frankfurt, 1926. Rav Schwab, *zt"l*, is standing, far right.

tenaciously insisted on enforcing the *shomer Shabbos* rule, effectively blocking any dissenters from changing the shul's special character as a model of uncompromising, Torah-true Orthodoxy.

The result was that at the time of my father's arrival, there were only about 8 to 12 voting members, out of a congregation of 150! Many of the others were Orthodox by synagogue affiliation only, but not in practice – especially with regard to *shemiras Shabbos*, which was observed at different levels by different people. Some “kept” Shabbos but their businesses were open; others kept Shabbos fully, but their wives were not too particular in their observance. Someone told me that he recalled, as a young boy, standing with his friends on the shul's portico on Shabbos afternoon between *Minchah* and *Maariv* and seeing the wives of some of the congregants – who were at *seudah shelishis* downstairs – getting off streetcars on Park Heights Avenue carrying shopping bags filled with groceries!

Almost immediately upon his arrival in Shearith Israel, this old, festering problem was placed squarely in my father's lap for a halachic resolution. Despite great pressure – especially from the Brotherhood, a group in the congregation that provided substantial funding for its budget – and threats of secession by a majority of the congregants, my father, after consulting with many rabbis and lay leaders in and out of Baltimore, ruled in 1938 that the old *shemiras Shabbos* membership condition would be enforced.

Furthermore, Hagoan Harav Elchonon Wasserman, *Hy"d*, who spent a Shabbos in our house on Glen Avenue and attended the shul, greatly encouraged my father in this decision. He was also supported by the board of the shul, by many leading rabbis in America, including Rabbi Dov Aryeh Levinthal of Philadelphia, and by an official position paper of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of America (Agudas Harabbanim).

Despite my father's best efforts to explain his ruling to the dissenters and to welcome them warmly to all of the congregation's activities and programs, including its Hebrew school, the great majority of the liberal-minded congregants seceded from Shearith Israel and formed their own congregation, Beth Jacob, in a building only one block away.

While Shearith Israel was left religiously intact, only a small number of congregants remained faithful to it. New arrivals to the neighborhood added somewhat to its



With Rav Pam, zt"l, and ybl"c, the Bostoner Rebbe, shlita, at the 69th convention of Agudath Israel, November 1991, in Parsippany, N.J.



(L-R) Rav Schwab, zt"l, and Rav Breuer, zt"l, at a KAJ dinner in 1965.



Rav Schwab, zt"l, (speaking) at an Agudah dinner in 1942. Mr. Mike Tress, z"l, is on the left.

membership, but the many German refugees who later made up a strong, strictly observant group within the shul had not yet arrived. They would arrive only later, in 1939, 1940, and 1941, and again after the war.

Notwithstanding the position of his opponents and their newly formed congregation, my father maintained good relations with them, especially with their first rabbi, Bernard Lander, founder and president of Touro College and Lander College in New York. The young Rabbi Lander, as yet unmarried, was a regular guest at our Shabbos table; I can still hear my father advising him on his dealings with his congregants and discussing his sermons. My father was a prime example of *talmidei chachamim marbim shalom ba'olam*, which gained him a great deal of respect among his opponents in Baltimore.

Affidavits That Saved Lives

My father, with the help of many good-hearted congregants in the shul, worked very hard from 1937 to 1941 to obtain "affidavits" to bring people who were fleeing Hitler's Germany to America, particularly to Baltimore. Mr. and Mrs. Myer Strauss were especially in giving "affidavits" freely to their desperate brethren in Germany, and there were many others who also helped in this undertaking.

These refugees greatly enriched the population of the shul and were a great asset to the congregation. They felt very comfortable and welcome in my father's shul, which had the familiar German *minhagim* to which they were accustomed. Our house was a center of welcome and encouragement for these penniless people. My father and mother helped many of them with the housing and employment challenges of the Great Depression, which still affected America at that time.

Simchas Torah

I remember well the early Simchas Torah celebrations at Shearith Israel. First of all, in keeping with the old German *minhag*, there were no evening *hakafos* in Shearith Israel until my father initiated them. This was not very 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 full 360-degree twirls, with a big smile on his face. This was especially

"Look around you," my father said. "Do you see anyone here with his tallis over his head? Why do you want to appear as if you are better than the baalei batim?"

entertaining for the children, who enjoyed watching their rabbi “loosen up” and show his happiness with the Torah.

Hosting Gedolim

I remember some of the *Gedolei Yisrael* who graced our home and shul in those early years. As mentioned earlier, Harav 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 own seat at the head of the table. Reb Elchonon would have none of it but my father insisted. Finally, a compromise was reached – 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 *bitachon* in *Hakadosh Baruch 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 was a vivid lesson in *bitachon*.

Then there was the charismatic Ponevezher Rav, Harav Yoseph Shlomo Kahaneman, *zt”l*, who attracted large audiences both in our house and in shul when he spoke on several occasions. He told stories masterfully, especially about the Chofetz Chaim, *zt”l*, whom he had known.

We also hosted a nephew of the Chazon Ish, *zt”l*, Rav Shmaryahu Karelitz, *zt”l*, who was a big *tzaddik*. Of course, the famous Rav Avraham Kalmanowitz, *zt”l*, fiery leader of Vaad Hatzolah and later Rosh Yeshiva of the Mirrer Yeshiva in Brooklyn, also came many times during the war years.

At the request of Rav Kalmanowitz, my father organized an appeal in shul on behalf of the 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 \$2,000, quite a large sum of money in 1944.

Harav Mordechai Gifter, *zt”l*, of Telshe Yeshiva, 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 meal on the topic of *Torah im derech erez*. I was fifteen years old then, and my father wisely kept

silent, smiling at my sophomoric efforts to argue this major philosophical issue with one of the great Torah leaders of the day.

Sensitivity to Baalei Batim

One short memory before closing. On the first Shabbos after I got married, in May 1956, I went to shul with my brand-new wife, Miriam. In the *yeshivishe* style, I put my *tallis* over my head, despite the fact that in those days in Shearith Israel, in accordance with the German custom, the men wore hats instead of putting their *talleisim* over their heads. My father looked at me and said, “Look around you. Do you see anyone here with his *tallis* over his head? Why do you want to be different and appear as if you think you are better than the *baalei batim*?” Needless to say, I got the point and put on my hat.

Despite my father’s yeshiva education and his great Torah knowledge, he was extremely sensitive to the feelings of his *baalei batim* and their long-held *minhagim*. He recognized the circumstances in which innovations were – and were not – important to the special character of his shul and the development of *Yiddishkeit* within it. His objectives were always *leshem Shamayim*, and that is why he succeeded.

Conclusion

These reminiscences are only a few snapshots of the life of a man who, from his earliest youth, as a scion of an old Frankfurt family, dedicated his life to creating a *kiddush Hashem* in the world. He succeeded beyond his wildest dreams, becoming the leader of the largest German *kehillah* in the world and a renowned spokesman for uncompromising, Torah-true Orthodoxy. His writings on Torah and *tefillah* continue to inspire thousands to improve their Jewish lives and will continue to do so, *b’ezras Hashem*, for generations to come. **M**

Author’s note: This article was written in collaboration with Rabbi Moshe Schwab, Rav Schwab’s eldest son. The author wishes to express his thanks to Rabbi Schwab for his invaluable assistance.

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(R-L) Rav Schwab, *zt”l*, with Rav Mordechai Gifter, *zt”l*.