

Louis Silverstein

Buffalo's last shochet describes Jewish community since 1920's

Louis Silverstein — born Leibish Zilberstein in Nasielsk, Poland — has lived in Buffalo for 53 years. He retired in 1963 as Buffalo's last shochet — ritual animal slaughterer.

He served as president and spiritual leader of Congregation Ahavas-Achim — the old Fillmore Avenue Shule — from 1928-51, and is now president of the East Buffalo Credit Union and secretary-treasurer of the Saranac Synagogue.

What follows, in his words, is one man's look at the Jewish history of Buffalo.

My father was an American citizen. A year before the first World War, in 1913, he had come to America. In 1914 the war broke out. He wrote me: "If you want to come to America, and you want to be a Shomer Shabbos, to observe the Shabbos, the only thing you can be is a rabbi or a shochet."

He was in Buffalo, and Buffalo was at that time not much of a Shomer Shabbos town.

I decided I had better be a shochet. I learned to be a shochet.

My education was in the yeshivoh — the Gerer — yeshivoh. The Gerer Rebbe had a big yeshiva and I studied there. I had to go to the city-shochetim in my town, Nasielsk, and I went with them every morning to the slaughter-house. There they didn't shecht as many cattle as we shecht here. They sheched maybe only about three or four a day, about two or three calves. I learned there to be a shochet.

I arrived in Buffalo in November, 1923. I came as a shochet with my diploma from Poland.

I rented a little place on Lutheran Alley — now Archie Street — near William Street. People at that time bought chickens at the groceries — the groceries used to handle live chickens — and they used to bring them to me to shecht and pluck the feathers. The charge was fifteen cents for shecheting and plucking the feathers. I used to shecht and my wife used to flick.

After a few years of getting experience with the poultry line, I started my own poultry business — wholesale and retail — at 334 William Street.

The Depression

This went on up till 1929, till the Depression came. When the Depression came, we didn't make a living by just chickens alone. We had to look for something else, so I went to a slaughter-house, the Hygrade Packing Company. There was another shochet there; I started out at \$15 a week for three day's work, Monday, Wednesday and Friday. A little from the slaughter-house, a little from the chickens; we made a living.

I was on William Street about 28 years. Buffalo at that time had gasoth-shochetim-shochetim who shecht cattle — and ofoth-shochetim, just for poultry. There were about 18 shochetim in Buffalo between 1925 and, let's say, 1940.

In Buffalo we never trained other cattle

shochetim. But in poultry we trained a few. Because when I had a live chicken market, we didn't shecht everything for Jewish buyers. If a non-Jew came in, we sold him a live chicken. This didn't have to be kosher. This was an opportunity for someone who wanted to learn how to shechet.

At that time Buffalo was a big stockyard — a lot of cattle came to Buffalo — and Buffalo had a few slaughterhouses. There used to be Jakob Dold, the old packing company; four shochetim used to work there. The meat used to go to New York, Boston, and other cities. Hygrade Packing Company was local; it also sent out of town. J.J. Schmidt used to shecht just lambs and calves. And there were the Klinck Brothers, and Wallens Packing Company. Just for local trade. And Mid-state Packing Company.

And later, when they sheched cattle in the middle West — like in Iowa, Colorado and Dubuque — they sent them direct from there to New York, and the need for shechetim in Buffalo was less. So Jacob Dold sold his place, and Hygrade bought it.

'On William Street, we used to go out on a Friday night after the Shabbos meal, and you could feel the atmosphere of Shabbos.'

Little by little, the local butchers started to buy beef out of town — it was cheaper out of town than in Buffalo — till lately, in the last few years, there has been no demand in Buffalo for a shochet, for the last ten or fifteen years. The old shochetim died, and a few young shochetim moved away from Buffalo to those places which sheched cattle. Buffalo was left with no shochetim. I am the only shochet left in Buffalo.

When I left Hygrade — it was too much work, they demanded too many hours and too many days, and it interfered with my poultry business — I went to work for J.J. Schmidt, just calves and lambs. Just one day, on Monday. This was between 1950 and 1960.

In 1953 I built the present building at 1495 Jefferson, especially for a poultry market — which is still a poultry market, but no live poultry.

William Street was, in the twenties and the thirties, the whole Jewish neighborhood. Around William Street were eight synagogues — eight shules — and a Talmud Torah. The shules had no other activity but davening in the morning, in the evening and on Shabbos. Just for worship.

There was one conservative temple in Buffalo, on Richamond Avenue — Beth El. And one Reform temple on Delaware Avenue, Beth Zion; Joseph Fink was the rabbi.

Buffalo had ten orthodox shules, one conservative and one reform. Now Buffalo

has five orthodox shules, three conservative, three reform and one reconstructionist

Russian, Polish and Hungarian

When William Street was the center of the Jewish neighborhood, you could hear different languages. There were Russian Jews, Polish Jews, Hungarian Jews, and everybody spoke their own language. But Yiddish combined them all. Before they learned to talk English, everyone talked his language — and Yiddish.

In the 1920's and the 1930's, Jewish life was more orthodox, because people were immigrants from Europe. The children were small, and the elderly people were still orthodox. The Pine Street Shule had a Rabbi Nison Markel. Anshe Emes on Hickory Street had a Rabbi Sam Gitin. Brith Israel on Hickory Street had Rabbi Chaim Davidovich. The Lubavitch Shule on Pratt Street had Rabbi Joshua Zambrowsky. Ahavas Achim on Fillmore Avenue had Rabbi A.M. Franklin. And Rabbi Rubin Weinstein organized a shule himself on East Ferry. There was also an Ohel Jacob Shule on East Ferry Street.

One shule was on Fillmore Avenue; that was a Polische Shule. The Polish Jews were concentrated around the Broadway Market. Later on, when people started to move, the next section was the East Ferry-Humboldt section.

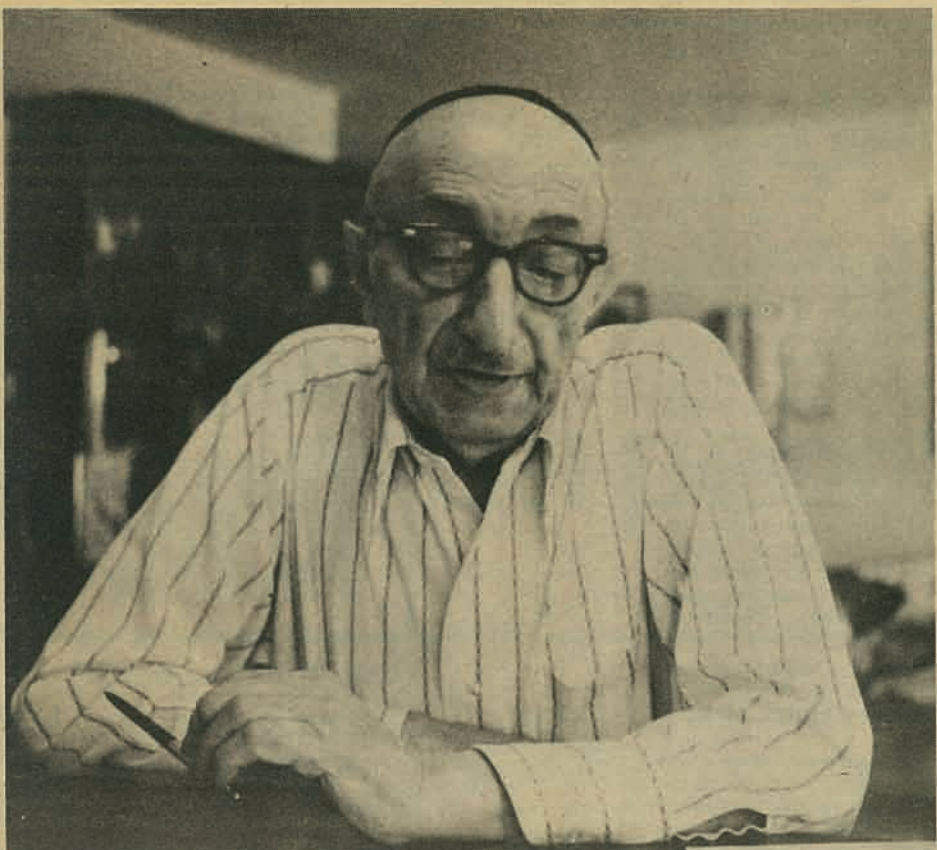
On William Street, we used to go out on a Friday night after the Shabbos meal, and you could feel the atmosphere of Shabbos. Stores were closed, people were walking in the streets — everyone visited one another — it was a pleasure. Now you don't see anybody walking in the streets; everybody rides a car.

Even when we moved, and the section changed from William Street to Humboldt East Ferry, it was the same thing. There we lived together, all Jews lived together. We came to the shules together, we went out in the street, everything together. Now we're all spread out. There's no place you can call a Jewish section. In the Hertel section a few Jewish stores are still left. But now the Italians are living in the Hertel section, and the Jewish neighborhood disappears.

A Jewish education for kids you only got in the Talmud Torah on Hickory Street. Two hours of classes after school. There were also private teachers, elderly people who came from Europe. They went to the children's houses to teach them. There were a lot of them.

The Jewish education in Buffalo at that time wasn't very good. You only had the one Talmud Torah, which the children from the entire William Street neighborhood used to attend. For two hours. How much Hebrew and Jewish law can you learn in two hours a day?

The Talmud Torah was free for the children, like the public schools. The upkeep of the Talmud Torah was an annual membership fee — maybe \$2 or \$3. And also, all the chicken shochetim used to charge two cents tax for the Talmud Torah for every



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... Buffalo's last shochet

chicken they shechted.

In Hickory Street were two shules — the Russische Shule, Brith Israel, and Anshe-Emes, a smaller Shule. They both combined and they built their shule on Hertel. With no Talmud Torah, just a shule to daven in.

From 1945 to 1950, there were few Jewish people around William Street, so they started to sell shules.

Temple Beth David built a temple on Humboldt Parkway. Ohel Jacob built a shule on East Ferry Street. When they built Temple Beth David on Humboldt, they built it with a Talmud Torah — a Hebrew school. That was the first shule at that time at which they built a Hebrew school for the children.

Lubavitsche Yeshiva

At that time the Lubavitsche Rebbe organized a yeshiva in Buffalo, on 42 Butler. The children who couldn't go to Temple Beth David went to the yeshiva. Besides this, the rabbi from the yeshiva went from house to house to solicit children. He picked up quite a few children. The rabbi in the yeshiva was kept up by the Lubavitcher Rebbe in New York: the Buffalo community didn't have to do anything. Later on, after a year or two, the Buffalo community people organized a committee, and paid the teachers.

The Fillmore Avenue Shule, Ahavas Achim, sold their shule, and the Lubavitcher shule on Pratt Street sold their shule, and we combined Ahavas-Achim with Lubavitch and called it Ahavas-Achim Lubavitz Synagogue. Which is still in existence on Tacoma near Colvin. They built a Talmud Torah. The Hickory Street Talmud Torah had already moved out, sold to a brewery next door.

There was organized another shule in the Humboldt section — they called it "Humboldt Orthodox Center."

That Humboldt Orthodox Center also had a Hebrew school.

The Humboldt section did not last too long. William Street was years and years. But the Humboldt section didn't last too long, in that people started to move out to Hertel. At that time a Temple Emanu-El was organized; they had it in a private house on Parkside Avenue, right across from the Zoo. After a few years they bought a building on the corner of Colvin and Tacoma — a church — and they converted it to a temple. They also had their own Hebrew school.

Not every temple has a Talmud Torah.

The Jewish education in Buffalo now is much better than at that time. That's why we lost that generation. The children didn't have much learning. When they grew up and had children, they wanted their children to have education. That's why the temples now have a lot of children — the parents are interested in giving them a Jewish education.

In the Hertel section, on Saranac, there also was organized a shule by Ungarische — Hungarian — Jews. They called it Anshe Zedek. After being in existence for many years, they changed the name to Ner Israel. Later Ner Israel combined with Temple Beth David — Beth David sold their shule on Humboldt — and they called it Temple Beth David-Ner Israel.

The shules which are in the Hertel section now, most don't have a minyan in the morning for davening. The Russische Shule — Brith Israel-Anshe Emes — doesn't have a minyan. Only two shules — the Saranac Avenue Synagogue, which is the building from the old Lubavitsche yeshiva, and Ahavas-Achim Lubavitz — still have a minyan. But otherwise there are no minyans anymore.