

The neighborhood of nostalgia

First of a Two Part Series

By SUE MALONEY

Pittsburgh, 1910. William Magee was mayor. The population was 533,905 of whom 25,000 were Jews. Escaping bloody pogroms and shtetl poverty in Europe, Jewish immigrants sought sanctuary in the Steel City. Although most of the new-

comers were penniless, they were industrious and their dreams drove them on.

One of these was Abraham Lewis Kelson. A young man with thick, dark sideburns worn long in the Jewish tradition, he strode up Fifth Avenue past the wholesale district where Mitapolsky, one of Pittsburgh's wealthiest merchants, had his dry goods store.

Around him, Jewish restaurants served chopped liver and noodle kugel. Fifth Avenue High School with its tall Gothic spires and tile roof beckoned him on.

He turned up Logan Street, a curving roadway filled with pushcarts loaded with silk and calico dresses next to carts of plumbing fittings and hardware. Wagons with pins, shawls and pans jammed the street while barrels of herring lined the curbs, and crates of chickens squawked in the background.

Old men with long white beards sat on stoops, and sons and grandsons waited on the trade.

Abraham was home. These were his people running the shops and peddling produce. Although there were 155 mills and 77 mines in Pittsburgh, few Jewish immigrants were miners or millworkers. Abraham dreamed of having his own store or restaurant.

After finding a waiter's job at a nearby restaurant, he took a room in one of the dank, crowded tenements which lined the streets surrounding Fifth Avenue.

In the tenements, refugees struggled to find jobs, master a new language and preserve family traditions. Their social, economic and personal needs were met by the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies formed in 1912 to "coordinate family services needed by the large immigration of Eastern

(Editor's Note: Sue Maloney is the former public relations director of Vocational Rehabilitation Center, located in the Uptown area described in this article)

European Jews to Pittsburgh."

Soon Abraham fell in love with Bessie, a dark haired beauty. At their wedding, friends gathered round, toasting mazel tov to the new couple. They had three girls and two boys. Their son Jack (Kush) was born in 1918.

With Bessie's help Abraham opened his own restaurant in 1930. Five years later he opened a large one on Fifth Avenue across from the high school.

Bessie Kelson and other housewives shopped on Logan and Clark streets where the smell of bulkies mingled with the odors of chicken, freshly killed by the shoichet's razor under kosher ritual.

Roving photographers harangued shoppers to buy cheap tintypes while mothers, fathers and grandparents gossiped about children, jobs, education and ailments. Down at the Pearl Theater on Fifth Avenue, families were enthralled by Shirley Temple in "Little Miss Marker."

On Lower Fifth Avenue there were over 145 wholesale businesses. Many people started out as peddlers, pushing their carts around the city. Others began working for their relatives in the Fifth Avenue neighborhood.

Merchants would come from as far away as Erie to buy goods. Since there were no blue laws, Sunday was the best day of the week.

As businesses prospered, some people left the tenements and moved to elegant homes on the Bluff or to Dinwiddie Street.

Although the area was mostly Jewish, Italians lived on Washington Street and a few blacks on Wylie Avenue. Residents could safely stroll down Fifth Avenue at any hour.

There were no bars. Eight synagogues were scattered around the district. Home, business and temple were intermingled. On Saturday—the Sabbath—shops were closed and men in striped prayer cloths walked down the street. Because Jewish law forbids riding on the Sabbath, homes were near synagogues.

Since Jews were escaping persecution as well as starvation, their scholars arrived with them on the crest of the immigrant wave, offering leadership to the community. By 1932, there were 150 Jewish organizations in Pittsburgh.

The Irene Kaufmann Settlement House, the social hub for the area, sponsored sport events, dances, English-speaking classes and the first kindergarten in Pittsburgh among its activities. When young Kush Kelson wasn't playing football, he was eyeing a pretty young girl, Betty, who had lively gray eyes and a quick smile.

Kush and Betty attended Fifth Avenue High School which was 90 percent Jewish in the twenties and thirties. Leading educators, businessmen and musicians were graduated from Fifth Avenue, including former Mayor Cornelius Scully, Judge Anne X. Alpern, County Commissioner Cyril Wecht, violinist David Rubinoff and industrialist Samuel Levinson.

When school was out, Kush crossed the street to Kelson's Delicatessen where his family lived in an apartment over the store. In the restaurant, his father had four waitresses and two busboys to help serve 200 persons a day.

Kelson's was more than a station to refuel bodies—it was the Duquesne Club of Upper Fifth Avenue. Izzy's



SOCIAL hub of the area was the Irene Kaufmann Settlement.

illness and Phil's music business were part of the menu. The restaurant glowed with a patina of memories polished by generations of families sharing triumphs and tragedies over bowls of borscht.

Many patrons came from the film exchange located on the Boulevard of the Allies. Over 150 companies, such as United Artists and Warners, had representatives in the area who talked about exciting new releases like "Love Finds Andy Hardy" with Judy Garland.

In 1945, Kush took over the delicatessen with his brother. When his father, Abraham, died four years later, Kush and Betty, whom he had married, moved to the apartment over the store.

Slowly, the metamorphosis began. First, the residents who supported the area began to move out to Squirrel Hill and East End because they wanted to improve themselves through education and better environments.

As early as 1940 Fifth Avenue High School and

surrounding areas were turning black. In 1949 there were only 206 Jewish children left in the Hill District compared to 6,000 in 1924. Kush and Betty moved out to the South Hills in 1952 so their children would grow up in a good neighborhood.

Then the film industry died because of television competition, the invention of nonflammable film and the centralization of the business in other parts of town. The big buildings with their tremendous vaults were sold to Duquesne University and WAMO radio among others.

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Reform Rabbinate's Passover statement

(Editor's Note: The following is a Passover statement by Rabbi Walter Jacob as representative of the Reform rabbinate of Greater Pittsburgh.)

As we celebrate Passover, we think again about Israel and the Near East. The crises this year are Afghanistan and Iran, but they also add to the woes of Israel and will make it more difficult for that reason to attain a lasting peace. On this Passover we pray that efforts in that direction will soon encompass all the nations of the Near East.

Passover, as an historic holiday, commemorates the most significant and vivid event of our past. In this celebration we are not different from any other people who recall distant heroism with fanfare and feelings of triumph.

We have gone further by using this holiday, not only to recall the past glory, but for present-day renewal. We have sought to use this festival to revive our interest in the broad problems of our people as well as the issues which trouble us as individuals.

As we look at the broad Jewish scene we realize that problems faced for the last decade remain very much with us; we cannot surrender to weariness. Hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews still yearn for freedom. Obtaining their release from the Soviet Union remains difficult; nor is it easy to resettle them in the West.

Their expectations are

high, perhaps too high, and, without doubt, some will leave Israel or the United States disappointed; that should not surprise us. This has happened with every wave of immigrants, and it should not lead us to diminish our efforts on their behalf.

As we turn toward renewal for ourselves in the United States, we realize that the principle problem is a lack of religious affiliation and strong meaningful ties with the synagogue which can provide a sense of deeper purpose for us and our children.

Jewish charities and concern for world Jewish problems are important elements in our life, but that is not enough; only worship and education has kept us alive from generation to generation.

If we take Passover seriously, it will not only mean a Seder at home, but also an earnest pilgrimage to the synagogue to seek renewal and reemphasis of our religious roots.

What Morsels These Foods Be

By NORMA BARACH, JTA Food Editor

Passover is once again in the offing. The West Orange Chapter of American Mizrahi Women has reprinted this year its "Passover Feast II" in hard cover.

It is available for \$8.80, or \$9.50 if speedier delivery is desired, by writing to Mrs. Susan Lando, 15 Haller Rd., West Orange, N.J. 07052. The book includes many vegetable as well as non-matzo meal recipes. It is also a useful volume for the rest of the year. Here are two recipes from the book:



Mrs. Barach

Carrot Kugel

- 4 eggs, separated
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1 cup grated, raw carrots, tightly packed
- 1/4 cup shredded apple
- 1/4 cup red wine
- 1/2 tsp. grated lemon peel
- 2 tbsps. lemon juice
- 1/3 cup potato starch.

Beat yolks with sugar until light. Add grated carrots, shredded apple, wine, lemon juice, lemon peel and potato starch. Blend well. Beat egg whites stiff and fold in. Pour into well greased, 1 1/2-quart casserole. Bake at 375 degrees for 35 minutes or until done. Serve hot or cold. Serves 6.

Stuffed Zucchini

- 3 large zucchini squash
- 1 large onion

- 1 1/2 lbs. chopped meat
- salt
- oil

Peel zucchini and cut into two-three pieces, depending on length of squash. Use a teaspoon to hollow out the center. Dice it up with the onion and fry in oil. Place the hollow squash in frying pan to brown on all sides. When browned, remove from pan. Also remove fried onion and squash and set aside.

Mix the chopped meat, salt, fried onion and squash mixture together. Stuff the hollow squash with it. Place in a flat pan. With the remaining meat, form into meatballs and place around stuffed squash. Add one inch of water to pan and the rest of the oil left in the frying pan.

Cover with tight lid or foil and cook on top of stove over medium heat for one-half hour. Remove lid and bake in 350-degree oven for an additional 30 minutes or until most of the liquid is absorbed.



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By SUE MALONEY

The wholesale district also began to slide downhill. Robert Comins, who started a wholesale footwear business in 1921 where Chatham Center is today, explains why. "When the blue laws tightened up, we lost some of our best customers." He felt what really hurt the wholesale district was redevelopment.

"Mayor Davy Lawrence and his bunch had grand ideas. They said the wholesalers don't belong on Lower Fifth Avenue beside Downtown. Instead, they wanted to get rid of us and put in fancy stores."

Comins, president of the Wholesale Association, fought for an industrial park where the wholesalers would occupy one entire building with a parking lot. Then Lawrence died in 1966 and the redevelopment plans with him, leaving the wholesale area unfinished.

Architect Frank Lloyd Wright came to Pittsburgh to render an opinion on the area between Bigelow Boulevard and the Boulevard of the Allies. Said Wright, "Burn it." The 1968 race riots almost did that. Starting in Kelson's block where windows were smashed, the violence flamed to the Hill District, burning it out.

Many displaced people moved down to the Fifth Avenue area.

Meanwhile, the riots left the smell of fear floating with the stench of smoke through the area. Merchants didn't rebuild. Customers decreased while the crime rate rocketed.

Kelson's Restaurant held out until fall, 1977. Then Kush served his last corned beef sandwich. To him, the state liquor store across the street was the final blow. "It's a wino haven."

Although he still runs a catering service at the same location, he feels the neighborhood has deteriorated into a picnic place for prostitutes and a dumping ground for crime.

A policeman who has patrolled Upper Fifth Avenue for 30 years agrees. "It's not the best neighborhood. It's not bad in the daytime. Since Fifth Avenue closed, purse snatches have decreased. But at night you have a lot of felonies, assault and battery cases and armed robberies."

On Marion Street, a gray haired woman sits on a folding chair in front of her stoop. Above her blue and white shapeless dress, her dark eyes are bitter. "I've been here for 75 years. It used to be beautiful," she remembers. "But today you could put gasoline on it and burn it up. And I'll help you."

Why doesn't she move? "Where the hell you going to go? My rent here is cheap. It's all I can afford. But there's no law here. I won't go out at night for a million dollars. The only way I would feel safe is if I had two 44's on me."

Drive down Fifth Avenue past Dinwiddie at 1 a.m. on a warm night. The lights are flashing at Red's Bar. A prostitute stands in the middle of the street, stopping traffic. Her short pants, halter and spiked heels are reflected in the head lights.

The night promises rain, if not customers.

In the next block a white

Walking towards Downtown the tempo of the avenue changes after passing Magee Street. There are few vacant stores and empty lots. Retailers like Kadet Photo have renovated their stores, enticing Downtown executives to shop there. These stores offer personalized services and low prices.

In the shadow of the United States Steel Building is a remnant from the past—the wholesale district.

At Charles Klein Co., which has been in business for over 60 years, owner Louis Frischman says, "We still enjoy a nice business. We handle people from three or four states."

Wholesaler Bill Lipsitz of NBZ Clothing claims the gross sales on this block compare with any block Downtown. One of the few young men left on the street, Bill depends on small merchants for the bulk of his business, not the general public.

For almost half a century, one man took notes on the chameleon-like neighborhood. Bishop Clifford MacLloyd hoped his observations would help blacks to economically revitalize themselves and the area. The black Bishop was executive director and founder of Junction House on the corner of Fifth and Pride.

A nonprofit organization working with the United Senior Citizens Economic

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Association, Junction House was a source of job referrals, health services, recreation and education programs.

Black people need work to lift up the face of the community, according to the bishop. "You must have a practical approach. During my 42 years in this city, I learned by watching the Jewish people who settled this area. The Jewish people taught me a great lesson and the blacks should follow their pattern."

Bishop MacLloyd will never know if the blacks rejuvenate the area. He died of a heart attack last spring. Junction House closed last summer.

Kush Kelson—still a popular figure in the neighborhood of his forefathers—feels the Fifth Avenue area is a potential goldmine.

He emphasizes, "It's the main link between downtown Pittsburgh and Oakland."

And for him and many Pittsburghers, it's also the main link to their American Roots.

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