

Torath Chaim closes

Congregation's demise spells end of East End Jewry

By JO MARKS RIFKIN

Staff Writer

No one walked down North Negley Avenue, past littered sidewalks and sundry whiskey bottles, to High Holiday services at Torath Chaim this year.

The doors to the last remaining synagogue in the East End are closed. The paint and cement are crumbling and the Jewish community, almost in its entirety, is gone.

The dwindling congregation, which could only form a minyan when a handful of paid Yeshiva boys walked there from Squirrel Hill on Shabbat, officially closed on Aug. 28.

"Today, when I pass by the street, I want to cry. East End was the most beautiful part of Pittsburgh," said Rabbi Mordecai Glatstein, Torath Chaim's religious leader from 1950 to 1955. "We had many synagogues there and the people were so happy and joyous and now it's empty — completely."

The first Shabbat service at Torath Chaim, a converted house at 728 N. Negley Ave., was in 1927.

"It was for my brother's bar mitzvah," said Jason Shapiro, 83.

At the time, Shapiro said, there were five other synagogues in the area, and this was a break-away group of people who were followers of Rabbi J.J. Hurwitz, his great-uncle. The shul was added onto in 1948 and could seat 700 people.

"And now it's finished," said Shapiro. "It's all over now. All that's left is a well-cared for cemetery on Route 8 in Gibsonia."

A few weeks ago, after a financial meeting with the few remaining congregants and Torath Chaim's president, Joseph Berger, the synagogue closed its doors.

The building's future is not yet determined.

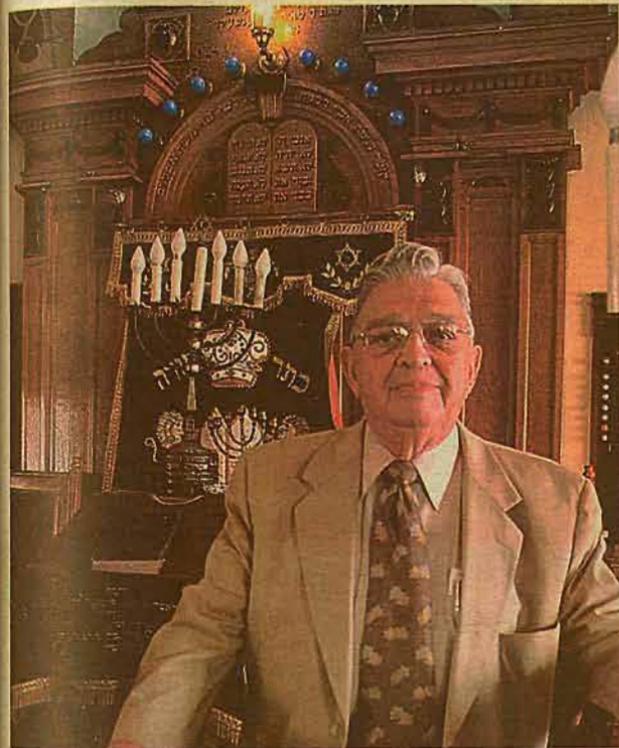
"The sad part is that the shul has been open these last 10 years with next to no attendance," Berger said.

The attendance dropped dramatically after Shamai Shapiro, the congregation's Torah reader, died 10 years ago.

"He kept Torath Chaim going," Berger said.

Chronicle photo by
Christopher Rolinson

Joseph Berger stands before the ark of the Torath Chaim synagogue. Berger, the president of Torath Chaim, says the East Liberty building — a fixture of East End Jewry for decades — is closing.



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Torath Chaim: Surviving members reminisce

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After the baal korei's death, the shul was sustained on Shabbat by a handful of local people, particularly by the Aronson family, but too few people remained to keep it open, according to Brad Perelman, a member and former president.

Perelman's grandparents, on both sides of his family, were among the congregation's founders and his great-uncle was the synagogue's architect.

It is a far cry from the days remembered by Perelman's aunt, Rita Herman, who attended services there as a little girl.

"I remember the tables out on front of the sidewalk and people would come to buy seats a few weeks before High Holiday services," said Herman, who was born in 1936.

Herman recalls sitting with the women in the second floor balcony, many of whom were unable to read Hebrew.

"But my grandmother had a woman who knew Hebrew and read to all the women around her, so they could hear the prayers," she said.

The women sat on graduated wooden benches, able to see the entire sanctuary below.

Yom Kippurs were days of heat and smelling salts.

"It was a tremendous awe in those years to be in synagogue. Part of the awe was to be strong enough that you could get through the day and fast and be in the synagogue and hold to that tradition," she said.

Most of the people were from Russia. "We were landsmen of sorts. One for all and all for one. There was the communal

feeling up there," Herman said.

There was a cantor for the High Holidays. And the rabbi prayed in the middle of the first floor, like theater-in-the-round. Men fell on their knees for the Aleinu.

"And everybody knew everybody," Herman said. The feeling of community was great.

There was, she recalled, a feeling of safety at the shul, away from the world's turbulence.

And there were tears during Yizkor. Many congregants left parents in other countries. Many children died prematurely.

"There was a lot of crying," she said. "It was an unabashed type of emotion. The experience we experienced at Torath Chaim, we all experienced together."

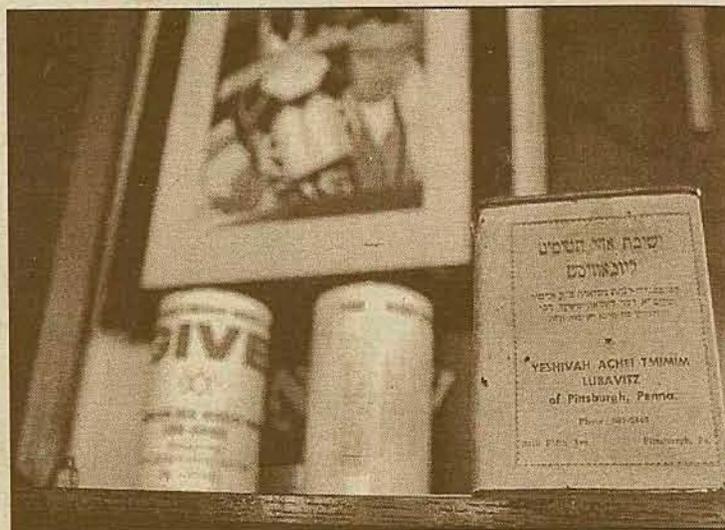
But within the last 10 years, those experiences were shared by few people.

The caretaker, Arnie Schwartz, who lived on the premises, had a quadruple bypass and no longer makes his home there.

After moving away, Schwartz would drive to shul on Saturday to open the doors and get things ready for the six boys from Yeshiva Schools in Squirrel Hill. Only two people walked from the East End to the synagogue and two other people rode to shul, Berger said.

There were no other services during the week.

Originally, two or three Yeshiva boys walked through all types of weather in order to form a minyan and lead services. As Torath Chaim needed more help with the minyan, the number of students grew until this year six students walked to the synagogue on Shabbat.



Chronicle photo by Christopher Robinson
Tzedakah cans in the Torath Chaim synagogue remain from past campaigns as well as a photo of the congregation's last acting rabbi, the late Shamai Shapiro.

Boruch Zaetz, 14, was the last student in charge of getting the boys together.

"We walked there, through pouring rain, ice and snow," he said, "even if we didn't think there would be enough people to form a minyan."

According to Zaetz, 10 to 12 people generally attended services, including the Yeshiva boys.

Last year, the students not only led the Yom Kippur service, mostly attended by older men, they also slept at the synagogue.

"It was not safe to walk at night," Zaetz said.

"It was a moving experience for myself and all the other boys who went there, trying to keep the shul open a little longer," he added.

The lack of attendance, coupled with economic concerns, forced the board to close the synagogue, according to Berger. "It cost about \$25,000 to pay for the utilities and expenses to keep the shul open for Sabbath services only," he said.

Marty Aronson, 28, who lives in Stanton Heights with his parents was one of Torath Chaim's regular attendees since childhood.

The shul had daily morning services which he attended, until about about three years ago. "It was just becoming too tough to get enough people to commit to it at 6:25 in the morning," Aronson said.

Over the last 10 years, women only at-

tended the High Holidays services, he said, not the regular Shabbat services.

Aronson said he knew the shul would eventually close.

"It was inevitable for a few years now," he said. "No people were coming to daven. I was probably the youngest person there, maybe by 20 to 30 years, who came on a regular basis. I knew I was in the minority, but I would have argued to keep it open as long as possible — to at least keep it open for the High Holidays."

About eight years ago, Herman attended her last High Holiday service at Torath Chaim, walking there from Squirrel Hill.

"I went upstairs and the pews were gone. I was trying to recreate those years. I davened with my memories," she said.

And she recalled the smells, emanating from the third floor.

It was "a wonderful smell. A mixture of wine and herring and honey cake. And whiskey, over which the men always made a l'chaim."

There was talking, singing, and sometimes arguments over a law.

And the common language was Yiddish. "If you didn't speak Yiddish, they would question if you were Jewish," Herman said.

"It was a fraternity, a camaraderie," she said.

(Jo Marks Rifkin can be reached online at jrifkin@pittchron.com.)

MOVIE TIMES
September 10th thru September 16th, 2004

CINEMAGIC

Manor - 422-7729 DOLBY DIGITAL () = Sat., Mon.
**Criminal* (R) (1:00, 3:10), 5:40, 7:50, 10:00; *We Don't Live Here Anymore* (R) (12:15, 2:40), 5:15, 7:20, 9:30; *The Manchurian Candidate* (R) (12:30, 2:50), 5:10, 7:30, 9:55; **Vanity Fair* (PG-13) (12:00, 2:30), 5:00, 7:30, 10:00.

Squirrel Hill - 421-7900 DOLBY DIGITAL \$4.50 All Shows Before 6 p.m. () = Sat., Mon.
**I'll Sleep When I'm Dead* (R) (1:20, 3:30), 5:20, 7:25, 9:30; **Danny Deckchair* (PG-13) (1:00), 5:10, 7:15; **Wicker Park* (PG-13) (1:15, 3:25), 5:35, 7:40, 9:55; **Mean Creek* (R) (1:45, 3:45), 5:45, 7:45, 9:45; *Festival Express* (R) (3:10), 9:20; *Garden State* (R) (1:10, 3:20), 5:30, 7:30, 9:40; *Maria Full of Grace* (R) (1:00, 3:15), 5:25, 7:35, 9:35

Denis - 343-7300 \$4.50 All Shows Before 6 p.m. Every Tues. All Shows \$4.50. () = Sat.-Mon.
**I'll Sleep When I'm Dead* (R) (12:55, 2:55), 5:15, 7:40, 9:30; *We Don't Live Here Anymore* (R) (1:00, 3:10), 5:20, 7:20, 9:25; *Maria Full of Grace* (R) (1:05, 3:00), 5:20, 7:25, 9:40; *Door In The Floor* (R) (12:50, 3:05), 5:25, 7:30, 9:35.

PGH. FILMMAKERS 682-4111

Regent Square Theatre - 1035 S. Braddock Ave.
Zhou Yu's Train Fri. 7:00, 9:00; Sat. 4:45, 7:00, 9:00; Sun. 3:30, 5:45; Mon. - Thu. 8:00; *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* Sat. 2:00; *California Suite* Sun. 8:00.

Harris Theatre - 809 Liberty Ave.
The Brown Bunny Fri.-Sat. 7:30, 9:30; Sun. 2:00, 4:00; Mon.-Tues. 7:30; Wed. 5:30, 7:30; Thu. 7:30.

Melwood S.R. - 477 Melwood Ave.
Control Room Fri.-Sat. 7:30; Sun. 3:00; Mon. 7:30; *Coffee & Cigarettes* Fri.-Sat. 9:30; Sun. 5:00; Mon. 9:30; *Film Kitchen* Reception 7:00, Film 8:00.

CARMIKE

Carmike 10 - 700 S. Hills Village 835-7700
**Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (R) Dolby 1:00, 1:15, 3:10, 3:25, 5:15, 5:30, 7:25, 7:40, 9:35, 9:50; *Paparazzi* (PG-13) DTS 1:40, 3:40, 5:40, 7:40, 9:40; *Wicker Park* (PG-13) Dolby/THX 1:30, 4:15, 7:10, 9:45; *The Cookout* (PG-13) DTS 1:20, 3:20, 5:20, 7:20, 9:20; *Anacondas* (PG-13) DTS 1:00, 3:20, 5:30, 7:40, 9:55; *Suspect Zero* (R) Dolby 3:50, 9:40; *Exorcist: The Beginning* (R) Dolby 1:00, 7:00; *Open Water* (R) DTS 1:15, 3:15, 5:15, 7:15, 9:15; *Without A Paddle* (PG-13) DTS 1:00, 3:15, 5:30, 7:45, 10:00; *Collateral* (R) Dolby 1:10, 4:00, 7:00, 9:45.

Galleria 6 - Rt. 19 Mt. Lebanon 531-5551
Cellular (PG-13) DTS 1:10, 3:30, 7:50, 10:00; *Hero* (PG-13) DTS 1:00, 3:15, 5:30, 7:45, 10:00; *The Princess Diaries 2* (G) DTS 1:15, 4:15, 7:10, 9:40; *Super Babies* (PG) DTS 1:00, 3:10, 5:15; *Little Black Book* (PG-13) DTS 7:20, 9:50; *The Manchurian Candidate* (R) DTS 1:00, 4:00, 7:00, 9:45; *The Bourne Supremacy* (PG-13) DTS 1:00, 3:40, 7:15, 9:45.

Movies and showtimes subject to change. Please call theatre.

WATERWORKS FOX CHAPEL 784-1406
Resident Evil: Apocalypse (R) 11:30, 1:30, 3:45, 5:45, 8:00, 5:30, 10:05; *Cellular* (PG-13) 11:50, 2:15, 4:30, 7:15, 9:35; *The Cookout* (PG-13) 11:55, 2:00, 4:05, 6:10, 8:10, 10:10; *Vanity Fair* (PG-13) 11:40, 2:30, 7:00, 9:45; *Wicker Park* (PG-13) 12:05, 2:35, 4:55, 7:30, 9:50; *Paparazzi* (PG-13) 12:10, 2:10, 4:15, 7:25, 9:20; *Garden State* (R) 12:00, 2:40, 5:10, 7:35, 10:00; *Anacondas* (PG-13) 11:35, 1:40, 3:50, 5:50, 7:55, 10:15; *The Princess Diaries 2* (G) 11:35, 2:10, 4:35, 7:10; *Collateral* (R) 11:45, 2:05, 4:40, 7:20, 9:55; *Suspect Zero* (R) 9:40.

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