Temple Beth Israel, Harlingen

Norman Rozeff

As the members of Temple Beth Israel, the only Jewish place of worship in Harlingen, prepare to rededicate the sanctuary following extensive repairs and renewal necessitated by Hurricane Dolly damage, it provides a good opportunity to reconstruct some of its history and that of Jews in the community.

By 1948 the number of Jews in Mercedes was shrinking as the town was being superseded commercially by McAllen and by Harlingen. McAllen and Harlingen members of Temple Beth El of the Lower Rio Grande Valley in Mercedes met separately in committee. The decision of both committees was to dissolve the Mercedes congregation. The Harlingen participants met 10/26/48 at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Messner where Ned Sondock chaired the meeting. They received a report from Nate Koppel of the joint meeting held in Mercedes on 10/17/48. Both sides had agreed to sell the real estate comprised by the Mercedes temple structure and its lot, and to divide the personal property and assets of the congregation. It was officially dissolved. The structure was later sold to a church.

Temple Emanuel in McAllen was already under construction, so it members purchased the original pews, the Torah, prayer books, all the chairs, tables and kitchen items for $250.00. The Harlingen group retained those items marked "Temple Beth Israel."

The Temple Beth Israel site was selected at 1702 E. Jackson, Harlingen in 1948. The organizers were primarily the first generation of Jews to reside in the city. They include the Feldmans, Levines, Koppels, Sondocks, and others. Sam Feldman was the congregation's first president.

While a small number of Jews came to Harlingen in the late 1920s and in the 1930s it was the opening of the Harlingen Army Air Field at the start of WWII that attracted Jewish retailers to downtown Harlingen and afforded them business opportunities. Oldtimers will remember businesses owned and operated by the Levines, Baums, Edelsteins, Lacks, Adolphs, Davises, Sondocks, Epsteins, Hertzes, Feldmans, Leonards, Nedlers, and others.

In December 1949 the architectural firm of Cocke, Bowman and York had been contracted for $25,500 for plans and specifications. E.J. Waitman was its general contractor.

While the design of the building incorporated many modern elements, its rectangular footprint combined with its flat roof surprisingly resembled many old synagogues to be found in Eastern Europe.

Between late 1948 and June 24, 1951 (the Jewish calendar year 5711) when its newly constructed temple on E. Jackson Avenue at 17th Street was officially dedicated, the Harlingen congregation met in various places including Barracks #T50 at the former Harlingen Army Airfield. This building served as both sanctuary and Sunday school for the congregation.

By 9/20/50 the newly completed Temple Beth Israel would hold its first high holidays Yom Kippur service according to Larry Rosow, its secretary-treasurer.

When the temple was dedicated it had 63 members in its congregation. On November 14, 1951 it was officially incorporated under Texas law.
From 1955 through 1966 the official paid membership ranged from 34 to 43 individuals. The number of attendees for services was significantly higher as Jewish military personnel at the reactivated and now renamed Harlingen Air Force Base were active participants. Their presence was considerable from April 1952 through June 1962 after which the base was permanently closed. This also meant the loss of Harlingen businesses including those of some Jewish merchants. This too diminished the numbers in the congregation.

The limited and fluctuating size of the congregation meant that there were few years when it could hire a fulltime rabbi. Often the services were conducted by student rabbis or visiting rabbis from McAllen and Brownsville. Some time after mid-1961 a Sunday school addition with four classrooms and two restrooms were added as well as a recreation room attached to the temple. The kitchen was expanded and modernized. The total cost for these changes was $26,935.

After more than 50 years the temple was showing normal wear, tear, and its middle age. After Hurricane Dolly damaged the building in July 2008, considerable repairs were necessary, but most of their costs fortunately were covered by insurance. In 2009 extensive renovations were made to its plumbing, electrical, and other areas requiring updating. The Koppel family donated two striking front doors fabricated from exotic wood from South America and with unique metal door handles featuring six-pointed Jewish stars. A new floor with 2' x 2' ceramic tile was laid. The kitchen saw completely new stone counters, stainless steel appliances, and a commercial size stove. Six narrow horizontal windows in one wall of the sanctuary were replaced by beautiful stain glass creations designed by the Hand of Man. Plans are for the current sixty theater style seats to be replaced by newer models.

The Temple is scheduled for its re-dedication on December 11, 2009. This will coincide with the happy celebration of the Jewish holiday Chanukah. The congregation has risen in number to around 100 members. Strangely enough some recently joined members are converts with an unusual background. They are Mexican ethnics who believe that their ancestors were Jews who fled to the border regions of Mexico when the Spanish Inquisition increased its examinations and punishments starting in Mexico City. They became in many instances "Crypto" Jews rather than abandoning their beliefs altogether. Over time however they were integrated into the Christian community though some families practiced some traditional Jewish practices without knowing their origin or why. With genealogy research on the increase, recent years have seen a resurgence in interest in verifying Jewish roots of some Valley border Mexican families.

Fernando Russek, Jr., he being the temple's president, and his wife Alma, were honored with a testimonial dinner on October 22, 2009 in recognition of their tireless dedication to the Harlingen area Jewish community. Russek, a horticulturist and landscaper, is also director of the Sunday school where he teaches Hebrew and religion.

A more complete history than the above was compiled by Lewis Levine for a presentation to the Texas Jewish Historical Society visiting Harlingen on February 11, 1995. It is part of the Harlingen Library Archive Room files.

Footnotes:
An obituary for Gertrude Greenfeld, 99, who died January 19, 2011 elicited additional research when note was made of her and her husband helping to establish Temple Beth
Israel, being at one time president of the Temple Sisterhood group, and superintendent of the Sunday School at the temple. She and her husband, Harry Norton Greenfeld apparently came to Harlingen in the early 1930s. By 1935 Harry was the manager of The Economy Store at 121 W. Jackson. Whether this is the same store listed as Economy Store in the 1931-32 Harlingen telephone directory is unknown. This store was owned by a Thomas W. Dowling. T.W. and his wife Mabel Alice and four children lived at 1510 E. Harrison. In the 1942-43 listing Harry was still manager. In 1939 the family lived at 515 E. Harrison. By the 1944 listing Harry was owner of The Economy Store at 202 W. Jackson. The dry goods store had moved to this location by 1941. This year Harry and Gertrude were living at 213 S. 6th Street and apparently had not started a family yet. By the 1950 directory four children were noted for this "merchant". The Greenfelds are still at the W. Jackson location in 1946 but will have moved out by 1948. The renamed business is the Greenfeld Economy Store and its new location appears to be in Rio Hondo, at least it is listed as being there in a 1956 directory. The family lives at 1213 E. Tyler.

With them at home in the years 1961 to 1965 is daughter Sheila who is a student. Son Samuel L., who is a student at the University of Houston, has his listing at home in the years 1968-1971. By that latter year Gertrude has been widowed. By 1980 Samuel is married to Renee and the principle in the Samuel L. Greenfeld Insurance Agency. They reside at 2501 Poinciana Drive. From the obituary we learn that later Gertrude taught in the public school system as a substitute teacher. At the time of her death she left behind daughter Nanette Shafer and her husband Phil of E. Granby, CT; daughter Janie Polunsky and husband Elliott of Houston. Unmarried daughter Sheila resides in Harlingen as does son Samuel and wife Renee. There are 10 grandchildren and 14 great-grandchildren.