

Seattle Jewish Seniors: A Special Group

By William Friedman

I am writing this as our group is fading away. I wish to preserve some history of this special group as a possible helpful guide to future generations. While I was not in Seattle at the time of its founding, I have gleaned some information from conversations with some who were. However, I have been intimately involved in the group for the past 18 years.

I shall attempt to identify factors, including the people and the characteristics that have contributed to make the group what it has been. I will extract from my experiences what might have led to fierce loyalty, the closeness among the core members. Why were so many committed to the group and readily willing to host schmoozes and plan and lead outings, year after year? Many of the group remained active until they sadly passed away. There are probably numerous factors that can account for the fond memories held by those of us who remain.

All groups are unique. SJS is unique, but it is also *special*. By this account I will attempt to explain why. This will be done solely from my memory without relying on external sources. Therefore, inaccuracies or omissions of people and events can be blamed on the limitations of my 86-year-old memory.

The Seattle Jewish Seniors group had a history of nearly 30 years. My participation spanned only about two thirds of this period. During the past 17 years, my vantage point has been as the group's first and only chairman of its steering committee. I have lived through the growth and sad, rapid decline. This decline has been due to the ravages of the human aging process which has taken from us so many of our dearest friends.

For many of us who had personal losses, a group like this offered some comfort which was hard to find elsewhere. For those new to Seattle, it also provided a welcoming group of friends who had experienced a similar need on arriving in a strange location. But these were not all that SJS offered.

First, some history. I have been told the group was originally begun with the assistance of the Stroum Jewish Community Center. That organization had, and still has its headquarters on Mercer Island. Our group was formed to serve those living in the “north end” of Seattle. Gatherings were held in the member’s homes and at a store-front location on 35th Avenue near 85th Street. Later this building was used to house a Rite Aid drug store.

A member of the JCC, Sylvia Angel, was assigned to assist the group. Two of the mainstays of the early group were Adele and George Levy. Adele remained a driving force and member of our steering committee until her death only a few years ago. I have recently been able to read some of her notes containing her thoughts about the group. These she jotted down over many years. Among other major driving forces were Allan and Phyllis Michaels, and also, Ulla Rychter. Ulla, while holding no specific position of governance, was nonetheless a very strong influence until her death about a year ago. Other early members included Art Macdonald and Ruth Goldman. At some point a German holocaust refugee, Heinz Schwarz, became a member. He had spent time in Shanghai China before coming to Seattle. Heinz was a CPA and had no living relatives. I have been told that he was a whiz at Scrabble in English and German! Unfortunately, he passed away in 2005. There were other very active members, including Judy and Steve Adler and Anne Futterman, who preceded my own membership in late 2006. I will return to discuss the role of many of these people in later portions of this account.

At some point the JCC ceased to support the “north end” organization. The members by this time had bonded enough to wish to continue on their own. They organized their own “schmoozes” in each other homes where food and discussions were always available. They also had periodic current events gatherings, and trips including overnight stays, and daytime outings which were both intellectual and physical.

The group sought to find a home as a place to gather. This was offered at first by Temple Beth Shalom on 35th Street. That proved unsatisfactory and the group shortly hereafter settled at Temple Beth Am, where they were welcomed by the Rabbis Jonathan and Beth Singer. At that point they had brown bag lunches with the Rabbis. They would later plan

elaborate secular New Year's parties at the Temple to which the members always looked forward. Current events sessions were also held at the Temple. Many other events took place in homes and elsewhere. While I have used the term "membership", there were no dues or formal governance. A tin can was passed around at current event sessions to raise some funds and the New Year's party was supported by an admission charge.

A major change in the group began in 2005 when our dear member, Heinz Schwarz, passed away rather suddenly. As I have mentioned above, he had no living relatives--neither did he have a legal Will. While he was in the hospital, he attempted to construct a Will. Elizabeth Asher, who was a Beth Am member and whose mother-in-law, Inga Asher Pepper, was a group member, spoke with Heinz, as a lawyer to prepare a Will for him. She made notes of his wishes preparatory to writing an actual Will. Sadly, the job was unfinished before he died.

He had a list of organizations he wished to support. One was the Seattle Jewish Seniors, which had meant so much to him. He was aware that the group had no "legal" standing. Heinz was a member of Herzl-Ner Talmid congregation on Mercer Island. When asked if he might want to leave a bequest for the Seattle Jewish Seniors under the auspices of that congregation, he opted for a different solution. Namely, to leave funds to Temple Beth Am for senior activities. Presumably this was because Temple Beth Am had provided a home for his friends, and Beth Am did have "legal" standing. He hoped that such an arrangement might benefit his closest social friends. Unfortunately, since the Will was never fully constructed, it appeared as if the State of Washington would be the only beneficiary.

A lengthy legal case ensued. Elizabeth Asher, who had made notes of her conversations with him, worked "pro Bono" so that his true wishes might be met, even in the absence of a Will. After a few years, a court decided to honor his expressed wishes. As a result, Temple Beth Am was awarded \$125,000 to support "senior activities". About another dozen organizations were equally fortunate.

The Seattle Jewish Seniors was composed of members with Beth Am affiliations but also included many with connections to other congregations. For all practical purposes the

group was the de facto “senior effort” of Beth Am. There was great delight among those of the group whatever their affiliation.

The bequest, while being a great benefit to the group, also created some tension. Many members assumed that the funds were ours to spend as we saw fit, and that Temple Beth Am was only a legal “cover” for our group. As it turned out Beth Am was indeed the true recipient and was truly in ultimate control. Thinking that the group had control, however, and aware of some serious financial needs of Beth Am arising from a leaky roof and damage, the group decided to give Beth Am \$25,000. This “gift” was offered in appreciation of the Temple’s welcome to us. The “gift” was graciously received by Beth Am and we were profusely thanked. It would later turn out that the money belonged to Beth Am all along and was not ours to offer. In any event the money stayed to help with the Temple through its financial difficulties, and \$100,000 remained to be spent. Many of the group, including Ulla Rychter, a close friend of Heinz, never gave up the false idea that we were to be in full control of the funds.

The bequest also meant that a more formal structure was needed for the organization. A steering committee was chosen. Its role was to consider how the money might be spent and to present its recommendations to the group as a whole for a final decision by vote. The steering committee was to consist of a secretary, a treasurer, a chairman, and two other members, with alternates. Even though I was a very new member, I was selected as chair. This was probably because I was the youngest. Other members, as I recall, included Steve Adler, Adele Levy, Harriet Falsberg, and Marty Rozenfeld. Except for Marty who was eventually replaced, for health reasons, by his wife Florence, the rest served until their deaths. I am currently the only one remaining. The choice of the youngest did have some logic. This became clear quite early when Harriet Falsberg passed away shortly after we took over in 2008. (As an aside, I learned from Harriet’s husband, Marty, at her funeral that he had been attracted to Seattle from the East Coast by the reputation of the father of my late wife. However, they never worked together because my father-in-law had moved to San Francisco before Marty arrived. Our wedding was in Washington DC, a long way from Seattle. What a small world!)

The question of our control of the funds remained an ongoing issue. Also, to be determined was the nettlesome question of who would benefit from the bequest funds. This opened a complicated effort to define membership which had never before been of concern. In the end, we opted for a very flexible definition. In addition, we had to deal with guidelines for the size of turnout required for support. Also, the nature of expenditures to be reimbursed had to be set. Thus, the existence of the Schwarz funds opened new opportunities but also lead to some problems.

The relationship between Temple Beth Am and our group also had some problems. While we were the only senior effort of the Temple, the access to the funds became very cumbersome and difficult. Long delays in payment and some strict requirements and limitations were, from our point of view, unnecessarily imposed.

We requested and received some relief from the Temple Board. Following this, a committee consisting of Steve Adler, Adele Levy, and myself negotiated with the new executive director, Jan Glick. We eventually came to a reasonable arrangement, whereby we would be permitted to draw up to \$8000 per year for budgeted expenditures. The steering committee would draw up and recommend a budget to the membership for a vote of approval. This would then be submitted for the Temple Board to approve. We would then get the annual funds in a lump sum at the beginning of the fiscal year. These funds were kept in our own checking account. We would have the responsibility of accounting for the expenditures. We had some flexibility to shift amounts between budgeted categories, and any funds left at the end of the year would become a portion of the \$8000 for the following year. This process worked well until the Covid pandemic which caused a sharp decline in our activities and membership. It did impose a large burden on our treasurer, who was Florence Rozenfeld and later Bert Goldstein. Both did excellent jobs of keeping records and making timely payments.

To celebrate our 20th anniversary, we held an extravagant party. This was planned by an able committee headed by Emily Davis. It was also assisted by Alexis Kort of Temple Beth Am, whose husband took photographs. The anniversary was marked by a dinner cruise on

an Argosy ship. The boat traveled out into Puget Sound on what turned out to be a beautiful evening. The group had its own dining room and the run of the deck on which that room was located. The event was attended by about 100 people, all of whom seemed to thoroughly enjoy themselves. I have included here a photo taken at this event.

SJS 2014 Anniversary Argosy Cruise



I will next take up some of what I consider the most significant aspects and demographics of the group.

The most important part of the operation of SJS took place at the monthly planning meeting. All the planning for the activities that were to occur the following month was done by a group of volunteers from among the members. Leading the deliberations of this committee were two driving forces, Ulla Rychter and Adele Levy. Anne Futterman would transcribe the planned events and prepare monthly newsletters for distribution to the entire membership. To be able to do this, she maintained an extensive mailing list of names, addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses. Other planning participants were Madeline Buckley, Leah Vetter, Emily Davis, and others. They would follow various

publications and sources looking for suitable activities. The number of planners was always about ten. They would consider schmooze hosts, schmoovie dinner hosts, fixed date activities, flexible date activities, outings, museums, trips, Endless-Opportunity events, lectures, etc. Often the array of events had to be pared down and conflicts avoided. In the end, a collection of the order of 15-20 items for the month would be agreed to. Anne would take this list home and compose descriptions and information for each of the events. She would write this up for distribution as a monthly SJS Newsletter. This process would also involve confirmation of dates, times, and availability. Those rarely attending the planning sessions, or those coming as visiting guests, would always remark on the eventual output from what appeared to be a nearly chaotic process.

In the early days, when printed bulletins were mailed to Beth Am members, people from the planning committee would assist in preparing these for the post office. Madeline Buckley was one of the stalwarts. The Temple permitted Anne's Newsletter to be inserted into the regular bulletin. In addition, because not all SJS members were Temple Beth Am members, an email version of the Newsletter was sent to those on our mailing list. RSVP arrangements were also listed in Newsletters. Anyone interested could find more than enough to keep themselves quite busy with activities each month.

Members attending a good number of events each month shared enjoyable experiences. That in turn contributed to a strong bonding and cohesion among them. Some of the most enjoyable events were the schmoozes in each other's homes, held twice a month during the afternoons.

Trips where the group was together for a few days at a time and away from the Seattle area had a great bonding effect. We would go by car, train, boat, and even plane. These trips included two visits to Portland, a trip to Vancouver B.C., and a trip to Mount St. Helens. They also included Princess Louisa Island in Canada, the Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, the Olympic Peninsula, Leavenworth and the Columbia River. Before my time, the group had made a trip to Alaska which had a lasting positive effect. For some of the trips, expenses were partially subsidized.

The wide interests and makeup of the SJS membership played a great role in its success.

The group included many lovers of the arts as well as talented practitioners. We had several active artists among our members, including Helen Brement, Anita Warmflash, Judy Adler, and Madeline Buckley (a prize-winning quilter). The group would plan visits to all the major exhibition galleries in the area. These included SAM and SAAM, the Bellevue Art Museum, the Frye museum, the Cascadia museum in Edmonds, the Bainbridge Museum, and others. Furthermore, the group would periodically go on art walks in downtown Seattle to visit private galleries which had periodic open houses. These were often led by Judy Adler.

Music was also of great interest to many of the group. Some, such as Leah Vetter and Anne Futterman, had children who were professional musicians. Leah had her daughter play for us, live and on recordings. Many of the group would look forward to attending the performance of one of Alan Futterman's two orchestras, the Academy Chamber Orchestra. This orchestra consisted of some of the most talented young players in the area. SJS made trips to the Olympic Music Festival (Music in the Barn) in Quilcene. We also attended the free open rehearsals of the Seattle Chamber Music Society. Many of us would go regularly to the programs of the Music of Remembrance. Those programs involved musical works by Holocaust victims and other oppressed people. Many of these, including chamber operas, were commissioned by MOR and had world premieres here.

Several of our members sang in the Beth Am Choir. These included Steve Adler, Leah Vetter, and Diana Pritkin. I played the trumpet for many years in the inter-generational KlezKids band under Wendy Marcus and Sean Weaver. I also played a shofar for a few years with a "shofar band" brought together by Sean Weaver at the High Holy Days.

From its earliest meetings, food played a big role for the group. I believe it was George Levy who would say, "feed them and they will come!"

Some of the most successful events of the group were schmoozes in the members' homes. The food provided by the host was often a combination of home-made and

purchased items and beverages. On occasion these became so elaborate that we suggested that they be limited to “dessert” type items. Schmoozes were held about twice a month. There eventually were some subsidies to hosts to offset the food expenses. In later years we also began having “schmoovies”. These were movies shown in members’ homes. They were always accompanied by pot-luck dinners. The host picked the film and organized contributed food choices.

Four times a year we held Birthday Bashes in restaurants to celebrate the birthdays of our members. After the meal, those with birthdays during the quarter were given cupcakes with candles. The rest only got cupcakes. The responsibility for organizing these affairs was passed to different members, but Madeline Buckley did many of these. An allowance to cover part of the meal cost was provided for each attendee. Generally, the number of participants was above twenty.

Following nearly every hike, museum visit, or other daytime activity, the participants could also look forward to a lunch at a nearby restaurant to complete the outing.

For many years the group had an annual (secular) New Year’s party. This involved a buffet dinner and gift sharing. Many of these were held at Temple Beth Am and some at the party room of Anne Futterman’s condo. These were always very well attended and supported by a fixed charge. Gifts were shared as a game. There were plenty of jokes for which Steve Adler was famous.

Food was also a feature of our most successful lecture series. These were all presented by Dr. Theodore Deacon. Each series dealt with a different subject. These included classical Jewish composers, Jewish composers of hit musicals, and Jewish composers of movie music. Each of these series included, I believe, eight monthly programs, and had audiences up to about 100 people. All were at Temple Beth Am and fully open to the entire community. Preceding each lecture, a buffet of sweets and beverages was made available to all in the Temple social hall. Members of SJS would layout these offerings and clean up afterwards. We even took out a Costco membership just to be able to buy large quantities of food needed for these lectures.

The demographics in personal history, careers, and geographical origins were very diverse for the group. These factors played a positive role in SJS.

A few of our members were survivors of the Holocaust. They reached Seattle, coming by different routes. As mentioned above, Heinz Schwarz was one of these who came via Shanghai. Another was Steve Adler who came via the Kindertransport, through England and later Chicago. Steve was a national leader of a Child Survivors organization and represented that group at international meetings. Ulla Rychter came from Germany via Chile, where her family had fled before coming to the US. Anne Futterman escaped Frankfurt in 1939 with her parents. She stopped briefly in England before settling in Rochester, NY. She came to Seattle when her husband was one of the founding members of the UW Ophthalmology Department. He was a widely recognized biochemist. Ruth Kaufman came from Germany to New York State with her family. George Lachman survived the war in Germany in a children's hospital near Frankfurt where he was placed by his parents presumably for his protection. Miriam Hymowitz survived, somehow, under terrifying conditions in Poland. I believe Ada van Dam made it here from Holland. There may have been others whose stories I did not hear.

Any group is composed of members with a variety of backgrounds. For a group of retired individuals, the Seattle Jewish Seniors included members with an extremely wide variety of careers. I shall attempt to enumerate some of these.

At one time there were four physicists among our members, all of whom had academic and research experience. Besides myself, who had a career at the University of Wisconsin, there was Allan Michaels with Columbia and Stanford connections. He had taught in a German university and did research at Argonne National Laboratory near Chicago. Also from the Chicago area was Marty Rozenfeld. He was a Professor in Medical Physics at the University of Chicago. A second physicist, Henri Vetter, also worked in medical physics research in the US, Canada, and Europe. He was trained at the leading university in Switzerland, which was his native country. As it turned out the paths of Marty and Henri

had crossed in the distant past, but they had little memory of that. In addition, Fran Goldman was trained in physics.

We also had many other members with advanced training in science and math. One of these was a salmon expert, George Hirschhorn, who was associated with NOAA here in Seattle. Steve Adler got his doctoral training in chemistry and served in the food industry for many years. Art Kaufman was a very successful inventor and a member of the sundial society. He constructed many intricate sun dials himself. Bert Goldstein, an engineer, provided important tasks for Boeing during many years of service. As a great raconteur, Bert would regale us with stories of his adventures. Bert has also been our SJS treasurer. Another Boeing employee was Mitch Grayson. Mitch and I graduated from the same engineering physics program at Cornell University. I was five years ahead of him and did not know him then. Mitch specializes in aeronautical engineering and also served in sales for Boeing. He spent some time in Israel working as a Boeing representative to El Al. George Lachman knew more about cars than anyone I ever knew. He could fix any appliance and did so with remarkable success and never asked to be paid for his valuable services. Anne Futterman, a math major in college, was one of the earliest computer programmers. She worked on a very early experimental computer, SEAC, at the US National Bureau of Standards in the early 1950's. Since no programming languages had been developed, she had to provide direct instruction to the machine itself. The group for which she worked produced comprehensive tables of the values for special functions. These tables were much used by scientists for over fifty years. Another member with a strong technical background was Paul Kasperzyk.

Education was the career path of many of our members. Paul Kasperzyk was also one of them. He developed classes for students with special backgrounds. His wife, Sheila, was also very involved in education. She was much appreciated by Temple Beth Am for her service to the religious school there. Others involved in various aspects of education included Leah Vetter, Diana Pritkin, and Libby Cohen. Aza Hadas taught Hebrew for many years. Denise Grayson was a librarian at Seattle University. Janet Robertson, the widow of a university professor, was scholar of Middle Eastern languages in her own right.

There were at least two nurses in the group, Ulla Rychter and Ruth Dick. Ulla arranged for members of the group to be given CPR instruction at Northwest Hospital.

The group, of course, was not without members who had worked in business. These included George Levy, Al Goldman, Jack Cohen, Alan Schwarz (also trained as a radio and TV announcer), Leslie Cohen, Norm Manister, and others, some of whom were active before I became involved.

We even had a corporate lawyer, Emily Davis, who has been extremely active with the group. She served as secretary and steering committee member and anniversary cruise planner.

As for locations, the Seattle Jewish Seniors included members from all parts of the Seattle area. These ranged from the north in Mill Creek and Edmonds to far south of Seattle where Aza Hadas lives. It included Shoreline, Madrona, Ballard, and Lake Forest Park. In Seattle, members came from the North End, First Hill, Capitol Hill, Phinney Ridge, the University District, and others. The loyal members would carpool, travelling great distances to be able to attend events and visit each other's homes for schmoozes. Over the years transportation by car became an increasing problem as the membership grew older and fewer members drove.

Going farther back in the members' histories, most had come to the Seattle area from many other parts of the US. Even before that, many were born in different parts of the world, and some had escaped the ravages of Europe and World War II.

The SJS membership came from widely varying religious backgrounds. While SJS was a Jewish social group, the backgrounds and history of practices was quite diverse. Some were quite orthodox in their observance. Others followed practices of the Conservative movement. Even those who were members of the Reform Congregation of Temple Beth Am had experienced backgrounds of many different types. Some could read Hebrew and others not. One of our members, Madeline Buckley, had come from Baghdad. She was from a distinguished Sephardic family, while almost all the other members were from Ashkenazi backgrounds.

I will also consider here some of the favorite types of activities with which we were involved. In addition to the activities, we organized for ourselves, which I have previously described, we made use of several existing external local structures.

One of the favorite activities of the group was to attend soup and cinema programs at the Nordic Museum in Ballard. Our members supported the building of the modern National Nordic Center in Ballard which replaced it. Some members were attracted to this Scandinavian group because of its honoring of Raoul Wallenberg who saved so many Jews. While visiting the Ballard museum we often saw our members Jack and Cynthia Goldberg who lived in Ballard. We would also see them at Seattle classical music events and, of course, at schmoozes. One of their sons, like myself, is a physicist.

The SJS was supportive of the Endless-Opportunity programs held at Temple de Hirsch Sinai on Capitol Hill and in Bellevue. The lectures and outings of this group were always interesting and well attended by our members. We also offered assistance to those planning for Endless-Opportunity events.

Our members anxiously awaited the latest publication of the Seattle Parks and Recreation Department's list of offerings. Many of us would sign up to join their trips and walks. These were often adventures in many ways, with unexpected lost van drivers. The walks that we planned for ourselves were usually in one of the city, county, or state, parks. These were often led by Anne Futterman, who years before had enjoyed hiking and mountain climbing with her husband. Had not his final illness interfered; they had hoped to scale Mt. Rainier. But they had climbed Mt. Olympus and several peaks in the Cascades.

In retrospect it was the broad diversity that, paradoxically, brought the Seattle Jewish Seniors together. It was what made it an interesting group with which to associate. It was the shared experiences of such a wide array of numerous activities which created strong bonds. It was also the devoted efforts of strong leaders who guided the group over its full lifetime. Such a combination of assets also required a relatively large critical number of members and carpools. These have now disappeared. I believe the convergence of all these factors is rare, and it is what made SJS *special*.

May 2024