

History of the Danville, Illinois Reform Jewish Congregation

By Sybil Stern Mervis

Preface

In the 20th century, Danville, Illinois, was fortunate to have two Jewish congregations, one Reform and one Orthodox/Conservative. The Reform congregation was Temple Beth El; the Orthodox/Conservative congregation was Congregation Anshe Knesset Israel - Congregation Israel for short.

At this writing, early 2020, both have disappeared. There are but a handful of believers in the Jewish faith still living in Vermilion County.

It is important, for historical reasons, to leave a record that Jewish people were here, contributing to the welfare, commerce, and enrichment of Danville and Hoopston in many ways. Our congregants established numerous fine shops and department stores on the main streets of Danville. Jewish folks actively supported various cultural and educational institutions, provided two mayors in Vermilion County cities, a federal judge, several attorneys and numerous doctors, and outstanding community leadership in many areas to improve the quality of life in Danville, Hoopston and Vermilion County.

Definitions of Judaism

REFORM JUDAISM was initiated in Germany in the early 1800s, which reformed or abandoned Orthodox Jewish worship and ritual in an attempt to adapt to modern changes in social, political and cultural life.

CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM is a form of Judaism particularly widespread in North America, which seeks to preserve Jewish tradition and ritual but has a more flexible approach to the interpretation of the Law than Orthodox Judaism.

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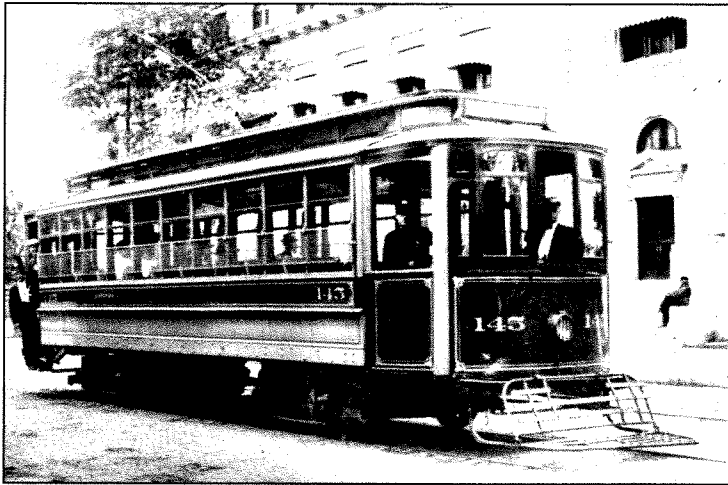
In 1891, the *Cincinnati Israelite* published the following column, referring to Jewish folks of Danville, Illinois, to wit "A friend writing to us from this thriving little city says that there are

fifteen Jewish families and a number of young men living there, all prosperous, intelligent and pleasant people. Yet they have no burying ground, no place of worship, no Sabbath school, make no pretense of observing any of the Jewish holidays, and in fact, as far as outward indications go might be classed as heathens. That this state of affair is not a very creditable one we have no doubt they will all readily admit and that it ought to be remedied they will soon convince themselves if they will meet and talk the matter over. They owe it to their children not to allow them to grow up without religious training, and to themselves to find opportunities for something higher than buying or selling or amusement. In addition to this, they should bear in mind that to the Christian, however liberal in his views, a man without religion is a most despicable thing and an object of suspicion and distrust. But we know that the Israelites of Danville are merely thoughtless and procrastinating, and trust that this reminder, which is kindly meant, will awaken them to action."

From local news stories, we observe that Danville's Jews did, in fact, meet on occasion for religious services, usually above someone's store in downtown Danville. These Jews were most likely German immigrants, as they were earlier arrivals to Danville than the Eastern European Jews. The principal motivation for immigration had been the desire for material improvement. Economic conditions in many German states were difficult as Germany fought several wars during the 1840s, especially the fateful revolution in 1848.

Later in the 19th century, it was the Eastern European Jews who sought new opportunities in the USA, driven by misery on the land and anxiety about violence (though the pogroms of the 1880s were very limited compared with what would come later in the Russian empire in the 20th century). An unprecedented wave of Russian Jews came to America in the decades between 1880 and the First World War, a wave that continued until the U. S. introduced restrictive immigration quotas in the early 1920s to prohibit Jews from entering the U. S.

Economic opportunities in Danville, a thriving rail center in the Midwest at the end of the 19th



Jewel Gritton, Conductor, on Danville street car in about 1911. (From Museum archives)

century, drew the Jewish immigrants to this area in east central Illinois. Certainly, it wasn't the rich farmland that attracted them, as Jews were more inclined, from their European background, to become merchants than farmers.

To some extent, occupations of local Jews were often determined by their place of origin. For example, many German Jewish immigrants started their economic lives as peddlers, walking the countryside with packs on their backs full of notions and yard goods. As soon as a peddler could save enough funds, he might afford a 'stall' in the downtown area, usually on Main, and later, Vermilion streets; then a store, usually, but not always, offering dry goods, shoes or clothing.

German Jews, for the most part, became merchants owning shops in downtown Danville. Some of the many store owners were families by the name of Basch, Deutsch, the Gimbel Bros., *briefly*, Greenebaum, Goldsmith, Levin, Meis, Plaut, Ries, Ike Stern, Straus, and Strauss. Many of these men had dry goods stores on Vermilion and Main streets in downtown Danville, one adjacent to the other, in the early 1900s.

Several of the finest clothiers in downtown Danville were Jewish. The four Deutsch brothers, led by twins Louis and Albert, opened their fine men's store in 1904. All four bachelor brothers worked in the store, which remained under the guid-

ance of the final brother, Ray, until 1965. The store stayed open in the same location, with the same fine fixtures until October 2010. Two of their sisters, Helen and Gertrude, opened a millinery shop in 1912 which evolved into one of the loveliest women's dress shops in central Illinois, Deutsch Uptown. With its array of stunning ladies' wear, the sisters drew customers from miles around until it was sold in 1964 to Paul Levy.

Tailoring shops, shoe repair shops and other service-related businesses were conducted by the Eastern European Jewish immigrants, who mostly worked with their hands; that was part of the great social divide: shopkeepers as opposed to junk dealers, auto parts dealers, shoe repair shops, tailors, etc. Eastern European Jews were more likely to work with their hands - possibly

THE SHOP DISTINCTIVE

Since 1904



For 64 years, Deutsch Bros. has merited one reputation—stocking Danville's most distinctive men's clothing.

Maintaining a single standard of high quality has always been our goal. We believe that in the end, it is the quality that makes the bargain.

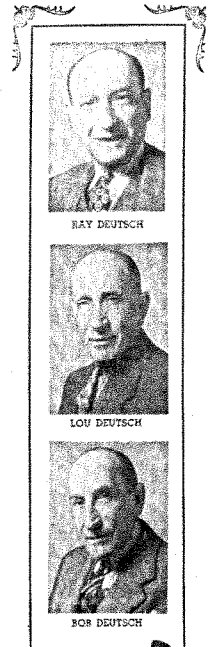
Our personnel serves you in the best way: What they assure you we will guarantee. Every customer must be pleased and our guarantee of satisfaction is pledged by us and by the manufacturer.

All this is what we mean when we say Deutsch Bros. is "The Shop Distinctive"—quality clothing for the eminently discriminating and distinguished service.

Distinctive characteristics of Deutsch Bros. since 1904.

FAMOUS BRANDS

Fashion Park
Petrocelli
Dobbs
London Fog
Hathaway
Arroyo
Zero King
McGregor
Puritan
Florsheim
Bass
Schiaparelli



RAY DEUTSCH

LOU DEUTSCH

BOB DEUTSCH



STORE FRONT IN 1911

34 NORTH VERMILION STREET

DANVILLE, ILLINOIS

Deutsch Bros

"THE SHOP DISTINCTIVE"



Ad from the April 5, 1966, edition of *the Commercial-News*.



Greenebaum's Big Store and the First National Bank from a postcard sent circa 1911. (From Museum archives)

The major department store in Danville was founded by Alphonse Meis and his relatives from Alsace in the final decade of the 1800s. It was operated by Meis family members until 1964 when it was sold to H. P. Wasson from Indianapolis. Three years later, due to the owner's death, the remaining Wassons sold their stores, including Meis Bros., to Goldblatt's.

Several clothing manufacturers operated in Vermilion County, taking advantage of the seamstress skills of spouses of the numerous immigrant coal miners and brickmakers. The first wave of Jewish immigrants were not formally educated, but they were determined that their children should be.

because they arrived poorer from *shtetls* where they were not permitted to be shopkeepers.

Professionals were few, but included two Jew-



Ike H. Levin store on the northwest corner of Jackson and Main streets, Danville, IL. In the photo are: Harry Pauley-porter, Rufus Lowe-clerk, Clarence Depke-clerk, Albert Stuebe, Isadore Freeman-manager, Charles Meyers-window trimmer/clerk, and Ike Levin-owner. (From Museum archives)

ish lawyers, Sam Levin and Casper Platt, in the first half of the 20th century.

Jewish medical practitioners were not allowed hospital privileges at either the Catholic or the community hospital until the mid-1940s, when WWII caused a shortage of doctors. There were evidently no local Jewish doctors early in the 20th century except for Dr. Seward Landauer, who, after practicing in Danville from the early years of the 20th century, moved to the South in the 1930s after the death of his wife. A number of medical men later arrived in Danville after they escaped from Nazi Austria or Germany. Several were psychiatrists at the substantial Veterans Hospital at the east end of Danville during and after World War II.

It is believed that Dr. Saul Halpern, who moved to Danville from Aledo, IL, was the first Jewish doctor to be allowed local hospital privileges in about 1944.

Though Eastern European immigrants living in Danville in the second decade of the 20th century were more likely to be orthodox or conservative practitioners, it was German Jewish immigrants and shopkeepers who formally constituted Danville's first congregation, the 'Hall of Reform' congregation, later renamed Beth El Reform, in the first decade of the 20th century. The Hebrew 'Beth El' translates as House of God.

"At Danville, Illinois, a permanent congregation has been organized," the *American Israelite* reported in October 30, 1902, continuing, "It is the intention to secure as soon as possible the permanent services of a rabbi. A hall will be rented in which services will be held until such time as a synagogue (sic) can be built".

(From the *American Israelite*, 10-30-1902-Volume 49, no.18, p. 6.) The *American Jewish Yearbook* (date unknown, but after 1905) similarly records that the Reform congregation was organized on October 12, 1902, noting that services were held at the Knights of Pythias Hall located above 121 N. Walnut St. on alternate Sundays.

Jewish men who attended the organizational meeting included the following, as listed in the Temple's early minutes book:

Reform Congregation Minutes Book
Established Oct. 12, 1902

at the Knights of Pythias Hall

Present were:

Mose Barnard	H. Lewis
A. M. Basch	Ike Landman
Isaac Basch	Alphons (sic) Meis
W. J. Basch	Joseph Meis
Julius Blanckensee	L. Meis
Jacob Deutsch	Louis Platt
B. J. Epstein	Percy Platt
G. M. Greenebaum	S. Plaut
Samuel Goldberg	M. S. Plaut
Otto Jarodski	Ad Plaut
Henry Levin	David Reis (sic)
Ike Levin	A. M. Strauss
Julius Strauss	Ike Strauss

There were 26 members in all. No minutes until October 8, 1905. S. Plaut was still president. Members subscribed \$685 to operate the next year.

It is interesting to note that nearly every one of these men either owned or worked at a retail store in downtown Danville. (*see appendix #1*)

Even before Beth El's founding, as we know from the *Danville Evening Commercial* newspaper, High Holiday services and possibly other holidays were being observed in Danville. A news item from September 1899 reports that Yom Kippur services were conducted by Rabbi Cadden and held at the Church of Christ. His sermon was titled "The Jewish Idea of Yom Kippur, Atonement and Salvation." A description of the services included: "The members were (sic) their burial robes and the rabbis dress in new linens." N. B. This is an odd description for Reform Jews as a kittel would be more in line with orthodox tradition. ('burial robes' refers to the wearing of a *kittel*, a white robe worn over men's clothing on Yom Kippur, at a Seder, and under the chuppah at their wedding.)

The first president of the new congregation was Solomon Plaut, a banker and loan broker, who had moved to Danville in the late 1880s from Homer; the vice president was Gus Greenebaum, owner of a large department store; secretary was Alphonse Meis, founder of the largest department store in east central Illinois, and treasurer was David Ries, a clothier. The first rabbi was J. A. Messing. Dues were \$12 annually. The congregation listed 31 members, and its by-laws "welcome(d) to its ranks all who would help spread the knowledge of these old yet ever



Solomon Plaut's children with Emmanuel Fischer (center back row) in the mid-1880s. Samuel, Adolph, and Michael Plaut with sisters Miriam, Adeline, Emma, and Carrie. (From the book *From the Timber to the Prairie, A History of Homer, Illinois*)

new truths.”

For eight years members of this congregation held services in the Woman's Club Room and the Odd Fellows Hall, usually on Sunday evenings. In 1906 we know that it also held Sunday lectures at the Woman's Club. In that year services were relocated to the Odd Fellows Hall at 127 N. Vermilion St. Other rented sites for services from 1905 until 1914 were the Savoy Hotel, a Baptist church, and the home of Jules Straus, a local shopkeeper, at 440 N. Vermilion Street.

Soon these Reform Jews began to discuss the possibility of building their own house of worship. It took four years of hard work for their plans to materialize.

A Ladies' Mite Society was organized in 1904. (The term has now gone out of fashion, but mite societies were groups that collected funds for charity through small contributions.) Its officers were president Mrs. Jules Straus, treasurer Mrs. David Ries, and secretary Mrs. I. H. Louis. With a roster of 28 members, the Society's purpose was supporting the Jewish-consecrated burial ground within Spring Hill Cemetery on East Voorhees Street. This ground was established in 1905 by B'nai B'rith Lodge 568, the local chapter of the International Brotherhood of B'nai B'rith. There are several unidentified burials at

Spring Hill that the Mite Society must have arranged. Relative to that subject: In May of 1916 David Ries was the interim custodian of the “schnorrer fund.” ‘Schnorrer’ is a Yiddish term for a Jewish beggar, usually a man who comes through town begging at downtown stores owned by Jews. Jewish folks were known to “take care of their own”.

Members of the Ladies' Mite Society, as the Sisterhood was called at that time, supported the congregation by giving dinners, card parties, bazaars and other fundraising affairs. In addition to the many social affairs, members of the Sisterhood held rummage sales, especially popular because they were able to gather new clothing and other items from the many Jewish merchants downtown. Jewish men often joined the local B'nai B'rith, a national organization founded in 1843, open to all Jewish men.

The Beth El articles of incorporation are dated December 15, 1909. On February 2, 1910, the congregation purchased a lot on the southeast corner of Walnut and Fairchild Streets from a widow, Mrs. Rita Glascock, for \$2000. The generosity of department store owner Alphonse Meis and others, who made substantial contributions to the building fund, made the dream of their own temple come true. Alphonse Meis was a recent immigrant from Alsace, who subsequently brought many family members to Danville. During May 1911, the congregation hired architect Charles Lewis to build a temple for them. John N. Fairchild's bid of \$12,286 was accepted for temple construction. The total cost of construction on May 15, 1914, settled at \$19,151.36.

The Temple building was dedicated on May 1 and 2, 1914, in an elaborate ceremony. The Friday, May 1, 1914, edition of the *Danville Press Democrat* had the following headline: **Begin Dedication of Temple Beth-El. Prominent Jewish Divines to Take Part in Auspicious Ceremonies Today and Tomorrow.** The article went on to say:

“One of the most noteworthy religious events that has occurred in Danville for several days will be the dedication of the magnificent new Jewish Temple Beth-El, corner of Walnut and



Temple Beth-El on the corner of Walnut and Fairchild Streets, Danville, Illinois. (From Museum archives)

Fairchild Streets this evening and tomorrow morning. Jewish divines of national reputation are here to participate in the ceremonial, which will be one of the most beautiful religious services ever held in the city.

MAGNIFICENT EDIFICE

The Temple proper, built of brick and stone, is a handsome and substantial structure, one thoroughly in keeping with the Jewish congregation in Danville. The Temple, moreover is a product of Danville skill and genius, the architect being Charles M. Lewis, and the contractor being John N. Fairchild. The equipment both inside and out is of rare beauty and design, contributing to making it one of the most handsome religious edifices in eastern Illinois.

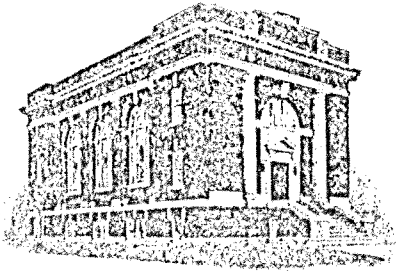
COMMITTEES IN CHARGE

“The Men Behind” - the building committee—whose labors made the new house of worship possible, are deserving special credit. This committee is as follows: Jules Straus, chairman: Alphonse Meis, B. J. Epstein, Dr. S. L. Landauer, A. E. Plaut, I. H. Lewis, Louis Platt, and N. J. Bash.

Officers of The Danville Reform Congregation, who co-operated with the building committee are: President-Alphonse Meis, Vice-President-Jules Straus, Treasurer-Isaac H. Lewis and Secretary-Samuel Levin.”

Other planned speakers for the two days included Rabbi Sidney Tedesche from Congregation Berith Sholom in Springfield, Illinois, and Rabbi David Philpson, D. D. from Congregation Bene

Dedication Services
of
Temple Bethel



Walnut and Fairchild Streets
Danville, Illinois

May first and second
nineteen hundred fourteen

Copy of Program from the Temple dedication on May 1 and 2, 1914. (From the files of Sybil Stern Mervis)

Israel in Cincinnati, Ohio. Special musical performances would be given by Mrs. H. Y. Mercer, Dr. G. Haven Stephens, Mrs. B. J. Epstein, Miss Jennie Tuttle, Mrs. Levin, Mrs. Dale and the Dedication Choir.

A review of the history of the congregation written in the local *Commercial-News* on December 5, 1936, relates that "soon after the dedication the great philanthropist Carnegie gave the temple a magnificent Estes organ." The organ was situated in the choir loft, above the bimah and behind the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments, and had supposedly come from a World's Fair, possibly the recent one in St. Louis. The choir was initially comprised of Jewish ladies. Dr. G. Haven Stephens, a local dentist, was the soloist for a number of years. In the 1920s, Horace V. Benjamin became the soloist for about 20 years, with Frank Foutek as the organist and choir director for 42 years. (N. B.: Andrew Car-

negie, the steel magnate, was helping to build public libraries all over America).

The first Torah was a gift in May 1926 from Mr. and Mrs. Alphonse Meis, owners of the 'great white store' Meis Brothers, on the southeast corner of Main and Hazel Streets.

From 1902 until 1912, the roster of rabbis officiating for the High Holidays had been Rabbis Moses, Stolz, Fox, Blau, Pedot, Delson, Haas and Latz. Beginning in October 1905, Rabbi Emil Leipziger of Terre Haute, Indiana, came up to conduct bi-weekly services on Sunday nights for eight years. One assumes he traveled to Danville by train.

In 1919 and 1920 congregational leaders tried, without success, to interest the Champaign Jewish congregation in sharing a rabbi.

Beginning in 1919, students at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati conducted bi-weekly services. The congregation had always hoped to employ a rabbi full-time, but were never able to afford to hire one. In March 1914, Rabbi Charles Latz of Kansas City was selected for a term of one year as "minister of the local congregation." But he soon left for a pulpit at Fort Smith, Arkansas.

In 1922, Rabbi Benjamin Frankel from the University of Illinois was the officiating rabbi for the year. At that time, Rabbi Frankel was in the process of founding Hillel, a Jewish student campus organization in Urbana, which grew to become world-wide.

Ultimately, the Temple never hired a full-time or resident rabbi, relying mainly on a roster of student rabbis sent for the season by Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. These students would travel to Danville for the weekend on an irregular schedule. Early on, services were held on Sunday.

At one time there were 23 pupils in religious school classes, which were conducted by the women of the congregation and supported by Harry Friedman, a local jacket designer at the John Rissman Co. Sisterhood members were the Sunday School teachers. *N. B. (Most of this information was gleaned from a report written possibly in 1964 by Rabbi Merle Singer, who had served the congregation.)*

Julie Haenel Friedman recalled her confirmation class in 1958 included Milton Baer, Terry Baer, Carol Graff, Bill Jaffe, Ellen Meis and Tillie Rose Cohen from Hume.

In the early years of the congregation, the Jews of this small community largely socialized among themselves. Meeting other Jews took considerable effort. However, for Jewish social events in Champaign, a group from Danville would board the traction or interurban, an electric railroad operated by the Illinois Traction System, and travel to meet folks their ages. A news clipping from March 23, 1905, relates that 24 guests from Danville attended the Purim Ball given by the Champaign B'nai B'rith lodge. They traveled in a special car on the interurban to the city 35 miles west. A Purim Ball was a grand social event in this era.

No doubt because their social circle was so limited, many of the local Reform Jews never married. For example, in the prominent mercantile Deutsch family of seven siblings, only one, Albert, married, and not until he was in his late forties, to a Seventh Day Adventist. There were other Reform families where several siblings remained single. Living in such a small community, it was simply difficult to meet Jewish folks. German Jews often scorned marrying Eastern European Jews. Because of cultural differences, Reform Jews didn't often socialize with the Conservative Jews.

Throughout this period (1920-1970), Jewish quasi-social organizations were active locally; e.g. B'nai B'rith men's and women's organizations and Hadassah, the largest women's organization in the world. Jews of both congregations belonged to these international organizations. The local chapter of B'nai B'rith (literally Children of the Covenant) was founded in 1904.

The *American Jewish Yearbook* estimated Danville's Jewish population in 1927 to be about 335. At that time, the city's population was over 36,000. In the years surrounding the founding of the Temple, Joseph 'Uncle Joe' Cannon, a Danville resident, was the Speaker of the U. S. House of Representatives. He brought a great deal of public infrastructure and private investment to enhance Danville through his influence as the then longest-serving Speaker of the House. Danville was the county seat and shopping mecca for Vermilion County.

Forty years later, the Jewish population was estimated to be about 240. Those figures would include both congregations, Reform and Orthodox/Conservative. At that point, Danville's population was at an all-time high of 42,570.

Social clubs in Danville were not particularly welcoming to Jews. Danville Country Club was not open to Jewish members, except in a very few instances, nor was the Boat Club. Several women's social and service clubs were off limits. The Elks Club was open to Jewish members as several Jewish men were among the Club's charter members.

Though they may have socialized mainly with one another, members of the Reform Jewish community were nonetheless significantly involved in the community. Louis Platt, who arrived from Chicago as a recent immigrant to America in the 1870s and became a successful businessman, served as Danville's only Jewish mayor in 1909. His son Casper was appointed to a federal judgeship in 1948 by President Harry Truman.

Gus M. Greenebaum founded the Danville Chamber of Commerce late in the 19th century and was president of the Midwest district of na-



Casper Platt, U.S. Federal Judge

tional B'nai B'rith.

Jeanette Platt, the University of Chicago-educated wife of Casper, helped found the local Girl Scouts and the League of Women Voters in the early 1920s. (College-educated Jewish women were, in Danville, a rarity in the first third of the 20th century). Leonard Jaffe, who purchased the John Rissman Jacket factory, was active in establishing the Danville Junior College Foundation. Alma Meis, wife of Alphonse's son, co-founded the gift shop at Lake View Hospital, which supported purchases of vital equipment for medical care.

The Reform congregation was able to celebrate its 50th anniversary in April 1964, but gradually the older members died and there were simply no new members to replace them. The final marriage ceremony in the Temple was on November 15, 1969, when Retta Kantz was married to Milton Baer. Rabbi Uri Herscher officiated.

It is sad, but not unusual, that the Reform and Orthodox congregations could never find terms on which to merge, despite the fading membership of the Temple. This discussion is ongoing in many moderately-sized Jewish communities even now. Federal Judge Casper Platt was one person who attempted to keep the two congregations from merging, even as the members of the Temple died off. Eventually, there were so few members remaining that the congregation was forced to close the Temple building.

In January 1973, the Temple building was donated to the Piankeshaw Council of the local Boy Scouts of America. Later, it became a Tae-kwondo gym. In the spring of 1999, the 1914 brick building was demolished to make room for a CVS drug store. The dream of a Reform Jewish congregation in Danville, IL, had ended.

The stone tablets engraved with the Ten Commandments, from above the Temple ark, eventually ended up at the local Conservative synagogue. They will find a home at the future Hillel Center at Indiana University in Bloomington. The disposition of the four Torahs is unknown. It is believed that the stained-glass windows from the Temple building were sold. Two of the bimah chairs were given to Congregation Anshe Knesset Israel Synagogue in Danville and later donated to a Chabad congregation north of Los Angeles.

Appendices

1. A roster of the founding members who were

Jewish merchants in downtown Danville:

Basch Families-clothing, 19 E. Main St.
and Bell Clothing 103 E. Main Street

Julius Blankensee-clerk at the Soldiers' Home

Deutsch-several brothers founded
Deutsch Bros, fine men's clothing in 1904

Gus Greenebaum-secretary at Ike Stern store

Otto Jarodski-partner at Progress Shoe Store

Ike S. Levin-H. Levin & Co and Peoples Bargain store

Landman-Meises-all worked at the department store at 102 E. Main Street, relatives later opened a furniture store and a ladies ready to wear shop-The Parisian.

Platts-real estate and insurance

Plauts clothiers at 25 E. Main Street;
Solomon was a banker and farm land owner

David Ries, Ries-Strauss clothiers with Sam Strauss

A. M. Straus-Straus Bros. Wide Awake Department Store, 16-18 E. Main Street

Isaac Strous-Strouse's Bazaar, 120 E. Main Street

2. Mrs. Ike (Emma) Strauss willed \$500 in 1927 for the purchase of a bronze memorial tablet for the vestibule. One of the biggest concerns when a congregation is closed is "What will happen to the memorial boards"? The reason for this has to do with honoring the dead, obviously. It is the Jewish custom to recall the deceased on the anniversary of death. The re-placement of the boards can be a very emotional subject.

The memorial plaques from Temple Beth El are now on display in the sanctuary of Congregation Shaarey Tefilla at 3085 W. 116th Street in Carmel, Indiana. A light is lit during the month of the anniversary of the death.

3. The obituaries of Temple members are available on the website: Danville IL. Jewish Community, easily accessible to readers. This makes this history accessible to researchers.