
OVERCOMING GEOGRAPHY



INTERIOR of Salet's original store, Mankato, probably in the 1890s

Jewish Religious Life in Four Market Towns

Linda Mack Schloff

ISAAC MARKS was born in East Prussia in 1823. He emigrated to the United States in 1840, settling first in St. Louis and then working in a succession of towns: Galena, Illinois, and Prairie du Chien and La Crosse, Wisconsin. In 1848 he moved to Long Prairie, Minnesota, and later formed a partnership with Asa White to trade with the Winnebago Indians. When the Indians were removed to Blue Earth County, the partners followed and built one of the first trading posts at the Winnebago Agency. In 1856 Marks opened a store in Mankato and two years later built a three-story stone building there. In the summer of 1862, at the time of the Dakota conflict, he married Anna Schoffman, a Catholic, in a civil ceremony. He was Mankato's first Master Mason, and when he died in January, 1885, he was given a Masonic funeral and buried in the Catholic cemetery next to his wife. His obituary in the Mankato

Review described him as "a liberal-minded, public-spirited man. . . . Though an Israelite by birth and education, he gave freely to all church enterprises and religious purposes."¹

Leon Salet, a Russian Jew, arrived in Mankato with his wife, Annie, and their two children, Louis and Harry, in 1892. He had emigrated to Winnipeg, peddled in the Grand Forks area, and was living in St. Paul in 1891. Searching for a business opportunity, he traveled to Mankato. What he saw must have appeared promising, for he moved his family and commenced peddling dry goods, using a horse and wagon. After four years he opened a fixed store, and by 1917 he had two shops in town, Salet's Old Store, which sold only menswear, and Salet's Department Store. That same year he bought a house on St. Paul's Summit Avenue and moved his residence back to that city. By forming a partnership with his son Louis, who remained in Mankato, he continued to manage his business, which grew to include stores in several southern Minnesota towns—including Winona, Rochester, and Owatonna. Leon spent the middle part of the week in Mankato and traveled by train to St. Paul for the weekends; he chose this difficult life to satisfy his need to be involved in Jewish religious and communal activities, activities that he had fostered in Mankato, only to see them wither. In St. Paul he was an active member of Temple of Aaron synagogue and was a major donor and member of the board of the Jewish Home for the Aged.²

The lives of these two Jews represent opposite reactions to life in a small town. Marks assimilated totally. Although there is no evidence that he converted to Ca-

¹ *Review*, Jan. 27, 1885.

² Among people interviewed for this study, economic opportunity was the reason most often given for settling in a small town. Another common reason was that a relative or *landsmán* (someone from the same town in the Old Country; the plural is *landsleit*) paid their fare and/or helped them get started. Interview of Richard Salet, Mankato, July 30, 1985; telephone interview of Eva Levy (Leon Salet's niece, Los Angeles), May 1, 1987; Salet's Department Store, Mankato, Minn., Papers, 1896–1973, Southern Minnesota Regional Research Center, Mankato.

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tholicism, he substituted Masonic ritual and generous donations for the formal practice of Judaism, and although Mount Zion cemetery and synagogue were in existence in St. Paul and he had a brother in Minneapolis, he chose to be buried in Mankato in a Catholic cemetery. Salet, on the other hand, tried to create a stable Jewish community with Jewish functionaries, and when he was unsuccessful, moved away rather than live outside of an intense Jewish milieu.

Most small-town Jews lived their lives between these two poles. They neither assimilated totally nor were they financially able to leave after establishing businesses in market towns. What effect did geographic dispersion have on their religious life? That is, how were Jews in small towns able to carry on religious life separated from major centers of Jewish life in the Twin Cities and hampered by small numbers? By establishing a demographic base and following it through time in several locations, this article will chart the rise, existence, and decline of Jewish populations and communities in several Minnesota towns between 1900, when very few East European Jews appeared in the census, and the mid-1970s, when most small-town Jewish communal and religious life existed in Faribault, Mankato, Austin, and Albert Lea, these market towns are the basis for this study. These Jewish communities, however, spanned county lines; for example, residents of at least five nearby counties used Mankato as their religious center.³

SEPHARDIC JEWS (originating in Spain or Portugal) have lived in America since 1654, when 23 arrived in New Amsterdam. The first large Jewish migration to America, however, was part of a great exodus from Germany, roughly between 1830 and 1880. Repressive legislation and changes in peasant economy had adversely affected Jewish petty tradesmen who lived in small market towns. (Two common occupations were peddling and cattle dealing.) In the United States, most Jewish immigrants settled in the large Eastern cities, but many peddlers followed the pattern of American migration westward so that, by the Civil War, 160 places had Jewish communal life. Jews began arriving in Minnesota in the 1840s. Mount Zion Temple in St. Paul, the state's oldest synagogue, was established in 1856, and by 1880 Jews numbered about 300 in the state. Of that number a few lived outside the Twin Cities.⁴

German Jews have run businesses—almost all of them clothing stores—in small Minnesota towns since at least the 1870s. For them, the stereotype of the Jewish peddler, who by dint of hard work saves enough to send for family, who opens a store and supplies his newly arrived brothers with goods they can peddle,

who moves into wholesaling and manufacturing, and who lives to see his relatives establish their own stores, was quite true. By the time German Jews arrived in Minnesota's small towns, however, they had passed the peddler stage and had enough capital to begin fixed businesses. Several were hide and fur dealers, just as they had been cattle and hide merchants in Germany. Rarely were there more than three German-Jewish families in the locales in this study, but they were well integrated economically and socially into their small towns. In Austin, George Hirsh was elected mayor in the early 1920s, and in Albert Lea, Simon Strauss was a vice-president of the First National Bank.⁵

Although German Jews in America often chose the same sort of businesses as they had in their homeland,

³ A note on methodology: The demographic base for this study was derived from the United States manuscript census of 1910, which enumerated people by language spoken. Yiddish speakers could only be Jews; however, by 1910 many Jews spoke English well enough so that other means were necessary to identify them in the census. Some were found by checking and correlating common Jewish occupations and names. If there were any Jewish farmers or railroad workers, they were overlooked, as were those who had Anglicized their first and last names. Business directories helped track the movement of people into and out of the towns researched. Immigration and naturalization records were used when possible. Finally, extensive interviews with people who live, had lived, or had relatives in the towns yielded names that had been overlooked in the census or business directories and revealed the networks of relatives and *landsleit* that covered southern Minnesota and northern Iowa.

The topics of intermarriage and anti-Semitism are beyond the design and scope of this article. Space limitations were one reason: the lack of a satisfactory, scientific way to measure the results of intermarriage or the presence of anti-Semitism was another. People often expressed a feeling of being different, being on the outside, for example, but overt symptoms of anti-Semitism were lacking. Irish Catholics living among Norwegian Lutherans may have felt the same sense of estrangement. Furthermore, those who lived in the communities were often reticent on this topic.

⁴ Arthur A. Goren, "Jews," in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. Stephan Thernstrom (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 571, 576; Marilyn J. Chiat and Chester Proshan, "German Jews in Minnesota: 1845-1910," in *A Heritage Fulfilled: German-Americans*, ed. Clarence A. Glasrud (Moorhead: Concordia College, 1984), 173-74. Since the decennial United States census did not classify people by religion, the problem of singling out German Jews in the absence of corroborating data such as synagogue records or cemetery lists is almost insurmountable. The census bureau did not publish religious statistics until 1906. Special reports on religious bodies were issued thereafter in 1916, 1926, and 1936; only members of religious institutions, however, were counted.

⁵ Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, *History of Freeborn County, Minnesota* (Chicago: H. C. Cooper, Jr. & Co., 1911), 834; Marilyn Chiat interview of Charles Upin, Albert Lea, July 2, 1982.



NEIGHBORING Jewish businesses on the corner of Main and Water streets. Austin, 1938

their religious practices had changed. By 1880 most belonged to the Reform wing of Judaism. Services were conducted in the German or English language (rather than in Hebrew) by a university-taught and seminary-trained rabbi, and emphasis was placed not on ritual practice, such as keeping kosher, but on faith and general moral elevation. Prophetic injunctions replaced the specifics of Mosaic law. The services were so different in language, style, and content that Reform Jews and the Orthodox Jews who emigrated in the following decades could not worship together.

German Jews, then, were well established economically and socially and had evolved different religious customs in America by the time the East European immigration began in 1880. While some 250,000 German Jews had arrived between 1830 and 1880, about 2.5 million Jews entered America during the period of the "new migration," 1880–1924. They too migrated because of repressive legislation and for economic rea-

sons. And again, most settled on the Eastern seaboard and in the largest manufacturing cities of the country."

By 1920 about 31,500 Jews lived in Minnesota, a little more than 4,000 of them outside of St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Duluth. Of these 4,000, the largest concentration was in the iron range communities, but Jews were also scattered throughout southern Minnesota, often in sufficient numbers to form religious communities. Like their German co-religionists, many began as peddlers of notions and piece goods or as junk collectors and dealers, for both businesses required little start-up capital. Most who settled in small towns in the 1920s and 1930s arrived with enough capital to begin other businesses, frequently retail clothing. Again, as with the German-Jewish migration, establishment of a network of family-owned businesses was common.

THE GERMAN JEWS looked askance at the peddlers who invaded their towns and at the junkyards and second-hand clothing stores the Russian Jews established. In larger towns the German Jews accepted responsibility for the welfare of these less fortunate newcomers, but in the small towns German Jews seem to have kept their Russian brethren at arm's length. The class divisions, intensified by differences in modes of worship, may also have been exacerbated by economic rivalry, for German Jews found themselves in direct competition with their East European co-religionists, particularly in the retail clothing trade. The few German Jews in Minnesota towns did, however, serve several functions in the lives of the East European Jews who followed. Some, like Abraham Hirsch, a hide and fur dealer in Albert Lea, offered jobs. More important, they confirmed a vision of America's promise. To be-

⁶ Goren, "Jews," 579–581. For varying estimates of the number of German-Jewish immigrants, see *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1971), 15:1596; Mark Wischnitzer, *To Dwell in Safety: The Story of Jewish Migration Since 1800* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1948), 289; Stanley Nadel, "Jewish Race and German Soul in Nineteenth-Century America," *American Jewish History* 77 (Sept., 1987): 18. For purposes of this study, the term *Russian Jew* is used interchangeably with *East European Jew*; more than 90 percent of the Jews described here emigrated from the Russian, not the Austro-Hungarian, Empire.

⁷ Hyman Berman, "The Jews," in *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups*, ed. June D. Holmquist (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981), 491.

come a mayor, to own a large store, to be respected—all this could also be within the grasp of East European Jews. Finally, the firstcomers may have served as a warning, for they were barely recognizable as Jews: none spoke Yiddish or kept kosher. Indeed, they appeared quite uninterested in their religion.⁸

Russian Jews arrived in Mankato, Faribault, Austin, and Albert Lea between 1900 and 1910, and they settled in sufficient numbers to begin thinking of organizing religious communities. Belonging to the Orthodox branch of Judaism, ideally they required the following physical spaces, structures, and personnel: a sanctified burial ground, a *mikvah* (ritual bathhouse), a synagogue with spaces for prayer meeting and teaching youngsters, a teacher to provide religious instruction for children, a *schochet* to slaughter meat according to Jewish law and thus make it kosher, a *mohel* to circumcise newborn boys, and a rabbi to lead services and act as a judge in matters involving religious law. Often the same man could perform all these functions.⁹ The community would also need a Torah (five books of Moses, written on parchment and wound on a scroll), which is read three times a week during prayer services. The Torah cannot be read unless a *minyan*, a quorum of ten males over the age of 13, is present. A Jewish boy attains his adulthood, his bar mitzvah, at age 13 by being called to the Torah, either to recite prayers or to read a portion: the cantillation (chanting with the proper musical intonation) is difficult to learn and requires months of study. Many men trained in Old World Hebrew schools could lead services; few could teach Torah cantillation or sing it easily.

While Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Duluth each maintained a full religious structure and personnel, smaller towns were unable to provide this range. For example, Rochester and the four largest iron range communities—Virginia, Hibbing, Chisholm, and Eveleth—had synagogues, but only Chisholm had a *mikvah*. The range communities banded together to purchase a burial ground as late as the 1950s; for the first half of the century they used cemeteries in Duluth or Superior.¹⁰

Buildings and religious personnel, however, were not necessary on a weekly basis. Services could be held in rented halls during major holidays such as Rosh Hashanah (the New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) and in people's homes on the Sabbath or for *yahrzeit* (the anniversary of a parent's death, when special prayers are recited). Furthermore, many Jewish holidays—Passover, Hanukkah, and Sukkot (the Feast of Tabernacles), for example—are mainly celebrated within the home, which obviated the need for a building. The bare minimum for community survival in the early part of the century, then, was a *minyan* for the full prayer service and a source of kosher meat. For

some communities, this bare minimum was impossible to attain.

THE HISTORY of Faribault's Jewish community begins and ends with Philip A. Schochet. Schochet left Russia in 1888 to join a brother and uncle in Minneapolis where, after serving a short apprenticeship as a peddler, he sold dry goods and bought and sold iron and metal. His experiences may well parallel those of the many Jewish men who peddled in Minnesota during the first decade of the 20th century. Shortly after he arrived in America, "Brother Herman arrived from the Country and fixed me up a pack dry goods and a suitcase notions and sent me out on the train 50 miles west from Minneapolis with Myer Moses, and Moses gave the lesson how to peddle; took me along for a whole day. The following morning we parted and he gave me a road named, from town to town, and the country was all covered with snow and places 2 feet high—as it was just ending the month of March.

"I think back to those times. We must have carried a pack 75 to 100 pounds full of dry goods on the back and in the front hanging down a suitcase with notions weighing about 25 pounds. Moses got bow-legged carrying such loads. After a Holyday leaving the City for the Country there wasn't a train where the baggage car wasn't half taken up with the peddler's packs."¹¹

Schochet settled in Faribault after the turn of the century and opened a wholesale iron and metal business with two brothers-in-law, Harry Mark and Moses

⁸ Upin interview; interview of Israel Waterman, Albert Lea, Sept. 12, 1985. Upin related that Simon Strauss never spoke to him about their mutual religion or businesses—both were clothing merchants. The Hirsh family of Austin did not worship with the Russian Jews.

⁹ A rabbi is not necessary to conduct services, for any man over the age of 13 is expected to know the service well enough to lead it.

¹⁰ Harriet Kohen interview of Molly Keller, Virginia, July 21, 1983. Her husband, Nathan Keller, was instrumental in organizing the Jewish cemetery that served the Range communities. A listing of churches that included B'nai Abraham synagogue, Virginia, noted that members used the Duluth Jewish cemetery; see WPA Papers, Historic Records Survey, Churches, 1938, MHS. For use of the Superior Jewish cemetery, see interview of Max Edelstein, Hibbing, July, 1982.

¹¹ Reminiscence by Philip Schochet, written in 1931 and contained in "The Family of Ephraim Schochet," an unpublished genealogy compiled by Claude Schochet in 1984, copy in author's possession.

¹² Here and below, see Industrial Removal Office files, Mar. 16, 1905, Feb. 27, Mar. 10, 1906, Oct. 24, 1907, American Jewish Archives, Waltham, Mass.; interview of Nahman Schochet, Laguna Hills, Calif., Oct. 30, 1985; United States, manuscript census, 1910, Rice Co., city of Faribault, Enumeration District (hereafter ED) 114, p. 8B, 9B, ED 116, p. 5A, 16A, ED 117, p. 3A; Declarations of Intention and Peti-

Newman. All three actively worked to build a Jewish community there. (There were at least two German-Jewish clothiers, related to each other, in town, but they played no part in this effort.) Between 1905 and 1907 the Russian Jews repeatedly wrote to the Industrial Removal Office in New York City, regarding hiring Jewish men who wished to move west. In a series of letters they expressed concern about hiring a man "for religious matters only," a *schochet* (ritual slaughterer), hoping that this functionary would bring people to Faribault, as there were "only five Jewish families" in March, 1906. The removal office, however, sent no one. The number of Jewish scrap metal collectors employed by the Schochet firm, though, did grow.¹²

The United States census for 1910 counted seven Jewish families (including the two German-Jewish households), but missed a number of Jewish men, junk collectors, who lived in Faribault long enough to apply for naturalization papers, which Schochet invariably cosigned. In 1915 the *Polk Business Directory* listed five Jewish families, and the total never rose above that. (After 1957 there were between two and four families in town.) Schochet remained the only Jewish scrap metal dealer there; the other families were in retail trade, particularly clothing.

As business opportunities arose during the 1920s and later, new families moved from the Twin Cities to Faribault, but old ones left, so that the town never achieved the necessities for Jewish community formation or maintenance. Without even a *minyan*, public religious life was nonexistent, but still, assimilation did not occur. Kosher meat was sent to Faribault from the Twin Cities, as it was to other towns in southern Minnesota, for only Mankato was able to employ a ritual slaughterer for very long. Gradually, all but the Schochets abandoned keeping kosher. Faribault's Jews went to the Twin Cities or to Austin for religious services; several families joined Minneapolis congregations and stayed with relatives for the High Holidays. The Passover Seder (a ritual meal and prayer service customarily held in the home) was usually spent with other Jews in Faribault.¹³

The few families showed a great deal of determina-

tions for Naturalization, Rice County, 1900–20, MHS; R. L. Polk & Co.'s *Rice County Directory* for the years 1907–1915. Schochet does not know why his father moved to Faribault. (The name Schochet indicates that some ancestor was a ritual slaughterer.)

¹² Here and two paragraphs below, see Schochet interview; author's interview with Razelle Himmelstein Yager and Koppel Hallock, St. Paul, Oct., 1985.

¹³ Levy interview; U.S., manuscript census, 1900, Blue Earth Co., city of Mankato, ED 19, p. 2B, 3B; manuscript census, 1910, ED 17, p. 7A, ED 19, p. 10B, 11B, 13A, ED 20, p. 6A, 7B, ED 24, p. 6B.

tion in providing a Jewish education for their children, although there were never enough students of similar ages to support a religious teacher. Between 1910 and 1920, for example, Philip's son, Nahman, was taught by his maternal great-grandfather, who prayed with the boy twice daily and taught him other elements of Jewish ritual. Before and during the early part of World War II, Faribault's few Jewish children took the bus to the Twin Cities on Saturday (although Jewish law forbids travel on the Sabbath), slept at relatives' houses, attended synagogue schools on Sunday morning, and were picked up after Sunday school by their parents. Contacts with relatives were maintained and deepened by this dependency.

After the war a new pattern developed. Increased automobile use and better roads meant that families could own a business in Faribault and raise their families in the Twin Cities. At least two men in Faribault did so in order to ensure a Jewish environment for their families and education for their children. (At least two Northfield businessmen commuted for the same reason.) In some sense, then, the proximity of Faribault to the Twin Cities worked to discourage the development of a viable small-town Jewish community; the greatest deterrent, however, was demographic. The town had a total population of 16,028 in 1950—but only four Jewish households. Apparently, the economic opportunities in the town did not attract Jews to Faribault.

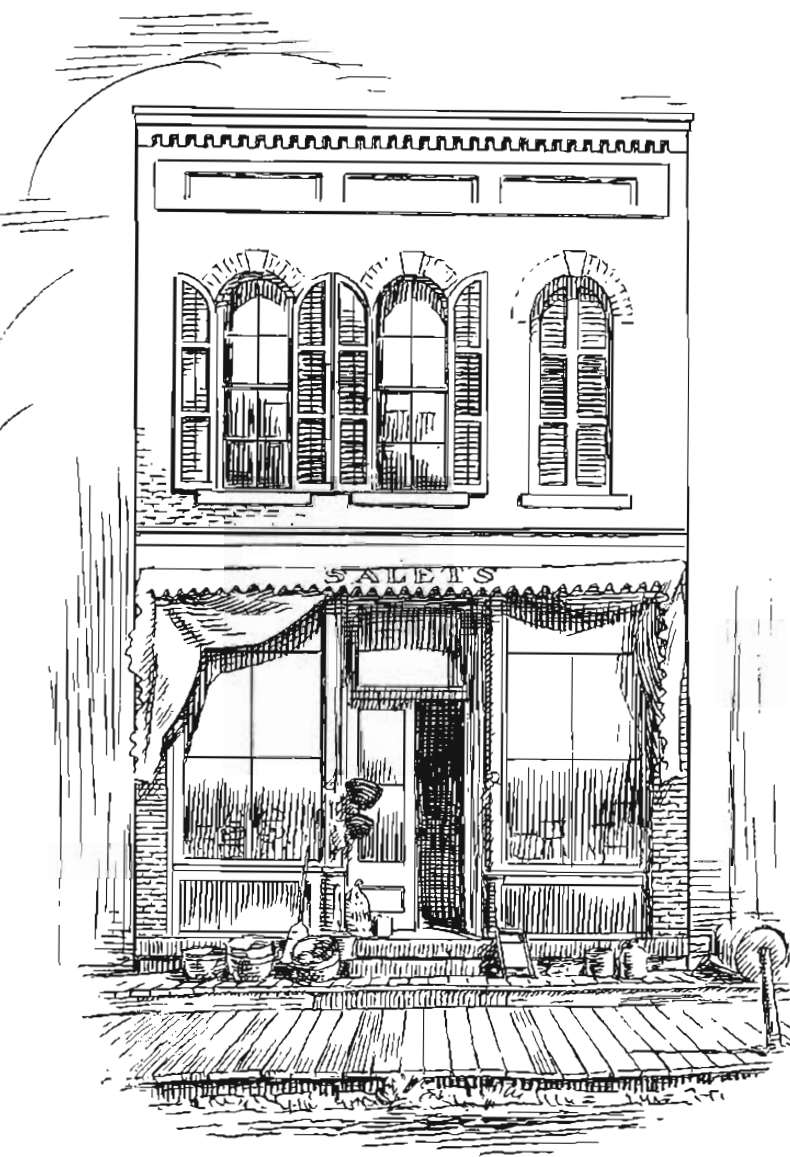
BOTH proximity to the Twin Cities and the size and economic vitality of a town had some role in determining the viability of Jewish religious life as expressed there. The history of the Mankato Jewish community highlights the importance of a third factor: generational structure. The 1900 United States manuscript census listed 14 Eastern European Jewish residents in Mankato, grouped into three families and one boarder. This tally included Leon Salet, his wife, Annie, their two children, and Annie's brother, Oscar Tenzer, who was a clerk in Leon's store; the other two heads of families were peddlers. By 1910 there were 55 individuals—13 families and four single men. There were seven clothing merchants and 17 peddlers or junk dealers; it is difficult to separate the latter two occupations, because one could be a peddling junk dealer trading new pans for old iron, for example, as Israel Waterman's father did in the outlying Albert Lea farm area. During Salet's early years in Mankato, he not only peddled yard goods and clothing, but also collected rags and rubber for resale.¹⁴

Of special significance in the 1910 census is the presence of a Jewish functionary, Theodore Wolf, a butcher. He was a *landsman* of Salet, and his father had attended *cheder* (Hebrew school) with Salet in Russia. Salet recruited him from New Jersey to be the



LOUIS SALET (right) and unidentified friends behind his original store. Mankato

SALET'S, about 1896



schochet and religious leader. Wolf led services, performed kosher slaughtering, taught children, and supplemented his income by clerking in Salet's store. He is said to have married Jewish couples all over southwest Minnesota and northwest Iowa.¹⁵

Just as Mankato was a marketing and distributing center for goods, so it became a center of Jewish life for neighboring towns such as Lake Crystal, Winnebago, Belle Plaine, Sleepy Eye, New Ulm, and Le Sueur. Salet owned a Torah, which enabled Mankato Jews to hold complete religious services, under Wolf's aegis. Jews came to Mankato and rented rooms or stayed with co-religionists in order to attend the High Holiday observances, conducted in the rented second-floor meeting rooms of a fraternal organization. During the rest of the year services were held in private homes.¹⁶

In either 1917 or 1918, however, Wolf moved to Sheldon, Iowa. According to his niece and son, he decided he would never make a respectable living unless he owned his own business. With Salet's help, Wolf and his brother, who had also clerked for Salet, bought a clothing and dry goods store in Sheldon; later, they expanded to Worthington, Minnesota, and then proceeded to amass a series of stores in southern Minnesota and northern Iowa, always placing relatives in charge. Also in 1917 Leon Salet moved to St. Paul, presumably taking his Torah with him. It is not in Mankato.¹⁷

Since there was no *schochet* in Mankato after Wolf left, residents purchased meat from a kosher butcher in St. Paul. Its arrival by train did nothing for aroma or taste; as one purchaser remembered, "It was only fit for burying." Refrigerated railroad cars were in use by the 1920s, but apparently not for kosher meat. Even if they had been available, the following anecdote illustrates the difficulties of keeping the religious injunction to eat kosher meat. According to D. Thomas Bergen of New York, his grandfather was superintendent of mails in Albert Lea during the late 1920s. One day a package of kosher meat addressed to Mier Wolf, a furniture dealer, came by special delivery to the post office. "My grandfather immediately dispatched William [his son] to deliver it. . . . My uncle Bill rapped loudly on the apartment building Mr. Wolf owned, but there was no

¹⁵ Telephone interviews of Paul Wolf, Sept. 9, 1985, Rhoda Wolf Mains, Sept. 7, 1985, May 2, 1987, and Eva Levy, May 1, 1987; *R. L. Polk & Co.'s Mankato City and Blue Earth County Directory, 1916-1917*. Wolf's credentials are not totally clear; according to his son (now deceased), he was an ordained rabbi, but according to his niece he was a *schochet* and *mohel* only.

¹⁶ Thomas Longley interviews of Sam Kantor, Minneapolis, Feb. 10, Mar. 14, 1983, and Adeline Fremland, St. Paul, Sept. 7, 1985.

¹⁷ It is possible that Salet donated his Torah to Temple of Aaron, the congregation he joined in St. Paul.

response, so he left the package at the door. It turned out that Mr. Wolf had gone to Holy Day service in Mason City, Iowa. By the time Mr. Wolf returned, the meat was kosher in spirit only. My uncle recalls being severely reprimanded by his father." As a result of these difficulties, fewer and fewer families kept kosher over the decades.¹⁸

Nevertheless, religious life did not stop, although it lacked the depth and focus that key men like Salet or Wolf had provided. High Holiday services continued for the better part of the 1920s. A rabbi was hired for the two-week holiday period, and the network of extended family and *landsleit* in smaller towns continued to converge on Mankato. (Presumably the hired rabbi brought a Torah with him.) Around the beginning of the Great Depression, however, High Holiday services ceased and weekly Sabbath services continued only if some male insisted on maintaining this ritual; should that person depart, the services terminated. As time went on, most business owners responded to the pressure to keep their stores open on Saturdays. Once-a-year memorial services for dead parents, however, continued to be held.¹⁹

The townspeople employed several men during the 1930s who instructed children and sometimes also led services, but the teachers rarely stayed more than six months, and religious instruction suffered accordingly. One man remembered a relative of his mother coming to Mankato from Minneapolis in order to prepare him for his bar mitzvah which took place in Mason City, his father's hometown. Although the number of families in the Jewish community stayed approximately the same between 1930 and 1955, there do not seem to have been many children born. Several families were childless, and the generation span was quite large, so large that one man born in 1935, for example, remembered no other Jewish children near his age. Having a sizable younger generation might have compelled—or enabled—the community to establish religious institutions in town. As it was, however, the relative lack of youths weakened community cohesion, for older members continued their allegiance to their Iowa or Twin Cities synagogues. Jewish holidays that were celebrated at home, however, continued to be observed. Several families joined for the Passover Seder meal, but the Friday night meal and ritual that begins the Sabbath were often subordinated to high-school sports.²⁰

¹⁸ Fremland interview; D. Thomas Bergen to the author, May 20, 1986.

¹⁹ Interview of Louis Kitsis, Mankato, July 29, 1985.

²⁰ Interview of Arlen Kitsis, St. Paul, Sept., 1985.

²¹ Louis Kitsis interview.

²² *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1971), 1391; interviews of the Fellers, Dec. 5, 1986, and the Zeilingolds, Nov. 23, 1986—both St. Paul.

Jews seemed to have compensated for the lack of a formal religious structure by shifting from religious to ethnic association. A chapter of B'nai B'rith, the national men's Jewish fraternal organization, was begun in Mankato in 1934, as was a women's auxiliary. As religious services had done, the organizations drew from a multicounty area. Another way Mankato Jews expressed their heritage was by explaining and interpreting it to Christian groups. After World War II, for example, businessman Louis Kitsis made a mission of explaining Jewish holidays in public schools, churches, and at Mankato State College.²¹

A trickle of new families continued to sustain the sparse Mankato Jewish community, and during the 1960s, the number of children in Mankato and the surrounding area was finally large enough to justify hiring a Jewish teacher. The community found an unusual source. Rabbi Moshe Feller had been sent to Minnesota from New York City in order to spread the tenets of the Lubavich Hasidic movement, which emphasizes mass enthusiasm, close-knit groups, cohesion, and charismatic leadership. "The philosophy of the Lubavich movement," Feller explained, "is to reach out to every Jew and reignite the sparks of Jewishness." Between roughly 1962 and 1970 first Rabbi Feller and his wife, Mindelle, and then Rabbi Asher Zeilingold and his wife, Sema, traveled weekly to Mankato and to Austin and Albert Lea in order to reignite or teach children and adults Jewish religious law and custom. They also tried to spend a portion of major religious holidays in these communities. Although some community members were uncomfortable with the strictness of Lubavich doctrine, as a whole they were grateful for the efforts of the emissaries.²²

One source of newcomers was Jewish professionals joining the Mankato State College faculty. Most notable among them were Harold and Maxine Slobof who, unlike some who wished to remain unaffiliated, energetically sought to create the sort of cohesive Jewish community they had known in Muncie, Indiana. They built a *sukkah* (booth or hut) for the Feast of Tabernacles, and they invited the entire Jewish community. They instituted Hanukkah and Purim parties on those holidays. They even began hosting a community Seder during Passover, an idea that grew out of the Seder that Louis Kitsis had led at the Catholic-sponsored Newman Center on the campus for many years before the Slobofs arrived. (Their first Seder drew 30 or 40 people, probably because of the large number of Iranian Jews enrolled that year. As an annual event, however, it was contingent on having a large—and interested—enough Jewish student population.) Maxine Slobof organized a chapter of Hadassah, a women's Zionist organization that raises funds for social services in Israel. The group drew members from New Ulm, Fairmont, and Janes-

ville as well as Mankato. Finally, the Slobofs began a Sunday school, but the old problems of few children and a large age span soon defeated the efforts of the mothers and teacher. Wanting more involvement with a Jewish religious and cultural community than Mankato could offer, the family eventually followed Leon Salet's example and moved to St. Paul. Harold Slobof commutes to Mankato. The town had lost another key family.²¹

THE IMPORTANCE of key people is well illustrated in the history of the Austin and Albert Lea communities, which usually functioned as a religious and cultural unit. In the 1900 census both Austin and Albert Lea showed the same picture of occupational structure as Mankato. Both Austin's Jewish population of 46 and Albert Lea's of 11 held a large proportion of single men: 30 percent and 80 percent, respectively. In both instances the majority were classified as junk dealers/peddlers. By 1910 the census figures listed 36 Russian Jews in Austin, only 21 percent of them single men. The proportion dropped to less than one percent of the 26 Jews in Albert Lea, which in 1910 had only three itinerant junk dealers/peddlers, none of whom appeared on the 1900 census. After 1910 the peddlers disappeared and each town was left with two or three scrap metal businesses apiece, all owned by Jews. The occupations of the towns' Jews during the 1920s was ordinary enough for southern Minnesota: one or two junkyard owners and several clothing merchants per town who often owned stores elsewhere in the region. In succeeding decades these people were augmented by other entrepreneurs. The number of families in each town climbed slowly as the decades passed; by 1955 the com-

bined total of 35 was more than double that of Mankato.²⁴

The Jews of Austin and Albert Lea overcame the problems of sparsity by banding together for High Holiday services. By 1920 one man owned a Torah. The owner of a furniture store had a cabinet fashioned for it, and this Torah, like the biblical ark in the desert, traveled from Austin to Albert Lea, where holiday observances were held in alternate years. As in Mankato, a rented fraternal hall housed the services, and families came to worship from nearby towns such as Wells, LeRoy, and Lyle.²⁵

Many other similarities to the Mankato Jewish community existed. The men of Austin and Albert Lea felt obligated to work all Saturday; therefore, Sabbath services were not held on Saturday mornings. Friday-night Sabbath meals were often hurried because of

²¹ Interviews of the Slobofs, Oct. 30, 1986, May 1, 1987. The Slobofs arrived in 1973. The teacher, Ursula Sklan, had trained at a Jewish teachers college in Chicago; her husband was a psychiatrist at St. Peter State Hospital. The *sukkah* symbolizes the temporary dwellings of the Jews during their wanderings after the exodus from Egypt; over the centuries the holiday has been transformed to a harvest festival.

²⁴ U.S., manuscript census, 1900, Freeborn Co., city of Austin, ED 81, p. 2A, 1B, 6B, 9A, 10A, 13B, and Albert Lea, ED 41, p. 3B, ED 42, p. 3A, 18B; manuscript census, 1910, Austin, ED 79, p. 11A, 11B, 23B, and Albert Lea, ED 40, p. 4B, 18B, ED 41, p. 4B, 19A, 20B; *R. L. Polk & Co.'s Albert Lea and Freeborn County Directory* and *Polk's Austin City and Mower County Directory*, for the years 1910-55.

²⁵ Here and below, see Upin interview; interviews of Mr. and Mrs. Melvin Gordon and Mr. and Mrs. Israel Waterman, Albert Lea, Sept. 12, 1985, and Elliot Dubinsky, Minneapolis, Oct. 12, 1985.

USEM and Overbook families at a bar mitzvah, VFW hall, Austin, 1960; traveling ark is in the background.





ORDERLY INTERIOR of St. Paul Clothiers, Albert Lea, about 1925

high-school sports, and families in Austin and Albert Lea celebrated Passover with other families in town rather than traveling to their parents' homes elsewhere. Again, kosher meat came from the Twin Cities or Iowa by train for those who insisted, and again the problem of keeping it fresh was never solved. At best a *schochet* visited the two towns to slaughter fowl before the High Holidays. As in Faribault as well as Mankato, no adequate religious instruction for the children was available through the 1930s. Parents often sent their boys to the Twin Cities to live with relatives in order to prepare for bar mitzvah or paid an itinerant teacher to live and teach in town for a few months. These solutions proved unsatisfactory learning experiences for children and frustrating to parents. In Austin-Albert Lea as elsewhere, different decades brought different solutions to the problems faced by Jews: their children's education, keeping kosher, holding religious services, and maintaining ethnic organizations.

Each town, however, possessed a key man, whose presence served to hold the religious community together. Edward G. Usem was born in Russia. In 1915, when he was in his early teens, the family emigrated to Austin. His father had been a junk dealer, but Usem became the owner of an automobile agency and a community leader, involved in numerous civic and fraternal



EDWARD G.
USEM,
1960s

organizations. In 1967 he was named the outstanding citizen of Austin. Usem was also the leader of the Jewish community. He was able to prepare boys for bar mitzvah because he knew the special cantillations; he was cantor at the High Holiday services for decades; and he opened his agency rooms to all Jewish community activities. Because of his presence, High Holiday services were held solely in Austin from the mid-1930s until his death in 1972.²⁶

²⁶ Interview of Paula Usem Sherman, Minneapolis, May 3, 1987; *Austin Daily Herald*, Dec. 16, 1972, p. 1.

Albert Lea's Jewish leader was Charles J. Upin, owner of the St. Paul Clothiers. After working in Chipewewa Falls and serving in the United States Navy, he had moved to Albert Lea in 1921 to open a clothing store. An active member of the general community, Upin was elected to the school board, serving for 12 years. At his death in 1984 he left money to the Albert Lea public library to buy books that would foster religious understanding. Upin was also interested in fostering Jewish cohesion. By 1939 he had started a B'nai B'rith chapter in the Austin-Albert Lea area, and he also appointed himself the fund collector for Jewish causes. Furthermore, he was a board member of Temple of Aaron in St. Paul. Upin was a deeply religious Jew who prayed every morning. He created a small chapel in his basement where he kept a Torah and prayer books. Services and B'nai B'rith meetings were held there.²⁷

After World War II several second-generation Jews returned to Austin and Albert Lea following college and military service, married, and began to raise families during the same decade. These families were joined by newcomers, attracted by the towns' growth. During the 1950s an enthusiastic cadre of mothers began a section of the National Council of Jewish Women, which, like B'nai B'rith, drew members from all of southern Minnesota. (The NCJW, a national organization founded in 1893, is dedicated to education, service, and social action.) The adults celebrated Jewish (and non-Jewish) holidays together, often using Usem's auto agency or Upin's basement as a meeting place. The adults planned community festivities for major Jewish holidays such as Passover, Succot, and Purim, which

had previously been family based. For several years the Austin Jewish community held a special Seder with members of St. Edward's Catholic Church. During the early 1960s, the Austin community also held Friday evening services, and members rotated the job of leading prayer service and preparing sermons.²⁸

During the 1950s and 1960s the communities finally had enough children of the same age to plan rationally for their religious instruction. Parents hired two instructors from the Twin Cities who drove south together, each teaching the children of one town for half a day. In addition, a newcomer who moved to Albert Lea in 1950 proved to be an unexpected gift. Bertram Cooper, an accountant, had attended rabbinical school in his native New York City and was able to teach boys and girls how to read Torah, thus preparing them for bar and finally bat mitzvah (induction of females, aged 13, into full religious participation).²⁹

The two towns seized all opportunities to teach

²⁷ Upin interview.

²⁸ Gordon interview; telephone interviews of Bertram Cooper, St. Paul, Dec. 18, 1986, Donna Robbins, St. Paul, May 1, 1987. Ecumenical Seders are a vehicle for teaching Christians about Judaism and underscoring that the two groups share an ancient heritage.

²⁹ Here and below, see Gordon and Cooper interviews; others interviewed for this study corroborated this information. See also *Ocean County Daily Times*, Sept. 6[?], 1974, undated, unpagged photocopy in author's possession. Bat mitzvah is a more recent ceremony which, in Reform and many Conservative synagogues, admits women, at age 13, into full participation in religious worship. It is the feminine equivalent of the bar mitzvah.



OFFICERS of the Austin-Albert Lea chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women, 1950s



COMMUNITY Seder with the Gendler, Upin, and Cooper families, Albert Lea, about 1950

their children. Some instructors, like Cooper and Dr. Nathan Camm of Austin, an optometrist, lived in their midst. Others, like the Lubavichers, commuted. In the 1970s young people went to Rochester for religious instruction. One measure of the success of these efforts is the fact that one young man, schooled in the community, taught Hebrew school in Minneapolis, another is presently a synagogue youth director, and a young woman became a rabbi.

JEWISH TEACHERS and rabbis do not move back to small towns, especially towns without synagogues and, increasingly, without Jews. Since the 1950s, all of the Jewish communities described have decreased in size, as more and more children became professionals and chose not to return to run family businesses. Their parents discontinued hometown religious services during the 1970s to join their grown children in the Twin Cities for Jewish holidays. The Austin and Albert Lea community is graying, and its members are retiring to areas such as Miami or Palm Springs, areas with large Jewish populations. Cooper now leads High Holiday services in Mason City, because that once-thriving Jewish community has shrunk so much that it can no longer afford a full-time, ordained rabbi.

It appears evident that several factors were necessary for the success of a small Jewish community. First and most important is numbers. At least ten adult males are required to hold a complete prayer service; realistically, three to five times that number is probably necessary in order to summon ten on a given occasion. Thus, the Jewish communities described were always

only marginally functional. At its peak in 1955, Austin-Albert Lea, the largest and most successful community, had about 35 families. The history of the Jews in southern Minnesota shows that the Jewish population increased significantly only when the town offered economic opportunities that Jews felt comfortable filling. After World War II Austin and Albert Lea attracted more Jews than Mankato; by the 1980s Rochester, because of the Mayo Clinic, was the only small town to draw sizable numbers.

A second factor was creativity and accommodation in adapting to circumstances. Small Jewish communities bolstered their size by drawing from still smaller nearby settlements. This was a creative response but no substitute for a fully interactive Jewish environment. A more successful innovation was the community holiday celebrations begun in Mankato and Austin-Albert Lea during the 1950s and 1960s.

None of the communities felt able to afford a synagogue or burial ground, and each was only able to hire religious leaders for short periods of time. Yet all worked out some solution to the problems caused by isolation from major centers of Jewish life. Residents either transported to their towns what they needed—rabbi, teacher, *mohel*, or kosher meat—or they traveled to larger regional centers for marriage, religious training, bar mitzvah, or burial. They made accommodations in burial practices. Although visitation at a funeral home is not practiced in Judaism, many Jewish small-town funerals included this common Christian ritual, followed the next day by a procession to a town with a synagogue and Jewish cemetery for a religious service and burial.

Another form of accommodation entailed giving up practices that Jews found to be unworkable in small towns. Most eventually forsook keeping kosher and did not observe the Sabbath with a day of rest and prayer. A solution reached by some families in Faribault illuminates the dilemma posed by accommodation. These families decided that the need to educate their children in Judaism was more important than a strict observance of its dictates. They violated the proscription against travel on the Sabbath in order to send their children by bus to the Twin Cities so they could attend a Jewish Sunday school. Finally, the substitution of ethnic organizations for prayer services can be seen as an accommodation to an environment lacking the reinforcement or support offered by formal religious institutions, buildings, and personnel.

A third factor necessary for sustaining community is the presence of key individuals and symbols, such as the Torah, to ensure that some degree of religious life was maintained. In retrospect, the departure of Wolf and Salet from Mankato was a tragedy. For decades no one else in the community had a similar interest in

making Mankato a center of Jewish life. Others who had the energy, such as Louis Kitsis, had family ties to Iowa or the Twin Cities Jewish communities. The Jewish academics, such as the Slobofs, encountered a gray-ing community that may have felt that the newcomers were transient. Beginning a Hadassah chapter was a great achievement given the sparse numbers, and the community holiday celebrations were commendable, but they were not enough. A strong religious element was lacking, and gradually the Jewish newcomers to Mankato shifted their loyalties to Twin Cities congregations.³⁰

It seems probable that the loss of a Torah, a great symbol of religious continuity, might cause a community to lose heart and despair of a future. Mankato retained between 14 and 18 Jewish families for almost 50 years, although those figures may disguise a rapid turnover of families. Despite its fairly stable Jewish population, Mankato's services were discontinued earlier than in Austin-Albert Lea. The families living in nearby counties could have continued coming to Mankato for the High Holidays, but in the absence of committed leaders and a Torah they did not. It was easier to transfer allegiance to Twin Cities synagogues and rely on professional leadership.

In Austin and Albert Lea both leaders and Torah remained. Usem and Upin each lived in their towns for over half a century, and after World War II were joined by a new leader. The role of the young, post-World War II adults in evolving new forms for celebrating Judaism cannot be underestimated. In spite of their small numbers, they succeeded in creating a joyous religious community for their children.

Finally, the role of children as a focal point for the community was critical. Although the elders and the Torah are symbols of religious continuity, the children *are* the future in the flesh. Educating them so that they could take their place in the adult religious community was a thorny problem, never easily solved. Faribault and Mankato never had enough youths at a time to plan a rational educational approach. Austin and Albert Lea shared this vexing problem until after World War II. It was because of the children that the community celebrations began, and when the children left for

college the celebration was over. The economic success of the parents and their success in making Judaism vital to their children ensured that they would not move back. They became professionals rather than merchants, and most wanted a larger Jewish community for *their* children—one that would not have to depend on a single leader.

It is difficult and may seem arbitrary to talk of success in one community and lack of success in another, for personal needs were met in many settings. It does seem, however, that Austin and Albert Lea, by combining, offered an unbroken community leadership that ministered to both religious and cultural needs of the adults and the children.

THE JEWS of southern Minnesota were never independent of the Twin Cities or Iowa Jewish communities; nevertheless, they struggled hard to maintain their religious traditions and educate their children at home. Their children's religious and ethnic education continued, in a sense, through college, for most were sent to the University of Minnesota, were encouraged to join Jewish sororities and fraternities, and were expected to find Jewish spouses. The message given by parents to children about returning to their towns of birth was an ambivalent one at best.

Overcoming geography has taken on a new meaning. It first meant establishing semi-independent Jewish communities despite geographical separation from centers with a large Jewish population. It now means traveling the one hundred or so miles to the Twin Cities and using the resources of the large Jewish community located there. The ark will no longer travel between Austin and Albert Lea.

³⁰ History often defies neat periodization or facile conclusions. According to the Slobofs the Mankato Jewish community in 1987 had more than a dozen youngsters. Their parents hired a teacher, an Israeli, who traveled to Mankato bi-monthly to instruct children and lead adult discussions.

THE PICTURES on p. 2 and 8 (bottom) are from the Southern Minnesota Historical Center; p. 11 (bottom) and p. 14 were made available by the MHS newspaper microfilming project; p. 5 is in the MHS collections; copies of all others were donated to the MHS by the families.





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