

The Jewish experience in East Tennessee since the Civil War started described

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of June 10, 2024)

It wasn't planned that way originally when Wendy Besmann was scheduled to speak in May in Oak Ridge on "From Peddlers to Ph.D.'s – The Jewish Experience in East Tennessee" for the local "Our American Roots: Exploration of Cultures" series. As it turned out, according to Bonnie Carroll, the American Roots committee treasurer who introduced her, May is Jewish American Heritage Month in celebration of American Jews' achievements and contributions in the United States.

Besmann, author of the award-winning book "A Separate Circle: Jewish Life in Knoxville, Tennessee" (University of Tennessee Press), spoke on the regional and national achievements and contributions of Jewish immigrants and their descendants in Knoxville and Oak Ridge from the Civil War through most of the 20th century.

Carroll said that about 2.4% of the U.S. adult population, or 7.6 million people, identify themselves as Jewish by religion and by cultural identity. Tennessee has more than 20,000 Jewish residents, 9,000 of whom live in East Tennessee. Carolyn Krause provides a two-part series summarizing Besmann's talk, with some additional information, on a history of Jews in Knoxville and Oak Ridge.

Enjoy learning what I found for me to be little known history.

Jews from Germany and later Eastern Europe immigrated to the United States in large numbers after the Civil War. Many of the immigrants and their descendants who identified as Jewish were strong adherents of the beliefs, rituals and traditions of Judaism, one of the three great monotheistic religions. However, Wendy Besmann noted, "Many people born Jewish became atheists and agnostics. Some Jews have called themselves cardiac Jews because they're Jews in their heart, or they have called themselves gourmet Jews because they like Jewish food.

"What draws us together? The best that I could say, and I'm not the first to say it, is that we're a tribe because we identify together around certain religious and cultural values even though we are very different. There are probably twice as many Jewish people who don't affiliate with synagogues as do. There's a saying that anytime you have two Jews, you have three opinions."

The other major point she made is that Jews in East Tennessee, as well as many other parts of the world, have experienced "a swinging door between opportunity and exclusion." A door opens to offer Jews' opportunities for financial and professional success. The door closes on them at times, denying them access to power and admission to leagues, auxiliaries, boards and country clubs that have long been dominated by Christian white folks. The Jews would go to a place, get settled and prosper, and "then they would get kicked out," Besmann said.

In the 20th century when anti-immigrant sentiment set in and the U.S. government decided to cut off immigration of large numbers of Jews, they experienced social exclusion – what is sometimes called genteel antisemitism. Besmann said that Jews, Christians and others during some periods "did business great together and loved each other regardless of their religion and culture. There was a whole lot of harmony. After 5 o'clock, everybody went their separate ways, and the Jews were not socially acceptable" in organizations meeting in the evenings. The Southern Jewish writer Eli Evans called this phenomenon "the 5 o'clock shadow."

Besmann focused on the cyclical history of the Jews in Knoxville after noting that the first Jews that settled in North America arrived in 1656. They were descendants of the Sephardic Jews that were expelled from Spain in 1492. Tens of thousands of them came but none settled in East Tennessee. Some seven families of Alsatian Jews moved to Knoxville about the time of the Civil War. They came from Alsace-Lorraine because they lost all their rights and suffered antisemitic violence when the occupying nation switched from France to Germany.

According to Wikipedia, more than five million Catholics, Protestants, Jews and other people left Germany for the U.S. during the 19th century because of limited political rights and lack of land and well-paying jobs as the German population burgeoned. Most immigrants came because the U.S. offered greater economic opportunity and freedom from government regulation.

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During the Civil War, German Jews migrated to Knoxville and started businesses. Many of the merchants formed the Knoxville Hebrew Benevolent Association in 1864 to take care of the sick and indigent and to support widows and orphans. It bought a small cemetery from a merchant for \$1 because the Jewish rights of burial were very important. The first two Jewish soldiers buried there had fought on different sides. "Knoxville was highly fought over, and it kept changing hands between the Union side and the Confederate side," Besmann said.

The German Jews, she added, started a school to educate children in their Jewish identity, rituals and Hebrew language. In 1864 they built a synagogue, which hadn't been the highest priority because Jews believe they can pray anywhere – with or without a synagogue and rabbi.

Emanuel Samuel, a Pennsylvania resident with Confederate sympathies, had himself smuggled to Knoxville in the early 1860s by hiding under the hay on a wagon headed south. He intended to set up a business selling dry goods but ended up selling blankets to both Confederate and Union supporters.

He became one of the founders of Temple Beth-El (originally called the Knoxville Hebrew Benevolent Association). It was in the reform (progressive) tradition because the Jewish congregation was willing to let go certain observances and dietary traditions so they could fit in better with the surrounding Christian community. Temple Beth-El (House of God) of Knoxville, which has existed for 160 years, is the oldest Jewish congregation in East Tennessee.

After the Civil War, Knoxville became a boomtown. "It doubled in size in just a decade and kept growing up to World War I," Besmann said. "This was a time of great opportunity for Jews who wanted to start a business." They opened and ran a huge number of theaters and saloons, as well as stores that sold meat, dry goods and other products.

The Eastern European Jews were the next wave of Jews that arrived in East Tennessee. They came around 1890 seeking freedom and economic opportunity after being driven from Hungary, Poland, Russia, Ukraine and other countries. "The German Jews were horrified because these Jews were poor, had weird habits and dressed in a funny way," Besmann said. "The German Jews wanted the Eastern European Jews to either become All-American or leave town." Even so, she added, because of their culture, the German Jews supported different organizations and businesses that helped Eastern European Jews get settled and set up their own businesses.

In 1890 in Knoxville, some Eastern European Jews built a humble, house-like place to worship known as the city's first Heska Amuna Synagogue, which is now in a larger building on Kingston Pike. In this conservative synagogue whose name means "strongholders of the faith," the Jews worshiped on Saturday, wore yarmulkes and prayer shawls, had bar mitzvahs and taught their children Hebrew. The Reform Jews of the older Temple Beth-El had dispensed with these practices so they could better assimilate into the mainstream Knoxville community. The city had two different Jewish "tribes" for awhile – the Temple Jews and the Synagogue Jews.

Many of the first Eastern European Jews to migrate to the Knoxville area starting in the 1880s were peddlers, people encouraged to sell small items in the countryside that they obtained from the Baltimore Bargain House and transported south by horse and wagon or by train. The Maryland business for using Jewish immigrants to sell merchandise to farmers and other potential buyers in the Southeast was modeled after the Industrial Removal Organization. It consisted of German Jewish businessmen in different parts of the country who "agreed to sponsor Eastern European Jews to get them out of New York and settled around the country, where they could learn to speak the English language," Besmann said.

M.B. (Max) Arnstein, who worked at the Baltimore Bargain House, convinced Sam Levine to go to Knoxville. Arnstein "fixed him up with a pack of merchandise and a horse and a wagon," Besmann said, citing one of about 100 taped interviews with now-deceased merchants made by her friend Barbara Bernstein and Natalie Robinson (these interviews were among her book's sources along with historical documents). Levine let his horse guide him and his wagon full of pins, needles and threads from Gay Street into the Sevierville countryside where he became a likeable talker who, Besmann said, "sold curtain goods to women who didn't even have a window." Levine later had a cattle business and moved to Knoxville where he became a successful merchant and important synagogue member.

The highly educated and cultured Max and Lila Arnstein later headed to Birmingham to set up a business but ended up settling in Knoxville after being stopped by a blizzard, Besmann said. In 1905-06 he built a seven-story department store overlooking Market Square. This steel-frame skyscraper was the tallest building in Knoxville at the time.

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After the Arnstein company closed in 1934, the new Tennessee Valley Authority leased the building. It's been home to many businesses since then including Whittle Communications (the now-defunct publishing company that Besmann worked for). In 2013 Dewhurst Properties renovated the building, which now houses Urban Outfitters, BarberMcMurray Architects and 20 luxury apartments.

Arnstein, who lived to be 102 years old, became a major supporter of the community before he and Lila considered selling the business and leaving for New York City in the late 1920s because of social exclusion in Knoxville. For example, they helped found the Knoxville Library, but later she wasn't welcome on the library floor. About that time Ben Winick, a Synagogue Jew and son of the Orthodox Rabbi Isaac Winick (who was Barbara Bernstein's father), decided to court Clara Cass, a Temple Jew from a prominent family. "They were like Romeo and Juliet," Besmann said. "It was shocking at first and then okay. They formed a progressive club where all Jewish young adults could gather and do things together. They needed to be with each other because they were less welcome elsewhere."

In 1929 when the Depression started, Arnstein was preparing to sell his department store. Persuaded by Winick, Arnstein, who had become wealthy, bought a building next to Temple Beth El to house what became the Arnstein Jewish Community Center, which has thrived to this day. It became the place where Temple Jews and Synagogue Jews in Knoxville could enjoy educational, cultural and social events together and, as Besmann put it, "circle the wagons in the face of this social exclusion, which lasted for several decades."

Thank you, Carolyn. The second and last article in this series on Besmann's talk will highlight stories about some of the Jews in East Tennessee who had significant local, national, and international influences on 20th century history and are especially important to Oak Ridgers.



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