

Meany, Miny and Mo

By Morris Speizman

The history of the Jews of Charlotte has been affected in small or large measure by three types of Jewish residents — the alienated, the indifferent and the committed. In reaching for a title to this article, a whimsical thought occurred that we might even describe it as "Meany, Miny and Mo." for the Mean, the Minor and the More dedicated types of Jews. It is our intention to first focus on three personalities who delineate in their words and actions the three qualities to which we refer.

In the middle of the 19th century, Jews began to arrive in Charlotte in numbers which made them readily identified as a separate ethnic group. Several of their members served in the War Between the States. They have participated in the life of the community ever since.

One of the best examples of the alienated, self-hating or escapist Jew, was Samuel Wittkowsky. He was a merchant in the late 19th and early 20th century. When approached to donate money for the building of a synagogue, he is reputed to have said that he would be glad to donate money to a fund not to build a synagogue.

He was an active member of the general community and became the first president of what was then known as the Board of Trade. He did everything he could do to assimilate himself and his family into the mainstream of American-Jewish life. At the same time, it is told that he relished the opportunities of speaking in Polish and Yiddish with the wife of Benjamin Silverstein, one of the early 20th century arrivals to our community. The Wittkowsky family has long since disappeared from the scene and those who survived, either in or near Charlotte, are not Jewish and carry the family name of Whitson.

Our Charlotte Jewish community still harbors a number of escapist or "closet Jews", one or two of whom occupy "visible" positions in the life of our city. In addition, there may be about 50 families or individuals who very assiduously separate themselves from

any vestige of Judaism, to the point where they do not permit their names to be listed in the local Hadassah Director, etc.

Next, we will discuss what can be termed the peripheral Jew, or one who can sometimes be characterized as the "cardiac Jew". This is the person with a "good Jewish heart" but wants to have very little to do with the general activities or participate in any way in organized Jewish life in our community. In this respect, the greatest example was "the man who made Charlotte famous" — Harry Golden. While he was an active member of Beth El during its formative years, (he actually authored their Constitution and By-Laws), shortly thereafter, he separated himself from any active day-to-day participation in Jewish communal affairs. His publication, THE CAROLINA ISRAELITE, gave him a wide readership and with the advent of ONLY IN AMERICA, he achieved a position of national and international prominence.

During these years, he would from time to time, make pledges to the Israel Bond Fund, the Federation of Jewish Charities, the two temples and other communal activities, but in all cases, he was a reserved outsider rather than a "willing worker in the vineyard".

Which reminds one of the story of the man who was marrying off his daughter, and came to the rabbi with his plans for the wedding. He wanted the most ornate and expensive affair that he could think of, and in discussing it with the rabbi he said, "And I am going to pledge \$1,000 each to the bridesmaids, \$1,000 each to the groomsmen and \$5,000 to the choir". Then, as an after thought he said, "And, I am going to give you \$50 in cash for your participation in this wonderful affair".

The rabbi looked at him a bit quizzically and said, "Tell me, sir, how come you are pledging all this money to the bridesmaids and others and only giving me \$50 in cash as an

honorarium?" To which the gentleman replied, "Well, rabbi, you know pledges are only pledges, but cash is real money".

Harry Golden had the reputation of being an easy pledger but a very difficult person from whom to collect pledges. Aside from these pleasantries and details, the fact is that Harry Golden left huge "footprints in the sands of time" as far as the Jewish community and the general community of Charlotte is concerned.

So far, we have discussed the self-hating Jew, the peripheral Jew and now, let us dwell for a few moments on the committed Jew.

Above all others, there was I.D. Blumenthal, who exemplified all the virtues of a person totally committed to the welfare of his fellow Jewish citizens and the general community. Elected the first Honorary Life President of Temple Israel, he was also active in the Reform Temple Beth El when it was organized. He was the earliest sponsor of the Kehillah idea for the Charlotte Jewish Community — an idea that has found fruition in the Foundation of the Charlotte Jewish Community, Inc.

He established the Circuit Riding Rabbi program, the Blumenthal Jewish Home for the Aged. He enriched the lives of Jews not only in the Charlotte area but throughout the country and perhaps the world through the establishment of the Wildacres Institute of Adult Jewish Education sponsored by B'nai B'rith. In this latter effort, he was aided (and, in some ways led) by the efforts of Maurice A. Weinstein, a young Charlotte lawyer. Weinstein later became the first National Chairman of the Adult Education Division of B'nai B'rith. Today the Wildacres facility in Little Switzerland, North Carolina is available to a diversity of groups from music retreats to inter-faith gatherings.

We have highlighted three personalities, but these were

not the only men and women whose lives left a distinct imprint on our community. There were so many, that a listing of their names would inevitably overlook some who should be recognized. With this caveat, we mention the following:

In the field of politics, Max Kahn, Arthur Goodman, Sr., Arthur Goodman, Jr., Alfred E. Smith, amongst others, come to mind.

In athletics, Harry L. Schwartz, the Neiman brothers, Lukey Tenner, Wilson Lewish and Al Manch are names that have been in the public press over the years.

Charlotte has been the location from which national and even international leadership in Jewish causes has sprung. In this regard, Maurice A. Weinstein has been Chairman of the International Council of B'nai B'rith. Others of us, including Walker J. Klein and the writer, have received a measure of recognition in communal and lay religious fields.

In the area of philanthropic leadership, the names of Leon Levine, Alvin Levine, Al Segal and, of course, Herman Blumenthal have lifted the level of giving to its present high standard. They are good examples of custodians of the Jewish communal wealth.

Herman Blumenthal, in particular, is to be recognized as the quiet, self-effacing type of philanthropist whose interests stretch into so many areas.

These include not only his Temple affiliations and the Jewish community, but also local and statewide organizations. His benefactions are accompanied by an avid interest in the day-to-day workings of the organizations in which he is involved and indicate the quality of his leadership which has enhanced the life of our community so much.

Finally, any comment on other personalities in connection with the Charlotte Jewish community would be amiss if it didn't include the name of Mark R. Bernstein, a prominent local attorney, who has been the moving spirit in guiding the community towards the fulfillment of the "campus plan" for all the Jewish organizations, at present known as the Foundation of the Charlotte Jewish Community, Inc. He has also served as president of the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra and was elected president of the Symphony Orchestras of America.

As already stated, the purpose of this article was to highlight three personalities, but the life-style and welfare of any community cannot be the result of any three or thirty individuals. There were, and are, many other men and women who by their efforts have made Charlotte what the writer considers a model of truly dedicated communal involvement. It's a good place to live and raise a Jewish family.

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