
ANN ARBOR:

— HOME OF MICHIGAN'S FIRST JEWISH COMMUNITY —



By Emily Rose

Although Michigan's Jewish community does not date back all the way back to the first Jews of the country, its humble beginnings can be traced to Ann Arbor in 1845 when the author's ancestors held Sabbath and holiday services in their home.

The Roots of the Weil Family in the Bohemian Countryside

While most of us know about the rich history of the Jews who lived in Prague, little is written about the Jews who lived in the villages and small towns in the German-speaking lands. In the mid-18th Century, about two-thirds of the 29,000 Jews in Bohemia lived in similar circumstances as the Weils, residing in a village that even now remains much the same, with a road winding up a hill to a Catholic church surrounded by farmland in all directions.

The earliest Weil ancestors mentioned in the family chronicle,¹ Joseph Weil and Fannie Kauder, married in 1798. Between 1820 and 1929, they bore seven sons, two of whom died in infancy. Joseph and Fannie lived in a house in the village of Bohumelitz, or Böhmelitz (now Bohumilice). Joseph was most probably a peddler or trader. In the 1830s, five Jewish families (25 Jews) lived in the village.



The location of the extended Weil family's native village and town in Bohemia (now in the Czech Republic).

There was no Jewish cemetery or synagogue in Bohumelitz. The Weil family belonged to the Jewish community in Skene or Tschkyn (now kyn) which is about one mile north of the village. It would have been a short distance to get there for Sabbath and holiday services.

In the 18th Century, most of the small towns and villages were under the economic and political control of the lesser nobles. In 1748, there were 10 Jewish families living in Skene. Six families traded in wool, linen and feathers; two traded in hides; one sold liquor; and one worked as a painter. The houses owned by the Jews were not clustered around the synagogue but were scattered throughout the town.

When the great synagogue was built in Skene in 1828, there were 151 Jews and 526 Catholics living in the town. The Jewish community supported a rabbi,

cantor, teacher, and caretaker. The synagogue followed the classic style for south German rural synagogues and is thought to be one of the oldest in south Bohemia. Colorful murals with the Lion of Judah and other designs adorned the walls. The Holy Ark for the Torah was painted blue with golden stars. Several Catholic writers of the time commented on the synagogue's great size and beauty.²

The synagogue was unusual in its accommodation for worshipers. Most synagogues were unheated; the congregants wore their coats while low footstools enabled them to keep their feet off the cold floors. The Skene synagogue, however, had an upper winter synagogue with a room heater in the wall and a larger synagogue on the ground floor for the rest of the year. There was a small matzah oven set in the wall, and a Jewish school and an apartment were located in the building as well. The Jewish cemetery was set on a hill overlooking the town and countryside. The oldest identifiable graves date from 1688 and 1700. This was the Jewish community in which Joseph and Fannie Weil brought up their family. Fannie died in 1841 of "brain paralysis" at age 50.³

The Weils in Michigan

Just two years after their mother's death, the first of the Weil young men took the long and arduous journey to America. Solomon immigrated in 1843 at age 23 and began peddling notions. By 1845, he had settled in Ann Arbor, where the population was just over 3,000. He sent for his fiancée, Dora Ratzeck of Skene, and they married in 1847. Ten months later, a mohel was brought from the then-distant city of Cleveland to circumcise their first son.

By 1848 all five brothers had left Bohemia for America. The reasons for their emigration are not known, but the fact that restrictions on Jews in the German-speaking areas were being removed in the 1840s, that no war was imminent and that so many

family members remained in Bohemia would lead to the conclusion that the young men left their homeland for better economic opportunities in America. This is consistent with recent research about Jewish emigration from southern Germany. It was not anti-Jewish persecution or failed liberal idealism, but economics that led to Jewish emigration. The Weil men followed the common practice of Jewish emigration: one son would make the journey and the others



SOLOMON WEIL
(1821-1889)



DORA RATZECK WEIL
(1822-1898)

would then be "pulled over." This was in contrast to the Christian emigrants who usually left as a family to start farming in the New World.

Up to the 1840s, almost all Jews settled on the East Coast. As the frontier moved westward, so did the Jewish immigrants. The Weils traveled to Michigan, which received statehood in 1837. These German-speaking peddlers had one advantage over their fellow Yankee and Jewish peddlers from Russia: German immigrant farmers generally preferred to deal in their native language and to hear news and gossip from home.

Before emigrating, Leopold, the eldest brother, married Rachel Sittig from Skene, and they had two sons. Initially, Leopold and his brother-in-law bought a farm in Lima, a town west of Ann Arbor. Farming was not a pleasurable endeavor, however, and they gave it up after a year because the "familiarity of the savage beast of the forest, added to the utter wildness of the locality, were just too much for them."⁴ In 1845, they moved to Ann Arbor.

Later that year, the first Sabbath and holiday services in Michigan were held in their home.⁵ Leopold served as *hazan* (cantor) and *shochet* (ritual slaughterer). He never asked for remuneration as he felt it was his honor to serve his fellow Jews.

Moses also tried farming in South Lyons Township, north

of Ann Arbor. His experience was not successful either. He and his youngest brother, Marcus, became notions peddlers and then shopkeepers in Pontiac.

The last to emigrate was Jacob. According to the Weil family chronicle, "After his bar-mitzvah, upon the wish of his mother, Jacob went to Prague to study to become a rabbi. He later went to Kaladay, near Budweis, where he studied the Talmud among the great rabbis. From Kaladay, he journeyed to Eperius, where he entered the University of Hungaria. There he took up languages, philosophy, history and mathematics, and graduated with honor." When Jacob joined Moses and Marcus in Pontiac, he utilized his fluency in French to work as an interpreter for the Canadian traders. Jacob also traveled extensively among the Indians, trading furs and skins for supplies. In 1849, the three brothers sold the French Shop in Pontiac and joined Solomon and Leopold in Ann Arbor.



LEOPOLD WEIL
(1820-1894)



RACHEL SITTIG WEIL
(1823-1886)

A Place To Be Remembered

Whenever Jews settled in a new place, their first obligation was to set up a consecrated burial ground. In 1848 or 1849, the Weils and several other Jewish

families in Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti acquired a plot adjacent to the Christian cemetery on Fletcher Street between Huron and Washington. It was bought "for a burying ground for the Jews Society of Ann Arbor." Since the first Jewish cemetery in Detroit was consecrated in December 1850, the historical marker designating this Ann Arbor location as the site of the first Jewish cemetery in Michigan remains correct.⁶

While traveling vast distances in the sparsely populated areas, it was difficult for Jewish immigrant peddlers to fulfill the religious rituals they had once so effortlessly followed. In addition, many new arrivals were lonely and homesick.



HEADSTONE OF
FRANCES WEIL
(1844-1853)

Frances, daughter of Leopold and Rachel, was buried in the Jewish cemetery in 1853.



THE WEIL HOME
AND THE FIRST SYNAGOGUE
(seen at a later date)

Interviews with Jacob Weil recalled that, "Their home became sort of a headquarters for all the way-faring Jews." Jacob remembered that they had "occasional 'round-ups' of these young men that were accompanied by an unlimited amount of fun, seasoned with pardonable amounts of devilry."⁷

In 1850, the Weil men sent for their father, Joseph, and his second wife, Sara Stein of Bohumelitz. According to family lore, Joseph bought a Torah scroll in Prague and carried it in his arms the entire journey to Ann Arbor. Thereafter, holiday services were held in the brick house at the corner of Washington and First Street.

According to the 1850 U.S. Census, the brothers were peddlers and all resided in one household. The first mention of the Weil family in the 1850 R.G. Dun & Company credit rating reports was not overly positive, but typical of how credit representatives evaluated Jewish immigrants. The agent wrote that Solomon and Moses were "Jewish Peddlers, Ages between 35 and 40; have been in this place about 4 years, engaged in peddling throughout the country...they can make money in a small business."⁸

After 13 years in America, Leopold and Solomon bought a tannery in Ann Arbor located at Huron near First Street. A year later, in 1857, their three brothers joined them, forming the partnership of J. Weil & Bros. Jacob, certainly the most educated of the brothers, was chosen as president and Moses as treasurer. In the city directories and on their letterhead, the business was described as "Manufacturers of leather and morocco and dealers in wool and furs."

Immediately, according to the R.G. Dun & Company reports, they were "making money" and "improving." "They have built a large tannery and are doing a good business. They all appear to be money-making men of good ...character and capacity...Their credit is good." The numerous periodic R.G. Dun & Company reports applauded their "business acumen." They prospered in a region that had a large Indian population and important wool and hide trades. Just three years after they bought the tannery, the R.G. Dun & Company reported the brothers' worth as \$50,000, and their business as "one of the most successful firms in the West." By 1861, the tannery employed from 40 to 50 men. Five years later their real estate was worth about \$100,000.

It is not surprising that the family owned houses next to each other. An interesting detail noted in the 1860 U.S. Census was that several of the Weil households employed domestics.

Jacob Weil's university background and oratorical qualities were appreciated outside the family business. He was offered a position as chair of the department of languages at the University of Michigan, but he refused, citing his commitment



JOSEPH WEIL
(1777-1863)



DEBORAH FANTL
(d. 1922)



JACOB WEIL
(1827-1912)

to the family business. He was elected alderman of his ward in 1861 and was nominated as mayor of Ann Arbor.

Joseph, the family patriarch, was also active in the community. He led Washington's Birthday parade in 1861 at age 84. The local newspaper described him as the tallest and most spry participant.

In the 1860s, the family expanded the business. Moses established a new branch of the tannery in Chicago in 1861 and married Theresa Lederer, who came from a town near Prague. Marcus joined Moses in running the Chicago



HEADSTONE OF
ROSA (REILA) GANS WEIL
(1824-1858)

Her beautifully carved headstone was found face down, and thus well-preserved, at the entry of a campus fraternity house at the University of Michigan. The Hebrew inscription on the chiseled headstone read in part:

A noble woman, she feared G-d with all her heart. She did good all her days, a crown of her husband and her children.

tannery and store. Marcus married Bertha Lederer, probably Theresa's sister or cousin. Jacob and his family moved to Newark, N.J. to open another branch of the tannery.

The End of the First Jewish Community

By the early 1870s, the family's assets including tanneries, stores and real estate were worth at least \$300,000. Solomon joined Marcus and Moses in Chicago in 1870, and Leopold followed soon afterwards. While no Weils remained in Ann Arbor, the brothers continued to hold considerable real estate there until at least 1885.

Although none of the brothers explained why they left Ann Arbor, the most obvious reason would have been for improved business opportunities. They also could have wanted to be



MARCUS WEIL
(1829-1889)



MOSES WEIL
(1824-1885)

part of larger Jewish congregations. Perhaps finding Jewish spouses for their many children was an important consideration, certainly an easier task in the larger and growing Jewish communities of Chicago and Newark.

During the 1850s and 1860s, a few other Jewish families lived in Ann Arbor. But, after the Weil family left, only one family remained. It was the family of Charles Fantl, who was from a village near Skene and Jacob's brother-in-law. He ran a dry goods shop until he moved away around 1886. This mass migration was not uncommon during these decades as many small, interrelated and interconnected Jewish communities, which had grown up in the towns, just

disappeared for a few decades or forever.

The motto of the Weil family was In Union is Strength. The five brothers remained in business together for their entire lives. While the phrase is often overused, the Weils really did live the American Dream with the strong values of family and Judaism. In doing so, they were an integral part of the early history of the Jews in Michigan.

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Emily Rose is the author of Portraits of Our Past: Jews of the German Countryside (Jewish Publication Society, 2001), selected by The Jewish Book Council as a 2001-02 National Jewish Book Awards Finalist. She is currently writing the history of nine brothers who immigrated from Prussia to Chicago and founded S. Karpen Bros. Furniture (1880-1952) and became partners in the Bakelite Company.

Footnotes

- ¹ Weil Family Chronicle, 1914 and 1976. Available at Leo Baeck Institute, New York.
- ² Nikola Rychtarikova and Jindra Bromova, www.synagoga-Ckyne.cz. Ehl, Petr, Arno Parik, and Jiř Fiedler. Alte Judenfriedhöfe Böhmens and Mährens. Prague: Paseka, 1991. Jiř Fiedler, Jewish Sights of Bohemia and Moravia. Prague: Sefer, 1991.
- ³ State Archive Prague, HBMA # 261 Čkyně Deaths 1839-1895.
- ⁴ Jacob Weil, in David Heineman, "Jewish Beginnings in Michigan Before 1850," The American Jewish Historical Society Publication 13 (1905), 67 fn53.
- ⁵ A leading expert on Michigan Jewish history, Irving I. Katz, wrote "The first Jewish settlement [in Michigan] did not come into being until the 1840s in Ann Arbor." Irving I. Katz, "Jews in Michigan," Michigan Jewish Family History, 4, No. 3 (Spring 1974), 5-8. According to Katz, the Ann Arbor congregation thus predates the first worship services held by Temple Beth El in Detroit in 1850, but Temple Beth El is the oldest extant Jewish organization in Michigan. Irving I. Katz, The Beth El Story, (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1955), 151.
- ⁶ Helen Aminoff, "The First Jews of Ann Arbor," Jewish Historical Society of Michigan, 1983, 3-14.
- ⁷ Jacob Weil, in David Heineman, "Jewish Beginnings in Michigan before 1850," The American Jewish Historical Society Publication 13 (1905), 67fn53.
- ⁸ Michigan, Vol.77, p.79, 216; Illinois, Vol. 29, p.130, 137, 141, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library, Harvard Business School.