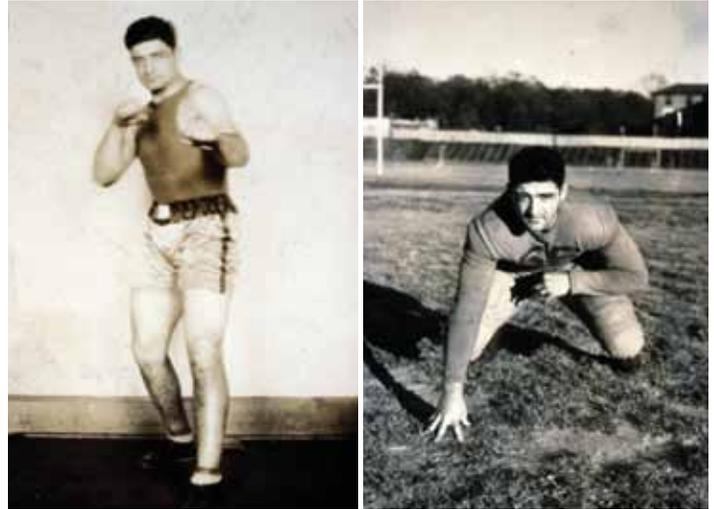


The Jews of Anderson, South Carolina: Merchants and Manufacturers

by Alyssa Neely

The first Jews to settle in Anderson, the Lessers, came from Prussia by way of New York and Georgia and were established in the town well before the Civil War. During the post-war occupation of South Carolina, Michael and Martha Lesser took an injured Union soldier, Oscar Geisberg, an observant Jew who hailed from Vienna, into their home, and in 1871, their daughter, Carrie, married him. It appears that, for Geisberg and the Lessers, a common religious background trumped regional alliances.

Reflecting the national pattern, Anderson's Jews tended to be merchants of one sort or another. The Lessers ran a mercantile store on the main square and a number of their children and grandchildren followed them into the dry goods business. Dora Geisberg, Oscar and Carrie's daughter, owned D. Geisberg's Millinery, a ladies' ready-to-wear shop. Her brother, Harry, operated a shoe store, while his wife, Sadie, offered ladies clothing at The Vogue Shop. Another Geisberg brother, Leo, sold general merchandise. Oscar reputedly tried his hand at storekeeping but was not successful. He was active in civic affairs in his adopted hometown, however, as an organizer of the YMCA and the Board of Trade. In 1878, there were some 17 Jewish residents in Anderson, most or all of whom were members of the Lesser and Geisberg families.



Reuben Siegel played football and boxed for Clemson University, ca. 1930. Photos courtesy of Paul Siegel.

As the area's economic base shifted from agriculture to a combination of farming and manufacturing, the face of the Jewish community changed. Among the influx of Eastern European immigrants in the first decade of the 20th century were the Fleishman and Siegel families. Sam Fleishman was one of nine brothers who fanned out across southern North Carolina and northern South Carolina and established as many as 15 general merchandise stores. He opened his Anderson store in 1906 and soon was joined by his 12-year-old nephew, Nathan, who, two decades later, would succeed him in the business, Fleishman's "Outfitter from Head to Foot for Men, Women, and Children."

Max Siegel left Russia just after 1900 and settled in New York's Lower East Side. Unhappy with the cold winters and the big city atmosphere, he boarded a train headed south in 1908. His money took him as far as Anderson where he peddled first and later established a livestock business, supplying meat to local markets and Clemson College.

Max's company thrived, enabling him not only to survive the Great Depression, but to provide assistance to the municipality. When the mayor and the city council approached him for help meeting the city's payroll, he loaned them \$50,000. He also was affluent enough to acquire the Anderson country club which, ironically, did not admit Jews. One year later he sold it to the city for the same price he paid, but when the city fathers offered him membership, he declined. Max's son, Sam,



Left to right: Sadie, Minnie, and Julia Cohen, Elberton, GA, 1904. Sadie moved to Anderson in 1914 when she married Harry Geisberg. Her daughter, Caroline, married Louis Funkenstein. Photo courtesy of Louis and Caroline Funkenstein.

recalled in a 1996 interview, “My father told them, ‘Nope, if the Jewish people can’t be a member, I don’t want to be a member.’”

Born in 1915, Sam recollected a childhood blighted by a lack of Jewish playmates and the taunts of other children. He was acutely aware of the power of the Ku Klux Klan, whose members, he said, controlled every facet of city life. He observed that while white Christians “tolerated” Jews, anti-Semitic attitudes prevented outright acceptance. During his high school years, the taunting subsided, which Sam attributed to the popularity of his older brother, Reuben, a star athlete who lettered in three sports at Clemson. Reuben’s football and boxing prowess won him the respect of admirers and he became known as “The Jewish Juggernaut” or “Jew Boy Siegel.”

Nathan Fleishman’s son, Alvin, born six years after Sam Siegel, estimated that 15 to 20 Jewish families lived in Anderson during his childhood. Though many stayed only briefly before moving on, he remembered having Jewish friends. Apparently his cohort was not numerous enough, however, to warrant a Sunday school. Nathan hired a rabbi to instruct him and, in 1934, Alvin’s bar mitzvah was the first to take place in the city of Anderson. “I made the day of my fountain pen speech at the Elks Club. It was the hit of the community for a while. They tried to figure out what those Jews were and they saw me and they decided, well, maybe they’re not too bad after all.”

Alvin also claimed in a 1998 interview that the Anderson congregation had existed as long as he could remember. The date of its founding and when it adopted the name B’nai Israel, however, remain unclear. Younger members of the second generation recall Sabbath services taking place with some



Rosenblum family Passover seder, 1941. Photo courtesy of Raymond and Sandra Lee Rosenblum.

regularity by the late 1930s, when the city’s Jewish population numbered roughly 72, mostly Eastern European immigrants and their offspring. Congregants met in the Woodmen of the World hall and, later, in a room over a grocery store, where High Holy Days services, Sunday school classes, and Purim plays also were held.

While some English made its way into the Hebrew liturgy, services were Orthodox, led by lay readers. Men and women sat separately. Members of the congregation taught Sunday school and hired rabbinical students from New York for the High Holy Days. Rabbi David Karesh, of Columbia’s House of Peace synagogue, presided over circumcisions, which were always held on Sundays, the day the merchants closed their stores. The Yiddish-speaking community with its strong sense of connectedness left an indelible impression on Raymond Rosenblum, who grew up on Peachtree Street in the 1930s. “The Jews of Anderson at that time were one extended family. Everybody knew everybody else’s business.”

In the years before World War II, virtually all of Anderson’s Jewish families operated businesses. Reuben Siegel returned from college and continued to trade livestock, opening his own barn. Nathan and Freida Rosenblum, Polish immigrants who had moved to Anderson in 1933 after trying their luck in Miami, Florida, and three other South Carolina towns, went into the dry goods business, selling new and used clothing. Nathan served as the cantor at Sabbath services.

Jules Kaplan moved to Anderson from Pennsylvania in the late ’30s and opened a shirt factory. He volunteered as a lay leader of the congregation’s weekly services. Ted Fleishman first worked for his brother Nathan, then opened his own store, The Hub. Younger brother Joe moved to Anderson in 1937 with his wife, Libby, and joined his brothers in the family businesses, which had grown to include a liquor store.

Sam Siegel, in the late 1930s, ran the Bern & Siegel Mule Company with his brother-in-law, Sam Bern, and achieved some renown by offering a helping hand to immigrant Kurt



Lt. Allen Rosenblum, pilot for the U.S. Army’s “Mighty Eighth” Air Force, flew 56 missions before being shot down over Germany in April 1945. The decorated pilot returned home safely after three weeks in a POW camp in Austria. The swastika on “Rosey’s” plane was a trophy from a German aircraft he shot down. Photo courtesy of Raymond and Sandra Lee Rosenblum.



Newsstand acquired by Kurt Sax, an Austrian Jewish immigrant, 1942. A neighbor remarked, "It would be only a matter of time until he owns the whole block." Photo courtesy of Kurt Sax.

toward a successful career as an executive in a large, well-respected company on the west coast.

In the 1940s, a rabbi reportedly came to conduct services on Sunday mornings and the congregation hired George Ackerman of nearby Walhalla, a Hebrew teacher and cantor, to lead High Holy Days services. Adult members continued to teach Sunday school classes and bar mitzvah candidates, and a chapter of B'nai Brith was chartered in 1945.

Max Siegel, Nathan Fleishman, Hyman Draisen, Sam Bern, and Nathan Rosenblum, among others, led the drive to build a synagogue—a 150-seat sanctuary with adjacent



Left to right: Michael Fleishman, Steven Siegel, and Edward Poliakoff ushering at Harriet Fleishman's confirmation in the 1950s. Photo courtesy of Libby Fleishman.

Sax, who had fled German-occupied Austria in 1939 and landed in Anderson at age 19. Sam gave the needy and ambitious young man a dollar and a note to hand other local Jewish business owners, urging them to do the same. The assistance Kurt received enabled him to open a kiosk, where he sold a "complete line of magazines, newspapers, soft drinks, cigarettes, cigars, tobaccos," and gave him a kick-start

classrooms, social hall, and kitchen. Supported by a Jewish population that had nearly doubled since 1937, Temple B'nai Israel was completed in 1948, in time for its first bar mitzvah, Ronald Bern. According to Ron, who wrote about growing up Jewish in Anderson in his 1975 novel, *The Legacy*, the impetus behind the building project was his grandfather Max Siegel's desire to see the ceremony take place in a proper synagogue. With a congregational membership of 20 to 25

families, the women organized a Sisterhood and affiliated with the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods.

Anderson's manufacturing industry continued to grow in the 1950s as Duke Power Company came on line and construction began on the Hartwell Dam. The promise of a substantial power supply was just one of a number of attractions for would-be manufacturers, such as Bill and Elaine Epstein, who moved to Anderson in 1953 and opened a ladies' apparel factory, Iva Manufacturing Company. The business became quite successful, expanding to include six plants. Bill developed a patent on a sewing device and was recognized by Clemson University for his management style.

Louis Funkenstein, who married Caroline Geisberg, a granddaughter of Oscar and Carrie Geisberg, moved to Anderson at the end of World War II and, with the encouragement of Jules Kaplan, opened a plant that manufactured paper boxes. Jules used Louis's boxes to pack his shirts.



Caroline Geisberg and Louis Funkenstein, wedding photo, 1943. Photo courtesy of Louis and Caroline Funkenstein.

By the 1950s, B'nai Israel's Orthodoxy appears to have been a source of contention among members. Funkenstein, among others, wanted the congregation to align its practices with the Conservative movement. Nathan Fleishman reportedly encouraged his fellow elders to defer to the younger generation regarding ritual preferences in order to keep them involved. The senior members followed his advice and the two groups compromised. Weekly services followed Conservative customs, while High Holy Days were observed according to Orthodox tradition. Men and women sat together and the Sunday school was well attended.

The congregation's flexibility helped keep it viable as the first generation of immigrants gave way to second and third generation Americans. In the 1950s, B'nai Israel hired Rabbi Goldberg, a retired Reform rabbi living in Augusta, Georgia, to provide services once a month and on High Holy Days. He served the congregation for many years, including presiding over marriages and funerals.

Sons and daughters of immigrant families who stayed in Anderson tended to operate their own businesses and take seriously their civic duties. Reuben Siegel, who had left the live-



Alvin Fleishman emcees at Temple B'nai Israel's 50th anniversary celebration in 1998. Photo: Dale Rosengarten. Special Collections, College of Charleston.

stock business and gone into finance, was a charter member of the Anderson Sertoma Club, served as its president, and was influential in creating its Scholarship Awards Program. In appreciation of his years of service to the community, the Club established the Reuben Siegel Scholarship Award in 1983.

Inspired by the struggles of one of his brothers, Reuben devoted much of his time to improving the quality of life for people suffering with mental illness. He served as president and vice president of the Anderson

County Mental Health Association, and helped to establish the Anderson-Oconee-Pickens Mental Health Center and the Patrick B. Harris Psychiatric Hospital. In 1986, Reuben was recognized by the Anderson mental health community for his leadership in fundraising and advocacy. A gymnasium at the Harris Hospital was named in his honor, marked by a dedication ceremony at which Rabbi Israel Gerber, one of B'nai Israel's visiting rabbis, offered the invocation.

After serving in the Navy during World War II, Alvin Fleishman returned to Anderson to join the family business and, in the 1960s, opened a second location. When his department store closed in 1984, he kept busy working in Fleishman's Liquor Store and teaching business courses at Tri-County Technical College in neighboring Pendleton. In the 1990s, he established the Alvin Fleishman Scholarship at the college.



Executive Officer Louis Funkenstein (left) on the seaplane tender USS Curtiss in the South Pacific, ca. 1943. Photo courtesy of Louis and Caroline Funkenstein.

County Mental Health Association, and helped to establish the Anderson-Oconee-Pickens Mental Health Center and the Patrick B. Harris Psychiatric Hospital. In 1986, Reuben was recognized by the Anderson mental health community for his leadership in fundraising and advocacy. A gymnasium at the Harris Hospital was named in his honor, marked by a dedication ceremony at which Rabbi Israel Gerber, one of B'nai Israel's visiting rabbis, offered the invocation.

A number of Jewish-owned businesses continue to operate in Anderson and neighboring towns today. They include manufacturers, retailers and wholesalers, and a music company. Most Jews living in the area, however, work in professions such as education, medicine, and the law.

Participation in Sabbath services dwindled in the 1970s and '80s. Perhaps to attract more members, B'nai Israel joined the Reform movement, a move that appears to have led to a return to regular Sabbath services. Temple B'nai Israel's official affiliation with the Reform movement, however, was brief. The congregation did not maintain its relationship with the national



Members and friends celebrate Temple B'nai Israel's 50th anniversary, June 1998. Photo: Dale Rosengarten. Special Collections, College of Charleston.

organization and today its practices are not explicitly aligned with either the Conservative or Reform traditions.

While the B'nai Brith chapter has not been active in decades, the Sisterhood continues to function. Currently, 36 families—few with young children, however—belong to the congregation. They meet Friday evenings for Sabbath observance led by members. On the High Holy Days, the temple fills up for services conducted by Robert Kimmel and his son, Brian. While the congregation is small, membership losses are offset by newcomers, mostly retirees, and B'nai Israel is optimistic about its future.

ISJL Online Encyclopedia

Drawn from material in the College of Charleston's Jewish Heritage Collection, illustrated histories of several South Carolina Jewish communities, including Anderson, have been added to the Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities, produced by the Institute of Southern Jewish Life, based in Jackson, Mississippi. Go to www.isjl.org/history/archive and click on SC. Please send comments and corrections to neelya@cofc.edu. We are especially interested in finding photographs of Jewish-owned stores, family events, congregational activities, and streetscapes in these South Carolina locales.

Raising Draisens in Anderson

by Alyssa Neely

with Judith Draisen Glassman, Bernice Draisen Goldman, and Barry, Samuel, and David Draisen

The Draisen family's southern roots go back to the early 20th century, when Rachel Leah Poliakoff left her home in Amchea, Russia, for Aiken, South Carolina, where she married her second cousin, Zalman (Sam) Poliakoff. Sam, who ran a store in the small upstate town, may have followed his brothers or cousins to the area. The couple raised eight children and moved a number of times, opening dry goods stores in Laurens, Greenville, and Anderson.

Daughter Eunice, born in Greenville in 1914 and raised in Anderson, studied piano at the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore. While teaching music to underprivileged children at Camp Woodlands near Baltimore, she met Hyman Draisen, who was making marionettes for the campers. Hy was the son of David and

Dora Margolin Draisen, who had emigrated from Russia, with David leading the way in October 1906, and Dora and their eldest child, Sadie, following seven months later. They lived first in New York, where David worked as a tailor. By 1913, when Hy was born, the family was living in Burlington, Vermont. Raised in Dorchester, a suburb of Boston, Massachusetts, Hy was trained as a printer at the Boston Trade School.

Hy and Eunice married in Anderson in 1939 and honeymooned at the New York World's Fair. They lived in Lynn, Massachusetts, before moving to Anderson in the spring of 1942, when their first child, Sammy, was just a few weeks old. Hy had been drafted and Eunice wanted to be near her family. The call to service, however, never came. After receiving two deferrals for illness in the family, Hy was



Wedding of Eunice Poliakoff and Hyman Draisen, Anderson, SC, June 11, 1939. Seated from left: Dora Brown, Moses Poliakoff, Fannie Poliakoff, Helen Poliakoff, David Draisen, Rose Poliakoff. Back row from left: Evalynn Poliakoff, Schlaime (Sam) Poliakoff, Raphael Poliakoff, Augusta Poliakoff, Dora Draisen, Rachel (Beebe) Poliakoff, Eunice and Hyman Draisen, Herman Poliakoff, Estelle Levkoff Poliakoff, Max Poliakoff, Gussie (Getel or Gete) Schwartz Poliakoff, Ben Poliakoff, Christine Scott.



Herman Poliakoff's going-out-of-business sale, Anderson, SC, 1951.

told to stand by for further orders. When the war ended, Hy was still waiting in Anderson for his deployment.

The young family, including a second son, Barry, born in 1943, lived with Eunice's mother, Rachel, who had been widowed nearly two decades before. The Draisen children called Rachel "Beebe"—Sammy's rendition of "Bubbe," for grandmother, which stuck.

Shortly after the birth of their third child, Bernice, in December 1945, Hy and Eunice moved to Spartanburg, where Eunice's brother Max set them up in a jewelry store called Bari's. The venture failed and, in 1948, the Draisons, with four children in tow, including newborn Judy, returned to Anderson. They joined Eunice's brother, Herman, in his pawn shop until he transferred ownership of another business, Henry's Jewelers, to them. Henry's became Draisen's Jewelry Store in August 1948. At the grand opening, Hy and Eunice stationed Sammy, age six, and Barry, five, on the sidewalk in



A raffle on opening day at Draisen's Jewelry Store in Anderson, 1948.

front of the shop passing out small boxes of Sunkist raisins to potential customers. They had put the letter "D" in front of the word "raisin" on each box.

Draisen's sold radios and record players, as well as jewelry, in a 28- by 100-foot space, before branching out in the 1950s to include musical instruments. The new line of merchandise started when Marty Travis, a traveling salesman from Charlotte, North Carolina, convinced the Draisons to carry guitars. Later, band directors from the local schools asked the jewelers to stock instruments after Herman Poliakoff, one of their suppliers, had closed his store. Draisen's served both black and white customers and extended credit to all.

All the Draisen children, including the youngest, David, born in 1950, worked at Draisen's Jewelry and Music Store after school and on the weekends. Each played one or more musical instruments and joined his or her school band or



Rachel Leah Poliakoff was "Beebe" to her Draisen grandchildren, who adopted young Sammy's pronunciation of "Bubbe."



Sammy Draisen, Hy and Eunice's oldest child, Anderson, SC, 1945.



David Draisen, the baby of the family, 1950.



Draisen family, ca. 1955. From left, Hy, David (front), Sammy, Eunice, Judy, Barry, and Bernice.

orchestra. With Hy on sax and Eunice on piano, the family would gather for informal jam sessions.

Intensely civic-minded, Hy donated time to the Elks, Masons, and Shriners. He also ran for a seat on the Anderson Board of Education in the 1950s. Anticipating the inevitable desegregation of schools, Hy proposed that Anderson's school administrators integrate first grade classes right away, adding a class a year so that integration would be complete in 12 years. His platform was greeted with a resoundingly low number of votes.

Eunice and Hy were raised as Orthodox Jews but practiced Conservative Judaism in Anderson. Despite the difficulties of keeping kosher in small-town South Carolina, Eunice and Hy adhered to the dietary laws at home and packed special school lunches for the kids during Passover. They had kosher meat bussed in from Charlotte, North Carolina, or purchased a supply when visiting relatives in Atlanta, Georgia. If kosher visitors came to Anderson, they were directed to the Draisons.



Temple B'nai Israel, Anderson, SC, 1997. Photo: Dale Rosengarten. Special Collections, College of Charleston.



Hy Draisen (far right) in Anderson, SC, with youngsters from Greenville's Shriners Hospital for Crippled Children, ca. 1958.

Hy was deeply involved in Anderson's Conservative congregation. He and Paul Radin led services on Friday evenings and on Saturday mornings when there was a bar or bat mitzvah. Hy and Joe Fleishman led services on the High Holy Days when rabbinical students were not available. Nathan Rosenblum served as cantor. Before the present temple was built, services and Sunday school, led by George Ackerman, were held over a grocery store in downtown Anderson.

Hy also taught the children Hebrew, preparing them for bat and bar mitzvahs. He was one of several men behind the push to build a house of worship. Max Siegel initiated the project because he wanted to see his grandson, Ron Bern, become bar mitzvah in a proper synagogue. Among those joining Max and Hy on the building committee were Joe Fleishman, Herman Poliakoff, Nathan Rosenblum, Sam Bern, and Nathan Fleishman. Temple B'nai Israel, which included a 150-seat sanctuary, kitchen, social hall, and classrooms, was completed in 1948, graced by the congregation's first Torah, which had belonged to Sam Poliakoff's maternal grandparents.

The Draisen children recall playing ball and badminton in the backyard. On Sundays their parents would take them on trips in their red Plymouth station wagon to Oconee State Park and Charleston. Growing up in Anderson, the children had mostly gentile friends since there were few, if any, Jewish youngsters their age. To expand their social circle, Eunice and Hy sent them, as teenagers, to Greenville's Beth Israel, a Conservative synagogue, where they attended religious school and joined United Synagogue Youth and B'nai Brith Youth Organization. Barry notes that "a big part of our Jewishness came from Camp Blue Star." He and Sammy made Jewish friends at Camp Blue Star and Camp Osceola, both in Hendersonville, North Carolina, where they were counselors. Bernice, Judy, and David also attended Camp

Blue Star. Because of their parents' devotion to Judaism and passing on this dedication to their children, it is noteworthy to mention that all five children married Jewish partners.

The Draisen siblings recollect the presence of the Ku Klux Klan in Anderson, but did not feel threatened by its activities. Some members of their congregation apparently felt less secure. Preferring to maintain a low profile in the community, the temple leadership chose not to place a sign on the synagogue until the 1970s.

While the KKK may not have frightened them, the Draisons did experience anti-Semitism in daily life. As kids, they were called "dirty Jews" by neighborhood children, even their playmates. While Bernice didn't encounter name-calling, she felt people would "shy away" from her because she was Jewish. She believes a "wall" of prejudice was the reason she was never asked out on dates. It also kept her gentile friends from coming to parties at the Draisen home. Judy's date for a Sadie Hawkins dance backed out when he learned she was Jewish.

The Draisons' store has been a family-run business ever since Hy and Eunice took over Henry's Jewelers. In 1967, Bernice and her first husband, Ed Shuman, moved to Anderson to help out, because Hy and Eunice were getting older and felt they needed assistance or would have to sell the business. Beginning in the mid-1970s, David and Barry took over the operation and the two brothers remained at the helm until 1990, when David decided to change his career. That year the store stopped carrying jewelry and began selling band instruments only.

David now works as a medical technologist in several hospital and physicians' laboratories, and serves on the Anderson County Board of Education. He is married to Andrea, an Anderson pediatrician. Barry continues to run the company, with a partner from outside the family. Bernice, a retired teacher, lives near Cleveland, Ohio, with her husband, Lloyd, a retired rabbi. Judy, also a retired teacher, lives in Atlanta, Georgia, with her husband Bruce. Their son, Michael made aliyah to Israel with his wife, Julie. Sammy and his wife, Carol, live in Atlanta where he is a retired air force lieutenant colonel and pharmacist.

The five Draisen siblings have prospered and multiplied, producing collectively a total of 12 children plus Bernice's two stepsons and (to date) ten grandchildren. While many of their offspring have gravitated toward bigger cities, the Draisons who have remained in Anderson continue to be fully involved in Temple B'nai Israel. David has been president of the congregation four times and now serves as treasurer. Barry's wife, Ellen, is the current president, leading a flock of 33 active member families.

Photos courtesy of Judy Draisen Glassman and David Draisen, unless otherwise noted.

Lillian Chernoff Bloom
(November 11, 1920 – February 21, 2010)

Jack L. Bloom
(June 25, 1920 – May 8, 2010)



Who could predict that an independent career woman from New York and a self-proclaimed southern gentleman from Greenville, South Carolina, would find true love, become devoted partners, and die within three months of each other? The Greenville Jewish community lost just such a couple this past spring. Lillian Chernoff was born in 1920 to Max Chernoff and Pauline Markowitz, immigrants from a shtetl in the region of Minsk, Russia, who met in the sweat shops of New York's Lower East Side. Despite the hardships of the Great Depression, Lillian attended Hunter College and her brother, Herman, went to City College of New York. Lillian worked as a medical records librarian at Beth Israel Hospital, an administrative assistant for the New York University Medical Center, and a field representative for the National Council of Jewish Women. On a trip to Greenville for NCJW in 1956, she was introduced to Jack L. Bloom. After a courtship of seven years, Jack and Lillian eloped and were married in Charleston's Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim.

Once settled in South Carolina, Lillian served on the boards of dozens of social service, health, and educational organizations, and was elected to the statewide Commission on Consumer Protection from 1992 to 1999. Her husband, Jack, was the son of Julius H. and Jennie Shatenstein Bloom, whose dry goods store was a feature of Greenville's Main Street for more than 55 years. Jack received his undergraduate degree from Furman University and his law degree from Duke. He served in the army in World War II and later retired from the army reserves with the rank of colonel. An active member and former president of Congregation Beth Israel, he dedicated himself to research and writing and, in 2005, published "A History of the Jewish Community of Greenville, South Carolina"—an engaging mix of archival data, family information, and philosophical reflection. Jack served on the JHSSC board from 2001 to 2006, always attending meetings with the lovely Lillian on his arm.