

Midlands Merchants: The Jews of Orangeburg and Vicinity

by Alyssa Neely

German Jews began settling in Orangeburgh (as it was originally spelled) in the early 1840s, once railroads connected the village of fewer than 400 to Charleston and Columbia. By 1853, the town's population had more than doubled. Originally established as an Indian trading post called Edisto, the settlement was renamed in honor of King George II's son-in-law, William IV, Prince of Orange, by German-Swiss immigrants in the early 18th century. Situated on hilly ground near the Edisto River, Orangeburg was surrounded by a well-populated farming region. Cotton production, together with the railroads, helped to make many 19th-century farmers in the district wealthy.



Theodore Kohn, from A Sketch of the War Record of the Edisto Rifles, 1861 – 1865, W. V. Izlar.

Ten-year-old Theodore Kohn, one of the town's first Jewish residents, emigrated from Germany in 1850 with his parents and a brother and settled in Orangeburg the same year. Kohn served in the Edisto Rifles during the Civil War. In the post-war period he became a respected businessman and an important contributor to civic affairs, serving as a town alderman, a founding member of Edisto Bank, and a major force behind the creation of Orangeburg's public schools. Dubbed the "Father of Orangeburg graded schools," he was also a member of the Masonic Shibolet Lodge, serving as its treasurer

for more than two decades.

When he first arrived in Orangeburg, Kohn worked for his uncle, Deopold Louis, an established merchant and possibly the earliest Jewish settler in town. In 1868, Theodore and a friend opened a general merchandise store, Ezekial and Kohn. Their association appears to have been brief, however, since a year later Theodore's brother Henry joined him in a mercantile business, Theodore Kohn and Brother. Later, Henry broke away from Theodore to open his own store.

Born in Orangeburg in 1850, Henry made his mark on the community as a founder of the Young America Fire Company and a Mason. In partnership with his wife, Matilda Baum Kohn, he organized and led the Orangeburg Philharmonic Orchestra.

Henry and Matilda directed the group of amateur musicians for almost 50 years. Henry, himself a violinist and a violin instructor, was admired for his dedication to bringing music to the city.

Shopkeepers, Tradesmen, and Land Owners: After the Civil War, Orangeburg dropped the "h" at the end of its name and incorporated as a city. Cotton farming continued to be the county's economic mainstay, supplemented by a diversity of food crops, including corn, oats, wheat, rye, rice, potatoes, pecans, and peanuts. The nearby towns of Bowman, Branchville, St. Matthews, Ellore, Eutawville, and Blackville all attracted Jewish settlers. Many of the newcomers were landsmen, hailing from the same part of the Old Country, or were linked by marriage.

Simon Brown (Braun), a shoemaker, immigrated to the United States from what is now Poland around 1849 with his wife, Philapena Asher (Aschen) Brown, a Jew of Sephardic descent. Initially, they joined Pena's brothers in New Jersey, but left the state after Simon became involved with anarchists. For reasons unknown, the Browns chose to settle in Blackville, which by 1878 was home to approximately 40 Jews. The Browns sent their children by train to Sabbath school at the Reform Temple in Augusta, Georgia, which Simon may have helped to found. He and Pena were buried in the family plot in Augusta.

How long Simon continued in the shoemaking trade in Blackville we do not know, but at some point he opened a store in Blackville called Simon Brown's Sons, touting "Globo de Oro—the New Golden Centered Cantaloupe" among the goods for sale. He also became a substantial landowner and, according to one descendant, owned slaves in the years before the Civil War. By the time of his death in 1906, he had acquired 5,000 acres.

St. Matthews, originally Lewisville, attracted a handful of Jewish families in the post-bellum period. In 1878, six years after



Kohn's store, established by Theodore Kohn in 1867. Photo ca. 1917, from Orangeburg Revisited, G. Atkinson.



Lipman Rich's clothing store on the right, Russell Street, 1928. Photo from Orangeburg, G. Atkinson.

its incorporation, the town was home to some 19 Jewish residents. Jewish businessmen in 1889 included M. Jarecky, J. H. Loryea, and P. Rich. Brothers Moritz and Lipman Rich of Germany had settled in Charleston before moving to St. Matthews. Moritz's grandson Lipman P. Rich, born in 1894 in St. Matthews, moved to Orangeburg with his wife and daughter and opened a clothing store. When the business failed during the Great Depression of the 1930s, Lipman went to work for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company.

Rich's clothing store was one of several Jewish-owned stores in Orangeburg in the early 1900s, as East European immigrants joined their predecessors from Germany. Downtown store owners included the Abrams, Beckers, Bernsteins, Finkelsteins, Furchgotts, Hurwitzs, Levines, Manheims, Marcuses, Mirmows, Rubensteins, Silvers, and Wilinskys.

Small towns across the region also attracted Jewish shopkeepers. Nathan Blatt (Minnenblatt), while peddling out of Charleston, learned that Blackville was ripe for a new merchant and decided to set up shop there. Alexander Goldiner ran a store in St. Matthews; the Nussbaums in Branchville; the Nesses in Denmark; and the Pearlstines in St. Matthews, Branchville, and Olar. Louis Link, who was born in St. Matthews and raised in Orangeburg, became a peddler. His father Solomon, a Russian immigrant, had been an Orangeburg merchant in the late 1800s. Joseph J. Miller of Elloree and Mordie Rubenstein of Orangeburg, competitors and good friends who often ate lunch together, each ran a store in Elloree.

Like small-town Jewish storeowners in other parts of the state, midlands merchants tried hard to integrate into society and often attained elected office. Harry N. Marcus, for example, was mayor of his hometown, Eutawville, from the late 1940s to the early 1970s. The World War II veteran was a Mason, a Shriner, and owner of Marcus Department Store, a business started by his father in the first half of the twentieth century. Irving Benjamin, who owned a department store in Bowman, served for 30 years as a councilman, and was a member of the Masons and the American Legion.

The Jareckys and Sol Wetherhorn were cotton factors in St. Matthews. H. M. Kline was a junk and used car parts dealer.



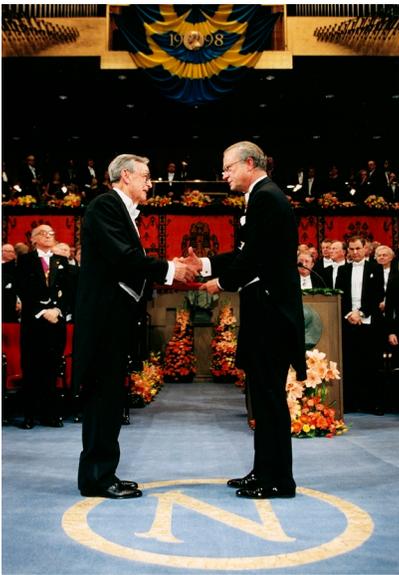
West Russell Street, Orangeburg looking toward the square and courthouse, ca. 1927. Courtesy of Marcelle Furchgott.

Evelyn Marcus, whose mother was a Rich, in 1920 became the first woman in Orangeburg County to be admitted to the Bar. Evelyn's choice of a professional career was a harbinger of the path future generations of Jews from Orangeburg and neighboring communities would take. Jewish-owned stores on the main streets of midlands towns would gradually close their doors as the owners retired with no one in the next generation willing to stand behind the till. One resident, born in Orangeburg in 1922, reported that the Jewish population in town had peaked in the early 1900s and was in decline when her generation was coming of age. In 1996, Barshay and Marcus Clothing Store, the sole remaining Jewish-owned store in Orangeburg, closed its doors.

Societies, Cemeteries, and Synagogues: The first Jewish organization in Orangeburg, the Hebrew Benevolent Society, was established in 1885, with Theodore Kohn acting as president. The following year, the group purchased land for a cemetery, where, over the next quarter century, members of the Bamberg, Blatt, Fenchel, Jarecky, Kohn, Link, Marcus, Rich, Sorentrud, Wald, Wetherhorn, and Wolfe families were laid to rest. Of the 21 burials during this period, nine were small children.

A copy of a printed program for a "Confirmation Service at B'rith Sholim" on May 19, 1918 at 4:30 p.m. provides evidence of Orangeburg's first Jewish congregation. The name the group chose may have come from Charleston's Orthodox synagogue Brith Sholom, where King Street merchants Lipman Rich and his son Philip were members and officers before they moved to St. Matthews, but the leadership was classical Reform. Jacob S. Raisin, rabbi of Charleston's Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, officiated at the confirmation (a distinctly Reform practice) and is listed in the program as superintendent of the Sunday school. The confirmation teacher was Mrs. Sol Kohn, the second grade teacher was Mrs. J. P. (Blumah Sorentrud) Moseley, and Henry Kohn served as president.

Nobel Prize-winning biochemist Robert Furchgott, who moved from Charleston to his mother's hometown of Orangeburg in 1929 at age 13, was a member of Orangeburg's last confirmation class. Robert's mother, Philapena Sorentrud, was a descendant of Simon and Philapena Brown. His father, Arthur Furchgott,



Robert Furchgott receiving Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine from Carl XVI Gustaf, King of Sweden, Stockholm, Sweden, 1998. Courtesy of Marcelle Furchgott.

came from a family of successful German Jewish merchants; in the 1920s he found himself struggling to make a living in Charleston. He tried his luck in Orangeburg but the drop in cotton prices during the Depression years made it difficult to get ahead, and in the mid-1930s the family moved again.

The religious practices of Orangeburg Jews tended to be fairly relaxed. Congregants followed the Reform tradition and offered Sunday school classes, with Kate Marcus instructing. Rabbi Samuel R. Shillman of Sumter officiated at the confirmation of Robert and his cousin Edward Moseley, reportedly the last confirmation ceremony conducted in Orangeburg. Observant Jews typically traveled to Charleston or Columbia for the High Holy Days. Some families simply conducted services at home. Edward V. Mirmow, Jr., born in 1930 in Orangeburg, attended Sunday school sporadically and for a short time only; for some reason, he reported, "it didn't last." Mirmow estimated that as much as half the Jewish population did not attend worship services. Others, often through intermarriage, became practicing Christians.

The ease and frequency with which intermarriage occurred reflects the harmonious nature of Jewish-Christian relations in the area and the paltry number of potential Jewish spouses. Jewish residents participated fully in the social life and civic affairs of Orangeburg. They belonged to the Elks Club, the Orangeburg Country Club, the Young Men's Business League, the Junior Service League, the Camellia Garden Club, and the Rotary Club.

Merchant Joseph J. Miller had no living relatives when he died in 1980, but he was surrounded by a family of friends. Born in Philadelphia, he had come to Elloree in 1946 by way of Augusta and Sumter and bought a department store. Upon retiring in 1973, he established the Joseph J. Miller Foundation to support "religious, scientific, literary or educational charities." In his will, he left his savings to four Elloree churches, Orangeburg's Temple Sinai, Charleston's Brith Sholom Beth Israel, Savannah Hebrew Day School, and various charities.

Edward V. Mirmow (Mirmowitz), Sr., born in New York City to Russian immigrants, moved with his family to Orangeburg in 1901 when he was a year old. He lettered in football and baseball at the University of South Carolina and remained a big Gamecocks



Eddie Mirmow at the lower right, a sports enthusiast, organized the Orangeburg High Indians Booster Club, 1947. Photo from Orangeburg Revisited, G. Atkinson.

fan throughout his life. After World War II, Mirmow founded the Orangeburg Indian Boosters Club to support high school sports and organized the city's American Legion Post 4 baseball program, serving as athletic director for ten years. In 1948, Mirmow Field was named in recognition of his contributions to amateur baseball.

In the 1950s, with an influx of Jews into the midlands and a surge in births as GIs came home, Orangeburg Jews organized again, this time to build Temple Sinai. It is possible that this new congregation, which had been served by Rabbi Shillman in the past, named their temple after Sumter's Temple Sinai. A *News and Courier* article reports that their Christian friends and neighbors helped to make it possible. The building, which was completed and dedicated in early 1956, seats a hundred and houses a hall, a kitchen, and space for a Sunday school on the lower level. J. J. Teskey, previously of Savannah, served as president of the board of directors and as lay leader. Member families, many of whom had young children, came from Orangeburg and surrounding towns as well. Temple Sinai's membership may have reached a peak of 15 to 20 families during this period.

The small congregation never had its own rabbi. To conduct services on the High Holy Days, Temple Sinai engaged visiting rabbis or student rabbis. Rabbi David Gruber of Columbia's Tree of Life conducted worship services once a month into the sixties. Disagreements over whether to use Conservative or Reform prayer books and personal animosities prevented the formation of a unified congregation. Sunday school classes were held during the Temple's early years, serving the small number of young families who were part of the post-World War II baby boom, but the congregation's viability became more tenuous as the children left for college and settled elsewhere.

Today, Temple Sinai's remaining three or four members meet one Saturday morning a month for worship, led by a lay reader originally from New York. Somehow, the tiny congregation has managed to retain the Temple building. High Holy Day services are a "hit or miss proposition," according to one member. The endangered congregation likely faces the same future as the Jewish-owned stores that once lined the streets of Orangeburg.