

People of the Book

Jewish Arlington, 1900–1920

By Jessica Kaplan

Very little has been written about the Jewish presence in Northern Virginia outside of the City of Alexandria. What follows is an attempt to partially remedy this imbalance by providing some historical insight into the early years of Jewish settlement, from 1900–1940, in Arlington County.

First Generation: 1900–1920

Business

“There is scarcely a village in any state of the union that does not have a Jew Storekeeper and his family.”¹

–Henry Feingold, historian

From 1880–1920, Jews in Eastern Europe lived under extremely difficult circumstances. Unable to own land, they were forced into a limited set of occupations in small commerce and the crafts. Their sons were often coerced into the military as teenagers as young as 12. In Russia, pogroms—massacres of Jews by Christian neighbors—were a common occurrence. To escape these oppressive conditions, Eastern European Jews began immigrating to the United States.

The majority of Eastern European Jewish immigrants settled in large American cities such as New York, Baltimore, and Chicago, but many moved to small towns throughout the country. On the 1900 US Census, the first clearly identifiable Jewish residents were enumerated in Alexandria County (now Arlington). Among them were Morris and Byrney Levy, siblings from Germany, who operated a grocery on Brown Avenue in North Arlington. By the 1910 census, the brothers had closed shop and moved on.²

Joseph Bloom, a Jewish tailor from Romania, also lived in Arlington in 1900. He was a boarder in the home of South Arlingtonians,

Rosa and Frank Johnson. His family resided in Philadelphia.³ At some point during the decade, Joseph felt confident enough to open a small independent tailoring establishment at Ft. Myer and bring his wife, Elizabeth, five children, and Russian Jewish in-laws, the Witoski's, to Arlington. Advertisements by Bloom for tailors in the local newspapers in 1904 and 1905 attest to the growth of his business. By 1907, he had completed a home on Columbia Pike, a symbol of success. Joseph's children attended lower school in Arlington and high school in the District. Frank, Joseph's eldest son, helped deliver Bloom's tailored uniforms to officers at the fort and sold newspapers on the side. Two other children, Rudolph and Sadye Bloom, excelled at the piano and performed in the community.⁴

Beginning in 1910, the number of Jewish families in Arlington slowly began to grow. The majority of these newcomers spoke Yiddish and were small shopkeepers, originally from Russia, though one or two had German roots. The county was not their first home in America. Like the Bloom's, they had started out in New York, Philadelphia,

Fig. 1: Sher family in front of their general store at 2901 Columbia Pike, ca. 1922.



Courtesy of Arlington Public Library

or Washington before moving to the county. They lived and worked throughout Arlington, which was a mostly white Protestant town.

Between 1910–1920, a handful of Jewish immigrant shopkeepers and their families began selling their wares along Columbia Pike, the center of development in Arlington. Their establishments, like others of the day, were “mom-and-pop” stores, single room grocery and general merchandise shops, independently owned and operated, that required little capital to establish. Startup funds usually came from family members and friends. One of these shopkeepers was Menachem Sher, originally from Austria-Hungary, who opened a family-run general store on Columbia Pike near Fillmore Street, where the Cinema and Draft House now stands. Ruth Levin, the granddaughter of Menachem, explained how he ended up purchasing a shop in Arlington. “[The family was] living in [Milton], Delaware....He had a farm and was tired of farming. So, his oldest son, [who] was living in Washington and had a little grocery store over in Southeast...found this one [on Columbia Pike], and my grandfather came with the other children, and my grandmother, and moved here.” Ruth’s uncle, Charlie Sher added that the eldest son helped Menachem purchase the business.⁵

The enterprise was named M. Sher’s General Store (Fig. 1). According to Charlie they sold horse feed, all kinds of groceries, clothing, gasoline—“everything a country store would have.” Everett Norton recalled shopping at Sher’s in his oral history: you “could go in and get your meat cut any way you wanted...[purchase] oranges or apples or nuts...horse feed and oats....The old streetcar from Rosslyn to Green Valley used to run right beside the store.” Mildred Ritchie’s family had their groceries delivered. “We would crank up the telephone and order,” she reminisced, “and [the Sher’s] would bring our order.”⁶

As was common among Jewish shopkeepers, the family lived behind and above the store. In 1918, when they first opened, the building had no running water or heat. “We were in the country,” Charlie explained. The family delivered groceries to clients by horse and wagon, which could be challenging on an unpaved Columbia Pike.⁷ Menachem and his wife, Esther’s, children, Charlie, Abie, Hymie, Joe, and Ida, helped in the shop. The children helped before and after school and between homework assignments. The free labor of the entire clan fueled the business, especially that of Esther, who maintained the store and the home.

The hours were long and the work hard. The Sher family woke at the crack of dawn to deliver goods and stock shelves, and their shop would have stayed open until 9–10 pm, 7 days a week. Sunday mornings, when most Arlingtonians were in church, the Sher’s would close shop.

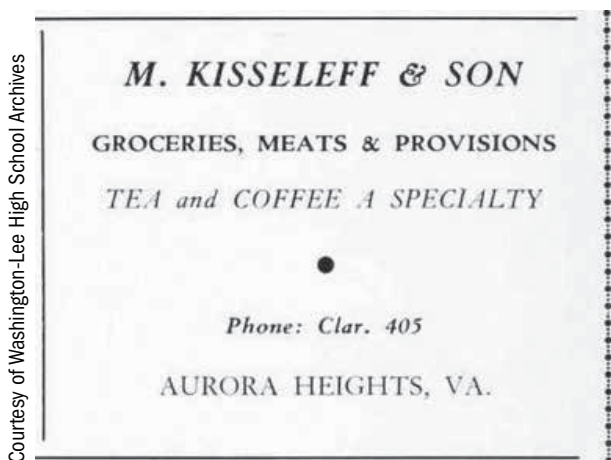
The Sher’s provided clients with personalized service and, once familiar with them, allowed buying on credit. Some customers chose to barter for merchandise rather than pay cash or take credit.⁸

Many residents in South Arlington referred to the Sher market as “The Jew Store.” This was a common term used to describe Jewish owned mom-and-pop shops throughout the South. The term marked their stores as different than those operated by others.⁹

Some early Jewish shopkeepers like Morris Kisseleff, the son of a Washington, DC, grocer, opened businesses in Arlington after working in similar enterprises in nearby Washington or Baltimore. These large cities had a plethora of small shops. For those seeking a less congested and competitive atmosphere close to an urban hub, Arlington showed promise.

Morris and Esther Kisseleff, both Russian immigrants, had a very specific reason to move their grocery and butcher shop across the Potomac to Parklane Avenue in North Arlington (Fig. 2).¹⁰ Around 1917, their son Harold was stricken with polio. Harold’s doctors recommended a more rural environment to improve his health, and Arlington fit the bill.

Fig. 2: Advertisement for Morris Kisseleff’s grocery, 1928.



Sadly, Esther Kisseleff died in 1927. Seventeen-year-old Josephine, the eldest daughter, dropped out of high school to care for her five younger siblings and their home. This included teaching Harold who was unable to walk and could not attend public school. The youngest, Lyman, was 4. Josephine’s older brother, Irving, remained in

George Mason High School through graduation. Education was considered more essential for Irving, a male, who would need to provide for a family in the future.¹¹

In 1921, Kisseleff was one of 20 grocery store owners to join a cooperative of small single-room shops in the Washington Metropolitan area. Made up of mostly Jewish immigrant families, District Grocery Society (in 1928 it became District Grocery Stores) or DGS, helped owners leverage their purchasing power to negotiate better prices from wholesalers, many of whom discriminated against Jews. In the 1930s, the number of DGS establishments continued to grow in the county and beyond as grocers faced increased competition from large chain groceries like Giant and A&P. At its peak, DGS helped its 300 members become more competitive and added many non-Jewish grocers to the DGS family (Fig. 3).¹²

Several Jewish shopkeepers opened their first stores in the county in East Arlington and Penrose, predominantly African American areas. Among them was Max Hyman (Fig. 4). Throughout the country, Jewish immigrants often got their start in business providing goods and services to Black communities.

Past injustices in the Old Country had an impact on how Jewish business owners interacted with their African American customers. According to historian Clive Webb, Jewish shop-owners tended to be more civil than other whites to Black customers, treating them with more courtesy and more importantly, offering them credit. Ever

Fig. 3: One of the first advertisements for District Grocery Stores.





Courtesy of Arlington Public Library

Fig. 4: Max and Fannie Hyman and their 9 children ran this general merchandise store in East Arlington from 1916 until its demolition in 1942.

conscious of trying to fit in, this did not lead to interactions outside of commerce for Jews feared possible retribution and lack of social acceptance from white Gentiles if they crossed this color-line.¹³ Arlington's Jews were therefore complicit in upholding racist attitudes and policies Blacks endured in the county during Jim Crow. African Americans paid for goods and services just like anyone else, and Jewish families found a somewhat profitable niche that most white business owners purposely avoided.

Jews have been stereotyped throughout history as cunning financiers and money-grubbing Shylocks. Some Jewish immigrants came to the US with entrepreneurial skills developed in Eastern Europe and a strong drive to succeed, but they were a far cry from evil money-lenders. Business acumen helped some achieve more financial success than others. As with any group of immigrants, and in Black communities, several Jewish newcomers were highly prosperous because of their hard work, thrift, and talent. They began small businesses that became springboards to larger or more substantial enterprises.

Albert and George Wasserman, brothers, were two of these men. They immigrated to the US as young adults in the late 1910s to early 1920s. Al was amongst the last wave of first-generation immigrants to arrive in the US before immigration was essentially halted.¹⁴ Al worked as an entry level printer and photographer in Alexandria and George drove a cab. In the late 1920s, George had enough capital to open a gas station in Clarendon called George's Service Station. In his office, George kept a crystal radio set that locals would come to listen to. Before long, George was selling radio sets and started George's Radio (and later Television) Shop in Washington, DC. It became one of the most successful businesses of its type, with branches throughout the region.

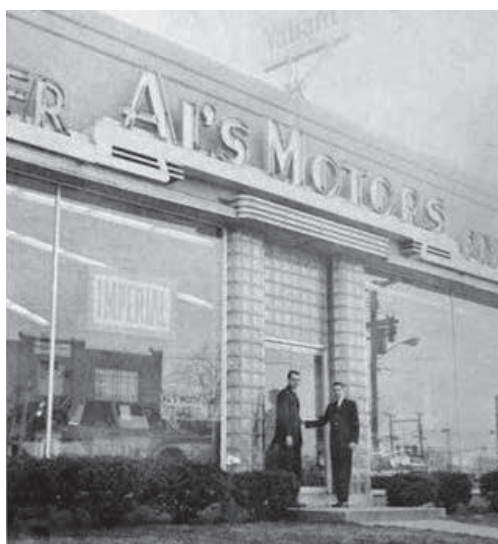
As George transitioned into radio sales, Al and his wife, Bertha, bought the service station. Al repaired cars and Bertha pumped the gas. Soon after, they began selling Hupmobiles and by 1929 had a contract to sell Chryslers and Plymouths. By 1937, growth motivated the Wasserman's to build a large dealership, Al's Motors (3924 Wilson Blvd.), and to hire over 20 new employees (Fig. 5 and 6).¹⁵

Not all Jewish shopkeepers in Arlington were as successful as the Wasserman family—or even close. For many reasons, including lack of skills, capital, and drive, they were unable to make ends meet. Difficulty adjusting to life in a non-Jewish environment also exacerbated

Fig. 5: The iconic Al's Motor's building on Wilson Boulevard near N. Pollard Street, ca. 1947.

Fig. 6: Bertha and Al Wasserman, 1940s.

Courtesy of Wade Schick.



their predicament. In the 1910s, Jewish proprietors, Abraham Deskin and Isaac Brenner ran enterprises in Arlington for a short time before closing shop. In the early 1920s, the groceries of Joseph Funger and Lewis opened and closed in quick succession. Louis Rubin & Son, a family run shop offering “fancy groceries, meats, and provisions” in Clarendon, between Wilson and Washington Boulevards, did not go belly up, but had checkered reviews. Gladys Hall and Margaret Slye remembered it, “Rubin’s store was quite a sad little grocery store. My mother would go in and if the cat was on the meat block, come home.”¹⁶

Women in Business

“Wherever you find a great man, you will find a great mother or a great wife standing behind him.”¹⁷

–Dorothy Sayers, writer

A woman’s role in helping to operate a family business was an essential element in its success or failure. Like many of their husbands, Jewish women came to the US with significant business skills. In the Old Country, as many Jewish men were preoccupied with the study of Jewish texts, women often minded the store and became the breadwinners. In America, women’s abilities often went unnoticed until the death of a shopkeeping husband. Wives would step in and keep the store afloat by themselves or jointly with a son. Fannie Hyman and Bertha Wasserman were such women. Bertha carried on the business with her son-in-law, Albert Schick, after Al’s death. Her oversight became legendary among employees and family members.¹⁸ Other Jewish women opened their own groceries as widows.

Katherine Grossberg Cohen, the wife of Arlington real estate broker, Albert Cohen, used her considerable entrepreneurial skills to enter the professional world. This was a relatively rare phenomenon during the 1920s and 1930s in middle class America; wives were relegated to motherhood and the home. Katherine was born in Latvia and arrived in Washington as a child. She married Albert in 1917, and by 1923 the couple had settled in Arlington and opened a general store on Pershing Drive. In the late 1920s, Katherine and Albert created the Potomac Credit Bureau of Arlington and a real estate brokerage firm, Albert H. Cohen Co. Katherine focused on the

credit bureau and Albert on brokerage. To boot, the Cohens were raising two children.

Around 1928, Katherine helped establish the Business and Professional Women's Club of Arlington and became its first president (Fig. 7). The club, a civic and social group, worked to acquire funds to create

Fig. 7: The Business and Professional Women's Club of Arlington. Katherine Cohen is sitting down, second from the left.



The Evening Star, February 14, 1929

public parks in Arlington “to keep kids off the streets” and helped young girls choose careers. In the 1930s, Katherine helped organize and found another professional women’s group, the Credit Women’s Breakfast Club. The organization met a few times a year for educational purposes. Katherine served on the board of Arlington Hospital, as well. In many of the local civic groups to which she (and her husband Albert) belonged Katherine appeared to be the only Jew.¹⁹

Practicing their Faith

“The counterlife was more important than the afterlife.”²⁰

–Shalom Y’ALL, *Bill Arens, historian*

Finding the right balance between practicing Judaism and living in a Protestant society was a continual struggle for America’s Jewish immigrants. Urban settings provided easier access to Jewish houses of worship called synagogues (or *shuls*), schools, and cultural centers. The *shul* was the heart and soul of a Jewish community, providing connection and meaning in its member’s lives. When deciding to live in a town or small city without these resources, Jews knew compromises would be necessary.

Celebrating the Jewish Sabbath, *Shabbat*, often became the first casualty for Arlington’s Jewish shopkeepers. Most allowed themselves “half a day on Sunday” for personal time.²¹ Ironically, this corresponded with the Christian sabbath, not the Jewish one, which begins on Friday night at sundown and ends on Saturday evening at sundown. A majority of non-Jews shopped on Saturday, so closing the store for *Shabbat* worship was not possible in a Christian dominant community.

Maintaining Jewish rituals and customs around food or keeping kosher was another tradition that was hard to preserve. Separating meat and milk utensils was necessary as was buying kosher meat. The latter was impossible to find in rural Arlington so more observant Jews, like the Iskow family, would journey to Washington, DC, to find a kosher butcher. Modern conveniences such as freezers did not exist at this time so preserving kosher meat for future use was not possible. Many stopped keeping a kosher kitchen.²²

The High Holidays, *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year, and *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, were the most holy days for Jews.

To observe these special occasions, Arlington's families would often travel to Washington, DC, where several congregations existed or to Alexandria City's two *shuls*, Temple *Beth El* or *Agudas Achim*. Washington was the preferred destination as it was closer to Arlington and offered synagogues of varying size and tradition.

Menachem Sher's granddaughter explained how Sher dealt with the high holidays. "My grandfather belonged to the synagogue at 14th and Euclid Streets [in Washington]." This is where he attended services on special occasions. The *shul*, *Tifereth Israel* Congregation, was orthodox, and founded in 1914 by a small group of Eastern European immigrants. Sher was also buried in their cemetery.²³

The Iskow family spent their high holidays at another Orthodox *shul*, *Kesher Israel*, in Georgetown. The Iskow's oversaw a grocery in Rosslyn and were able to walk across Key Bridge to attend services. Descendants felt the Rosslyn store was chosen for its size, location, and cost, but importantly, because it was near *Kesher Israel*. The family became very involved in the synagogue.²⁴

In the 1910s and 1920s, the Jewish shopkeepers lining Columbia Pike knew one another well.²⁵ Given their common native language and backgrounds, they might have shared Jewish Holiday meals or, if they had ten adult men, worshipped in each other's homes, though the records are silent on this. The Kisseleff's were not observant Jews but would attend the Passover seder at the home of Esther Kisseleff's father.²⁶ Other families probably spent important holidays with loved ones in the city rather than each other.

Anti-Semitism

*"[The Jew] is well aware that he has contributed as much as another to forging the future of the society that rejects him."*²⁷

—Jean-Paul Sartre, philosopher

At the turn of the twentieth century, social discrimination against Jews was a fixture in American life, especially in major cities. Between 1900–1917, anti-Jewish exclusion had been consolidated and normalized.²⁸ Jews were denied access to social clubs, private schools, and leisure facilities. Housing covenants and gentlemen's agreements excluded Jews from "prestigious" neighborhoods such as Country

Club Hills and Arlington Forest in Arlington. In 1898, the Metropolitan Club (now the Washington Golf & Country Club) had one token Washington, DC, Jew in its ranks.²⁹ Yet, Arlington, a fledgling suburb, had fewer elite institutions and most Jewish families had little leisure time to partake of them.

Anti-Semitism still reared its ugly head in the county. In 1911, the Bloom family, which operated a tailoring business by Ft. Myer, experienced a well-documented anti-Semitic incident that underscored the difficulties of “belonging” in America. The saga began when Frank Bloom, Joseph and Elizabeth Bloom’s son and a private in the US Army, “failed” the preliminary examination to obtain a commission as an officer. According to newspaper accounts, Colonel Joseph Gerard, the commander of Ft. Meyer did not pass Frank because he lacked the mental fitness for promotion. In Gerard’s comments on the matter, he praised Frank for being “honest, upright, ambitious, and probably deserving,” but qualified his remarks, “The applicant is a son of Mr. Joseph A. Bloom, of Jewish persuasion, who is now, and has been for a number of years, a tailor at this post....I would not desire him in my command as an officer and a social and personal associate. I have found few communities where Jews are received as desirable social associates.”³⁰

Anti-Jewish discrimination was not new to Joseph, or his parents. Having grown up in highly anti-Semitic Eastern Europe, the Blooms were familiar with second-class status. In fact, the Blooms had come to America so their children could escape inequality.

This must have weighed heavily in Elizabeth Bloom’s mind, when she bravely sought to redress the anti-Semitism aimed at her son. She contacted Simon Wolf, an official with the Jewish organization B’nai B’rith, claiming a “great wrong” was being done to Frank and the Jews. Wolf took the matter up the chain to President William Taft, who eventually reprimanded Gerard. Taft felt Gerard’s actions were “contrary to the ideals and principles of this country.”³¹

The story of Frank Bloom became the “greatest military sensation” of the year and was carried by major newspapers around the country. The incident revealed a chasm in the country regarding the question, who was a true American? Senator Simon Guggenheim of Colorado weighed in, “Whether a man be a Jew or gentile, no matter what his

creed, he is due all fairness, certainly in the army, that is due an American citizen.”³² Ironically, many Jews left countries such as Russia and Poland to escape military service. Yet, when an American Jew chose to serve his nation, he was discriminated against for being different.

Frank Bloom was allowed to take the officer’s test a second time. He passed, becoming a Second Lieutenant (Fig. 8).³³ Bloom served America throughout his life. He fought in both World War I and II and worked as a civil engineer for the US government. While a federal employee, he resided in Arlington. Frank’s brother Rudolph, a doctor, joined the US military and National Reserve as a medical officer and, like his brother, served in both World Wars. Their commitment to defending their new homeland ran deep. The controversy took a toll on the Bloom family. A few years later, they returned to Philadelphia where Joseph and his in-laws soon died.³⁴



Fig. 8: Frank Bloom after passing his officer’s examination.

Old World Scandal

“If you sleep with dogs, you get up with fleas.”

–Yiddish proverb

Shortly after the Bloom incident another controversy rocked the world of David Finkelstein, a Jewish grocer who operated a store by the gate of Ft. Myer on 2nd and Wayne Streets. “Finky’s” was a fixture in the area. David and his family had all the trappings of material success.

In 1913, Finkelstein’s house of cards began falling apart when Fega Melka Finkelstein, and baby, knocked at his front door. Fega was David’s first wife whom he had abandoned in Russia. Imagine the surprise of his American wife, Anna Korsover Finkelstein and their children. According to the newspaper account of their meeting, David denied knowing Fega and “left [Fega] and his baby lying on the floor while he went up to bed [with...] his other wife and children.”³⁵

Finkelstein had immigrated to New York around 1904 and sent for Fega and their two children a few years later. The family lived together for five years before David sent a pregnant Fega and children back to Russia so he could save enough money to go into business. They corresponded and David sent money, but eventually communication ceased. Soon after, Fega received divorce papers from a Virginia court. The documents claimed she had deserted her husband. Though poor, Fega was industrious and came to the US to find David. She traced his whereabouts from New York to Arlington and enlisted the legal help of United Hebrew Charities in Washington, DC.³⁶

The desertion of wives from the Old Country was not unprecedented. The Yiddish New York newspaper, the *Jewish Daily Forward*, in its “A *Bintel* Brief” advice column, abounded with stories of *agunah*, abandonment. At one time, the *Forward* ran articles seeking out these dead-beat husbands and fathers who often left their spouses and offspring destitute. Why did they break Jewish law and the law of human decency? For some, getting ahead was more important than family obligations. For others, the life of a single immigrant male was too lonely, separated by an ocean and differing cultures, they strayed from the fold. Or perhaps they met Americanized Jewish women who better understood their burdens and strivings for success. Some went to jail for their behavior.

There is no indication in the newspapers that David was imprisoned. The courts instructed him to provide alimony for Fega, but he initially refused to comply.³⁷ David and Anna continued to operate their grocery together for decades, so Fega bowed to the inevitable divorce. Had Anna known of his past marriage before Fega's arrival or not? Had David lied to her about his own abandonment? Regardless, his behavior towards Fega and Anna was abysmal. Their marriage could never have been the same. What became of Fega Finkelstein is unclear. David's grocery remained in operation for over 30 years, so the incident did not ruin his livelihood.

The Second-Generation **Education and Business**

“A righteous man falls down seven times and gets up.”
–Yiddish proverb

Between the World Wars, the children of Arlington's Jewish immigrant families began coming of age. As part of the second-generation, these young adults had a leg up in establishing themselves socially and economically. They had been educated in American schools, spoke English without an accent, and understood the Protestant norms of the majority culture. With these assets, they strove to enter the middle class. Many quickly began to earn more than their parents.

Before entering the business world, almost all of Arlington's second-generation Jews had schooling. The great importance of education in Jewish tradition ensured parents' willingness to provide their children as much schooling as affordable. In Arlington, most received up to a high school education (partial or full), either in Washington or at Washington-Lee after it opened in 1925. Few could afford tuition to a college for their children.

Once educated, second-generation Jews entered the competitive American workforce. Many immediately hit a wall—discrimination. The business community barred Jews from entering upper-level positions in the professional world, especially in banking, insurance, law, and industry. Systematic medical school quotas kept young Jews from becoming doctors, a highly desirable career path.³⁸

Another business impediment Jews encountered was the refusal of most banks to extend them credit. To overcome the lending gap,

the Jewish community stepped in and organized the Hebrew Free Loan Association and other mutual benefit societies. These groups provided short-term, no interest loans to aid in business development. As early as 1909, Washington, DC. boasted its own Hebrew Free Loan Association. Families could get loans from relatives and friends as well.³⁹

No doubt, anti-Jewish discrimination in the workforce rankled. Counterintuitively, it contributed to Jewish advancement as well. According to historian Henry Feingold, obstacles to high level jobs,

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either drew or compelled second-generation Jews into riskier businesses like automobile parts, real estate investment, construction, and others. By entering these fields, they filled a profitable void in the market and their risk tolerance grew. Prejudice also motivated advancement by “unleash[ing] enormous new energies to overcome the hurdles it imposed.”⁴⁰

Given the impediments to upward mobility, Arlington’s second-generation remained firmly entrenched in self-owned businesses. With education and a bit of capital, Charlie Sher opened Dependable Cleaners on Columbia Pike and Sol and Ida Cohen ran the Sher general store when Menachem retired in the mid-1930s. They branched out into furniture a little later. For many years, Irving Kisseleff kept his father’s grocery running after his passing and before starting his own Toyota dealership. These men and women, by the end of their careers, were firmly ensconced in the middle class.

For a determined few, education, a bit of moxie, and opportunity led them out of their family’s small stores and into the professions. Frank Bloom became a civil engineer and his brother, Rudolph Bloom, a doctor. Bertha Wasserman helped run Al’s Motors, and Albert Cohen operated a real estate brokerage and credit bureau. Lyman Kisseleff, after World War II, served in the Air Force for 20 years.

Depression and the New Deal

*“Worries go down better with soup than without.”
–Yiddish proverb*

During the 1920s and 1930s, Arlington experienced a large population increase, driven mostly by newcomers from other states.⁴¹ The influx helped launch the businesses of many a second-generation Jewish Arlingtonian. The Great Depression temporarily halted this progress. The lack of money in the economy hit shopkeepers hard. Charlie Sher recalled that his father Menachem lost a lot of money during the Depression and would frequently barter with customers who lacked cash. To earn extra income for his family, Herman Iskow worked in other grocery stores.

Overall, families tightened their belts and made sure the various generations had food and shelter. Many also looked out for their neighbors. Under his counter, Morris Kissileff kept a huge book of accounts of customers who owed money for their groceries. His grandson recalled, “He never went after anyone to collect any of it.” The Iskow’s kept modest expectations and remembered “the war, famine, and anti-Semitism” from the Old Country when times were particularly challenging. Others, unable to stay afloat simply closed their shops and moved on.⁴²

Arlington’s proximity to Washington, DC, and federal government jobs provided a small cushion for some of its residents during the Depression. In the 1920s, the prime employer for Arlingtonians was the federal government, which hired at all levels, from the trades and clerical to the professions. During the mid-1930s, the government increased its hiring to staff recently established New Deal agencies. President Franklin Roosevelt, for the first time, hired Jews in meaningful numbers to these positions. They answered the call, causing the number of Jews in the Washington Metropolitan area to soar, including in Arlington.

Servicing new Arlingtonians helped many a shopkeeper recover from the ravages of the Depression. It also led to an influx of additional Jewish shopkeepers. Hardware, drug, grocery, and clothing stores dotted the business landscape, as did service stations, dry cleaners, and pawnshops. What is now American Service Center, founded by

Saul Brooks and Saul Gordon, opened its doors in 1937 as an Amoco gas station. In 1938, Sara and Samuel Friedman began operating the beloved Public Shoe Store in Clarendon, and Milton Elsburg and Robert Gerber the Community Drug Company in Buckingham, the precursor of Drug Fair.

As the 1930s progressed, shopkeepers began working in Arlington but resided in Washington, DC. In 1939, Louis Chelec opened National Pawnbrokers in Rosslyn, near Key Bridge, but remained living in the District. Chelec was attracted to Arlington by the higher interest rates he could charge in Virginia. Louis's son, Ziggy, believed his father preferred living in Washington due to its established Jewish neighborhoods. He felt more comfortable being near other Jews, and his favorite deli.⁴³

Several other entrepreneurs chose to live in Washington but operate shops in Arlington. In 1940 Meyer Sharlin, in a tiny storefront on the corner of Glebe Road and Lee Highway, began Dominion Electric, the electrical supply company that is still a fixture in Arlington today. A block away, Louis Sislen opened Glebe Court Gas Station. After years of commuting to Arlington, Sislen moved his family to the county.

Anti-Semitism

“We knew, and for a very long time accepted, that being Jewish was not ‘equal,’ but ‘other.’”⁴⁴

–Ruth Gay, historian

Beginning slowly with World War I and surging in the 1920s, immigrants, especially Jews, Chinese, and Southern Europeans, became the object of great hostility in America. In 1921, Congress imposed severe limitations to immigration of these populations. In 1924, Congress passed the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act, which essentially halted most Jewish immigration to the US.

The Ku Klux Klan (KKK), emboldened and strengthened by anti-immigrant fervor, experienced a resurgence in the South, even in Arlington. Known as a “Klan town”, with a listing in the county phone book and the cadre of “well-placed small businessmen and tradesmen,” in its ranks, the KKK sought to intimidate Blacks and immigrants.⁴⁵ In

the past, Arlington's Jews may have felt their whiteness protected them from KKK hostility. As the social structure shifted in the 1920s, their vulnerability was fully exposed.

In the 1930s, the rise of Hitler in Germany alarmed Jews everywhere. News of attacks on Jews and Jewish businesses seeped into the country causing terror and dread among Jews. Could this happen in America? Most kept a low profile and did not protest anti-Semitic treatment for fear of reprisals.

In the 1920s and 1930s, anti-Semitism became more widespread in all areas of American life. Discrimination affected gains in business and employment and became entrenched in the social arena. For Arlington's second-generation Jews hoping to fully Americanize, the road was increasingly bumpy.

Jewish Arlingtonians reacted by joining welcoming community clubs like the Girl Scouts and the Freemasons, and its branches, Eastern Star and Job's Daughters. Estelle Sher Cohen and her daughters were members of these clubs in the late 1930s and 1940s.⁴⁶ Others reacted by trying to flee their Jewish identity, a very difficult undertaking.

Judaism and Jewishness

"Few could envisage a time when the shul would cease to be at the center of Jewish life."⁴⁷

—Irving Howe, historian

The success of Arlington's Jewish residents came at a cost. The strong drive to assimilate into American culture often "diluted" their Judaism. Most would describe themselves as non-observant and "high-holiday" Jews. Having grown up in a largely Protestant community, inter-faith marriage became unavoidable. Several second-generation Jews married gentiles including Joseph Hyman and Meyer Blumenthal.⁴⁸

The influx of new Jewish families during the New Deal era started to change this trajectory. Many of these men and women, mostly of Eastern European extractions, grew up deeply grounded in Judaism. They lived in large Jewish neighborhoods in the north and mid-west of the US with synagogues, kosher butchers, Jewish theatre, and cultural centers. They sought to create some of this Jewish infrastructure in Arlington, especially a *shul* in which to worship and connect with other

Jewish families. Without the synagogue, Arlington's Jews had no space in which to comfortably and confidently practice their faith.⁴⁹

In the fall of 1940, a group of new Jewish Arlingtonians established *Ohev Shalom Congregation*, a Conservative *shul*. Their first high holiday services, held at the Ashton Heights Women's Club Building, attracted sixty-six attendees. The members of the fledgling congregation turned to two long-standing county residents, Al Wasserman and Albert Cohen, to explore financing and building a permanent synagogue. Wasserman pledged substantial sums towards a building fund and Cohen "engineered the purchase of the lot and the construction of the building." Though newcomers such as Abe Beyda, Herman Schwarzman, Samuel Friedman, and many more, were the inspiration for the *shul*, Wasserman and Cohen were the most successful Jewish businessmen in the county and had the contacts and business acumen to make the *shul* a reality.⁵⁰

Early on, *Ohev Shalom*, met for high holidays and provided Jewish educational programming in the homes of members or in rented spaces in Colonial Village and the Jones Building in Clarendon. In 1942, the congregation changed its name to the Arlington Jewish Community Center, and, in 1947, broke ground for a long-awaited synagogue building on Arlington Boulevard (Fig. 9). Once established, the congregation attracted second- and third-generation Jewish Arlingtonians as well as Arlington's Jewish New Dealers. An early member, Harry Schlaffer hit upon the importance of the congregation, "Everyone seemed

Fig. 9: Arlington Jewish Center, ca. 1948.



really isolated out there and the synagogue was a force bringing them all together.”⁵¹

Conclusion

“I wouldn’t trade my living in Arlington for anything.”⁵²

–Ruth Levin, Jewish Arlingtonian

From 1900 to 1940, Arlington became the home of a growing number of Jewish residents. Despite facing discrimination, they secured a footing in Arlington, contributing to the economic and social progress of the county. Many found considerable success as small business owners while a few struggled to make ends meet. Yet, most were able to provide education and access to the middle class for their children.

Maintaining Judaism was difficult for Arlington’s Jews. Financial dictates and the desire to assimilate kept them from practicing Judaism in a meaningful way. Proximity and familial ties to Washington and Alexandria’s congregations and Jewish communities gave them a place to worship during important holidays making them less inclined to create a permanent *shul* in the county. This changed when New Deal workers settled in Arlington and brought them together as a real “community” for the first time. The Jewish population of Arlington had finally come of age.

About the Author

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Endnotes

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