

# The Milwaukee Jews

## Early history in Milwaukee

A small Jewish population lived in the Milwaukee area in the 1840s, forming the first Jewish congregation in 1848. By 1850, there were 70 Jewish families in the city. By 1907, there were 7,000 Jews living in Milwaukee. That number increased to 22,000 by 1922.

## *Countries of origin*

While some came from England, most of Milwaukee's early Jewish population came from Germany and surrounding nations of Austria, Hungary, and Bohemia. This population found a comfortable niche among the German establishment that had become the foundation of Milwaukee. German was spoken in nearly all early temples—a tradition maintained until 1912.

In time, the pattern shifted and most of the Jewish immigrants began arriving from Eastern Europe, often fleeing pogroms or other anti-Semitic attacks. Following a period of nativism in the United States during and after World War One, Milwaukee Jews began to face unfamiliar outbreaks of prejudice. In addition, the widely differing cultural backgrounds of the newer Jewish arrivals sometimes created as much tension among the older Jews as did anti-Semitism. The tension continued in the 1980s and 1990s when a new wave of Jews arrived from Russia.

## *Settling in Milwaukee*

The immigrants were very entrepreneurial. They developed retail stores all over downtown and the north side (with two early exceptions on the south side). In the early years, Broadway was one of the thriving streets for Jewish businesses. Immigrants also opened delis on Walnut Street, Vliet Street, North Avenue, Center Street, and Burleigh Street.

In 1924 the Jewish population developed their own Yiddish language newspaper, *Milwauker Wochenblat*. They also formed an extensive list of self-help agencies including (but not limited to) Jewish Family Services, the Jewish Community Center, United Jewish Appeal, and the Milwaukee Jewish Federation.

As time passed, the Jewish community became involved in the professions and organized healthcare facilities, schools, and law firms. Examples included Mount Sinai Hospital (today Aurora Sinai Medical Center), Hillel Academy, Yeshiva Elementary, and the law firms of Habush Habush & Rottier SC and Gimbel, Reilly, Geurin & Brown.

"My family has not been spiritual since my grandmother was alive. But for some reason or other we still want the foods at the various times of year. We sometimes do the Seder even though we aren't sure that we're committed to the religious parts. My kids loved getting the matzo at that time of year. We just loved it. We always had the potato pancakes at Hanukkah and would eat apples and honey at Rosh Hashanah. It's funny. We never think about special foods at any other time of the year. It's like you have a craving for that food then and something about tasting it connects you to your childhood and maybe a distant past. It's very fulfilling."

"On my father's side was a town near Kiev. And my grandfather and his cousin went out hunting one day. And while they were gone—I don't know if it was more than a day or two—but their entire village was killed by a pogrom that came through. Everyone was killed and they were the only two survivors of their village . . . And on my mother's side, my great grandparents were kicked out of Russia, and went to Poland. And my grandparents were born were born in Poland. And then they were kicked out of Poland, and then they went on to Israel. And so my mother was born in Israel and immigrated to the United States in 1948."

*Quotes of Jewish informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.*

Like Jews throughout America, many Milwaukee Jews began to look outside their local community and became involved in two political arenas--Socialism and the growing Zionist movement, which urged the return of Jews to Palestine. Two Milwaukeeans played integral roles in these arenas. See below.

*Meet two of your past Jewish neighbors*

### Victor Berger

Victor L. Berger (1860 –1929) was a founding member of the organization that would become the Socialist Party of America. While born in Austria, he'd immigrated to the United States and settled in Milwaukee, both on North 2nd Street and on Clark Street, on the city's near North Side. (See photo<sup>i</sup>.)

Born to Jewish parents, Julia and Ignatz Berger, Victor had attended the Gymnasium at Leutschau. In the United States he became a journalist and helped establish the "Sewer Socialist" movement in Milwaukee—called this because of the emphasis on practical rather than ideologically driven reforms. Berger's German background helped him integrate into Milwaukee's elite circles, where he taught German in the public schools. And the city's strong labor force helped him develop a following. See the documentary, *The Cultural Roots of Milwaukee's Socialist Movement* by Urban Anthropology Inc.

He was elected as the first Socialist to the House of Representatives from the Milwaukee area. During World War One, Berger publicized his anti-interventionist views and was convicted of violating the Espionage Act, which resulted in his losing his congressional seat—a verdict later overturned by the Supreme Court. He went on to serve three successive terms in the House.



"In my childhood a common expression was 'He will Jew you out of something.' That meant that he was going to cheat, swindle you out of something. That expression is not used that much anymore, but the idea is still there. My mother used to say that Jews tip more in restaurants just to overcome the stingy stereotype. I know that Jews give a large amount to charities."

"We're a small community in Milwaukee and getting smaller, but we've never lacked for communication. Perhaps it is because we are so small. We've always had a Jewish newspaper or two in Milwaukee. The [name of newspaper] has been in circulation since the 1920s."

"Maybe we secular Jews need to decide exactly what our culture is. If we are not religious, in what ways are we Jews? What are our common denominators? Social justice work? A mainly professional class?"

*Quotes of Jewish informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.*

### Golda Mabowehz Meir

Born in Russia to parents Morris and Bella Mabowehz, Golda grew up on Milwaukee's Near North Side. Her family first settled on 6th and Walnut Street on the border of today's Hay Market and Hillside neighborhoods in the years following the turn of the 20th century. There the family lived in the building where they ran a grocery store. In her later memoirs Golda wrote about the excitement of being in Milwaukee with the great department stores like Schuster's and the endless procession of cars, trolleys and shiny

bicycles on the street. In the neighborhood, Golda attended Fourth Street Grade School (today's Golda Meir School). She actually began her activism at the school when she organized a fundraiser to pay for her classmates' textbooks. (See childhood photo<sup>ii</sup> below.)

Golda's family soon moved deeper into today's Hillside neighbor-

hood—at 2136 N. 10th Street, where Golda began attending North Division High School. During this time she met and became romantically involved with Morris Myerson (name later changed to Meir), who worked as a painter and a writer. Both became very interested in Zionism. With her parents urging her to avoid marrying too early, Golda went on to college and graduated from Milwaukee Normal School—today the University of

Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Following graduation, she took a job at the Milwaukee Public Library for 20 cents an hour.

She and Morris married. They rented their first unit in Milwaukee's Hillside neighborhood and in 1919 moved to 13th and Juneau (then Chestnut Street) in today's West Town neighborhood. In spring of 1921, Golda and Morris left Milwaukee for Palestine, determined to play a salient role in the struggle for a Jewish homeland.

The rest of Golda's story is history. She became chief negotiator between the Jews of Palestine and the British Mandatory Authority. When Israel was officially established in 1948, she served as Minister of Labour and Foreign Minister, and was elected Prime Minister of Israel in 1969. To this day, she is regarded as one of the most remarkable world leaders.



"Many of the older people spoke Yiddish back then. [In] my own community today, actually speaking Yiddish is rare. Some of us—the older—remember how to understand it. There are very few Yiddish speakers around now, but there were quite a few in the 1950s."

*Quote of Jewish informant from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.*

### *Sherman Park area*

The Sherman Park neighborhood on Milwaukee's northwest side was historically home to many members of the Jewish population. The Sherman Park area (encompassing today's Milwaukee neighborhoods of Grasslyn Manor, Roosevelt Grove, St. Joseph's, Sunset Heights, Sherman Park, and Uptown) began developing in the late teens and early twenties of the twentieth century. Milwaukeeans generally were attracted to the suburban look of the blocks with their wide, tree-lined streets and boulevards. But the beautiful homes were the neighborhood's signature. The large bungalows, duplexes, and Period Revival homes were finely crafted from brick, wood, and stone. Many Jewish families began joining Czechs and Germans who were moving

to the area. Soon the Jewish population was 10,000 strong in Sherman Park, and kosher markets and Jewish delis became part of the landscape. Some of the Jewish notables were raised in the neighborhood, including Herb Kohl and Bud Selig.

A Jewish Museum of Milwaukee docent learning about Milwaukee's connections to Golda Meir and the State of Israel in the Museum's permanent exhibit  
(photo courtesy of Jewish Museum of Milwaukee)



## *Meet two more of your past Jewish neighbors*

### **"Bud" Selig**

In 1940, Allan Huber ("Bud") Selig lived on North 61st Street near Center, on the border of today's Enderis Park neighborhood (see photo<sup>iii</sup> to right). He and his brother Joseph lived with parents Benjamin, an immigrant from Romania, and Marie, an immigrant from the Ukraine. The family was Jewish.

At an early age, Bud took an interest in baseball. His interest was prompted by his college-educated mother who took him and his brother to games of the minor league Milwaukee Brewers at Borchert Field.

As a teenager, Bud attended Washington High School in Sherman Park, where in the early 1950s he was a classmate of Jerome Silberman (who later went on to acting greatness under the name of Gene Wilder), and Herb Kohl (who later owned the Milwaukee Bucks and became a U.S. Senator from Wisconsin).

Selig later graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a degree in American history and political science. His roommate at Madison was Herb Kohl.

After graduation, Selig joined his father Benjamin in the family's car leasing enterprise. The business was successful enough to allow Bud to invest heavily in the Milwaukee Braves, after the team moved from Boston to Milwaukee. When in 1964 Selig learned that the team's major owners



were relocating the team to Atlanta, he divested his stock. Insistent on returning baseball to his hometown, he purchased the Seattle Pilots in bankruptcy court in 1970 and renamed them the Milwaukee Brewers, after his beloved minor league team. Under his tenure, the Brewers went on to the World Series in 1982 and built a new stadium, Miller Park.

After his family sold the Milwaukee Brewers, Selig remained in the game, becoming the ninth Commissioner of Baseball in 1998. Under his leadership, major league baseball experienced (1) a 400 percent increase in revenue and annual record-breaking attendance, (2) the introduction of the wild card, interleague play, and (3) enforcement of ethical prohibitions including gambling on games and the use of steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs.

### The Kohl family

Sometime in the 1930s, Max and Mary (nee Hiken) Kohl moved from Clement Avenue in Bay View to a newly purchased home in the Sunset

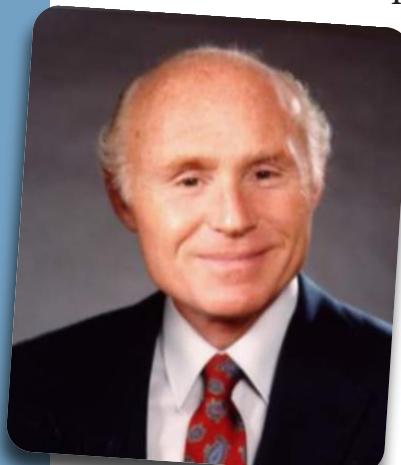
Heights/Sherman Park neighborhood. Their house, at 3259 North 51st Street, was valued at \$1,500, a modest price even by Great Depression standards. Max was a Jewish immigrant from Poland and Mary a Jewish immigrant from Russia. Although Max had only completed the 7th grade, he proved to be an aggressive entrepreneur. He'd already opened a grocery store in Bay View and was on his way to opening several more.

The couple's children all eventually played roles in the Kohl business, which over the years expanded to 50 grocery stores, as well as several department stores, pharmacies, and liquor stores.

But the child that grew to the greatest heights in terms of service to Milwaukee and Wisconsin was Herbert Kohl, called "Herb." (See photo<sup>iv</sup>.)

Having earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Wisconsin in 1956 (where he roomed with future baseball commissioner Bud Selig) and an MBA from Harvard Business School in 1958, Herb Kohl rose to the office of president of Kohl's. Some years after selling the Kohl's empire in 1979, Herb sought a new career in politics. He ran for and was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1989, where he served until 2013 when he did not seek reelection.

But Herb Kohl had already been heeding another calling. Following the example of his former roommate, Bud Selig, who had purchased the



bankrupt Seattle Pilots in 1970 and brought the team to Milwaukee, Herb Kohl purchased the Milwaukee Bucks of the NBA in 1985. One of the goals of the purchase was to ensure that the team remained in Milwaukee. In 2014, Kohl sold the bucks to Wesley Edens and Marc Lasry, negotiating a deal that included a new arena and would again ensure the team's tenure in Milwaukee.

However, as the Jewish population became more prosperous they began leaving Sherman Park for Milwaukee's northern suburbs such as Glendale, River Hills, Fox Point, and Mequon. For nearly twenty years the Jewish presence in Sherman Park nearly disappeared. But this all changed in the 1990s when a new community of Jews began migrating to the area.

## Recent history

The original Jewish population in Sherman Park had been a mix of Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, and non-practicing Jews. Many of these families

continue to live throughout the City of Milwaukee. And many continued working toward larger social and political issues, such as resisting discrimination against not only Jews, but African Americans, Muslims, and other groups targeted by intolerance and hate. Among these efforts have been a blockade of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) building, speaking out about attacks on Muslims, and advocacy work with America's Black Holocaust Museum and the James Cameron Foundation.

However, the new arrivals in the Sherman Park area were not the Jews of old. They are Chasidic Jews seeking an affordable community near a synagogue. The synagogue they

sought was Beth Jehudah at 3100 North Fifty-Second Street where the notable Twerskis served as rabbis. Rabbi Jacob Twerski was descended from celebrated rabbis in Eastern Europe. He founded Congregation Beth Jehudah and was succeeded by his son Michael and grandson Benzion.



"You see extreme views among Jews, I think. You have the founders of socialism and communism, and their backbone parties, being Jewish. Then you had some rabbis that joined the Moral Majority in the late eighties."

"Traditionally, we've given to charitable causes that are not just Jewish or Israeli. We've had foundations that support causes of the general citizenry. One woman, who was actually a Gentile who had converted to Judaism, founded one of the largest foundations in Milwaukee . . . They give, not just to Jewish and Israeli causes, but mostly to the underprivileged and community causes."

"There were two specific movements that happened in Judaism which happened since the late 1960s. What you had in the 1960s in Milwaukee was a very strong periphery and a very weak core. You had a lot of Jews with an erosion of religiosity. One of the things that happened is that Jews gained greater freedom in America, which turned out to be the curse of intermarriage and assimilation which occurred at that time. We were insulated from the factors of anti-Semitism. Today you have a weak periphery and that core is very strong. The core is a dramatic growth of orthodoxy."

*Quotes of Jewish informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.*

The new Jewish community in Sherman Park has continued to grow and is now over 200 families strong. In addition to the synagogue, they have developed their own self-help organizations and a school, Yeshiva Elementary School (YES). See a member of this new community profiled below.

*Meet one of your current Jewish neighbors*



### James A. Hiller

Jim Hiller was raised in the Greater Milwaukee area, having graduated from Nicolet High School. From there he received a bachelor's degree at Northwestern University and a law degree from George Washington University Law School. He currently lives and practices law in the Sherman Park area and acts as executive director for the Burleigh Street Community Development Association. An Orthodox Jew, he worships at Congregation Beth Jehudah.

Hiller did not always live in the Milwaukee area. At one time his career took him and his growing family to the West Coast. "My wife and I lived in California for about four years and moved back in late 1979 or early 1980 to be closer to my family," he stated. "We started out in Brown Deer and then moved to Glendale and then finally to the West Side in about 1983 to be closer to the Orthodox Jewish community which did, has, and continues to bring more meaning to our lives."

When asked about his greatest accomplishments in life, Hiller said it was "being a loving parent and grandparent." In addition to wife Lisa, he has seven children and over 20 grandchildren. The family follows a religious way of life. They also enjoy reading, camping, and following the Packers and Brewers.



"We have Jewish families that came together in this neighborhood . . . A lot are young with lots of kids. It's a conglomerate of people from all over the country."

"The school was founded over a decade ago [quote from 2005]. About half a day is spent on Jewish studies and half on standard curricula. But our test scores, when compared to the secular schools, are outstanding."

*Quotes of Jewish informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.*

<sup>i</sup> Photo attribution: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victor\\_L.\\_Berger#/media/File:Victor\\_L.\\_Berger.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victor_L._Berger#/media/File:Victor_L._Berger.jpg)

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