

Life on Pittsburgh's 'Hill':

*Some Views and Values
of Jews Who Lived There
Before the 1940s*

by Hyman Richman

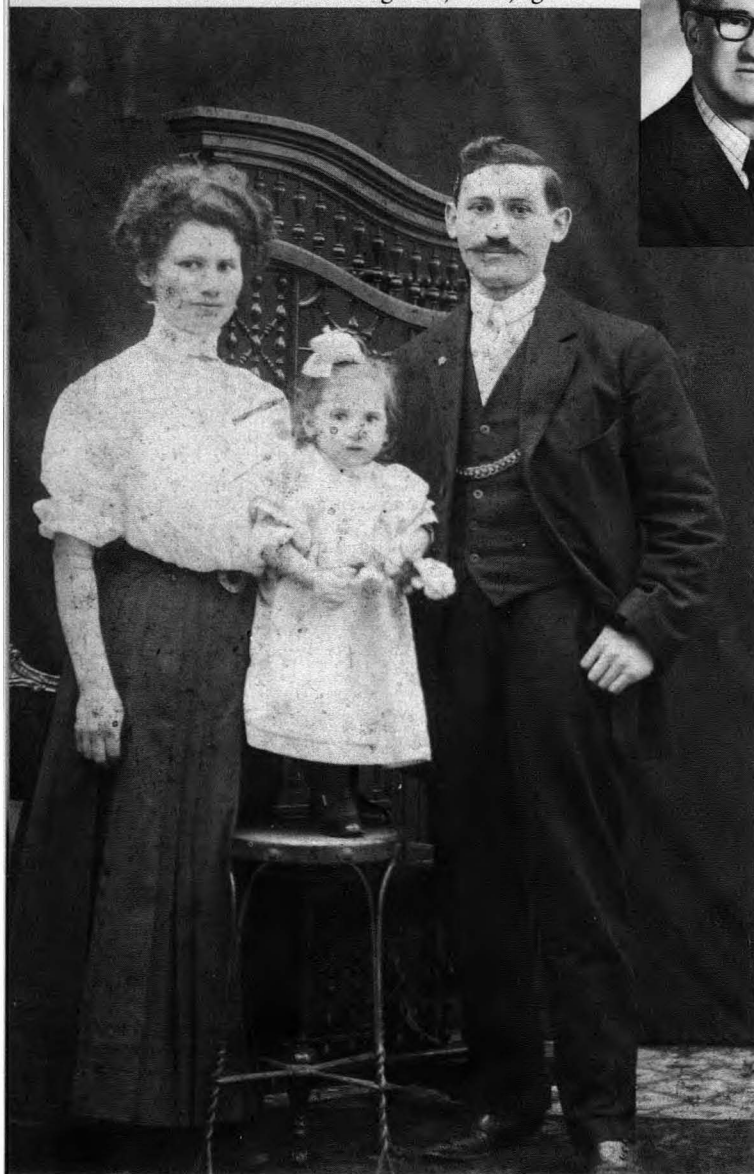
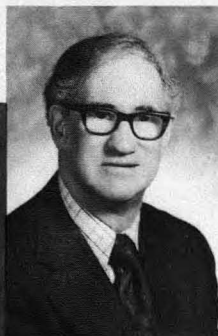
THE thread going through this story is the tenacity of the Jews in the face of adversity and the amazing changes that have taken place within our lifetimes. A mere 50 years ago, the majority of Pittsburgh's Jews were scratching for a living, self-employed in small business or working in low paying jobs with limited opportunities for advancement. Yet, to use a Yiddish expression, they were able to *mach a leban* — make a living. As my dad, an old socialist put it, "It's pretty hard to criticize capitalism when it works so well."

Hyman Richman has been a mediator, consultant and federal investigator on organized labor issues for 40 years. Active in Jewish community affairs, Richman holds a master's degree in Labor Relations and Personnel from the University of Pittsburgh. This article is adapted from a talk on Hill District history that Richman delivers to local civic groups. *Photograph:* The Hill has always been Pittsburgh's major new-immigrant neighborhood. In an alley off Crawford Street in 1926 is Sidney Teller, executive director of the Hill's principal charitable organization, the Irene Kaufmann Settlement.





The author, *right*, and his parents Sarah and Samuel Richman, c. 1910, with one of the three Richman daughters, Pearl, age 4.



My story is by no means a scientific or objective summation; it's more or less a few personal accounts of a small group of people. My viewpoint is much like that of many other people, and how do I know about these things? I lived there. Many of us who lived on the "Hill" in Pittsburgh remember what the life was like.

In preparing this material, a few friends and I tried to estimate what percentage of the old neighborhood was Jewish until the late '30s. Estimates ran the gamut — someone said 90 percent of the population on the "Hill"; someone else estimated it was 50 percent. I said it was 25 percent. And I'm supposedly the *maïven* — the expert! Well, the first estimate is the closest: a very large percentage of the

Jews came from the Hill and spoke or understood Yiddish. But for those who don't understand the language, I'll explain a few expressions which so vividly described our views and values. In doing so, I'll often refer to my father, Sam Richman, a 1906 Russian emigrant who so richly influenced my life.

Religion played a very important role. My father, being a socialist, didn't think organized religion was much good, but he used to say, "I want you to be a good Jew. Stay out of the synagogues." He saw no dichotomy there.

There was never any question about us being Jewish, even though he was not religious. Somebody met him on Centre Avenue and said, "Are you still a free-thinker, an atheist?" And he said, "I am still an atheist, thank God." And he didn't see where it was funny, because, as a Jew, if something was to be blessed, you always wound up by saying "thank God," as a matter of course. And despite heated debates about the importance of observing *halacha* (Jewish law and tradition), there was no question about remembering we were Jewish. There was always that oneness underneath. Those values were the fabric of life on the Hill.

I left the Hill in 1941, some time after most of my friends had gone. What was my ticket out? I studied labor relations at the University of Pittsburgh. But my basic education started at the Labor Lyceum on Miller Street, which was owned by the Jewish fraternal organization, Workman's Circle. Also, I'm probably the last living newsboy who carried the *Jewish Daily Forward*, a Yiddish paper from New York with a Socialist slant. I still recall my dad reading aloud from the "Bintel Brief" (a packet of letters), which was a popular column in that paper. It was a forerunner of "Dear Abby" and "Ann Landers." These are written by twin sisters who, growing up in Sioux City, Iowa, listened to "Bintel Brief" stories. Ballantine Books has published *The Bintel Brief*, a collection of the most famous columns. And the problems discussed in the columns weren't the sort of thing that you have today — you know, "Should I live with this guy or not?" The burning issues addressed in the "Bintel Brief" dealt with problems facing Jewish immigrants. For example, a woman wrote: "I work in the clothing factory and a man who just came from Europe asked me out, and everybody in the shop says don't go out with him because I hear he is married, with a wife and four kids in Europe. What should I do?" Those were interesting questions, important to the times. It wasn't gossip, *National Enquirer* stuff. These were the kinds of problems confronting the Jews in Pittsburgh and across the country.

Many of the immigrants worked in Pittsburgh's cigar factories, and when I was a little kid, I had a job in which I was called a "stripper." The stripper was someone who pulled the stem out of the tobacco leaf,

and it was the kind of job children did. At age 9, I stripped with my father on the kitchen floor at home in the evenings. And if you looked into many living room windows in those days, you could see whole families spending their evenings stripping tobacco leaves. In the morning, the fathers and even some mothers and sisters took these leaves to the factories to make a few dollars rolling cigars.

Cigar workers were an important part of Pittsburgh's early labor history, because they unionized. For a time, my father was head of the cigar makers union. He would sometimes welcome the national president, Samuel Gompers, to Pittsburgh. (Gompers went on to found the American Federation of Labor, the AF of L.) My father at first wondered if Gompers was Jewish, but then he said to me: "But with all the anti-Semitism, who would insist he was Jewish if he wasn't?" So on those grounds he accepted Samuel Gompers as a Jew. He later found out Gompers's parents were "Litvaks" who migrated from Lithuania to England.

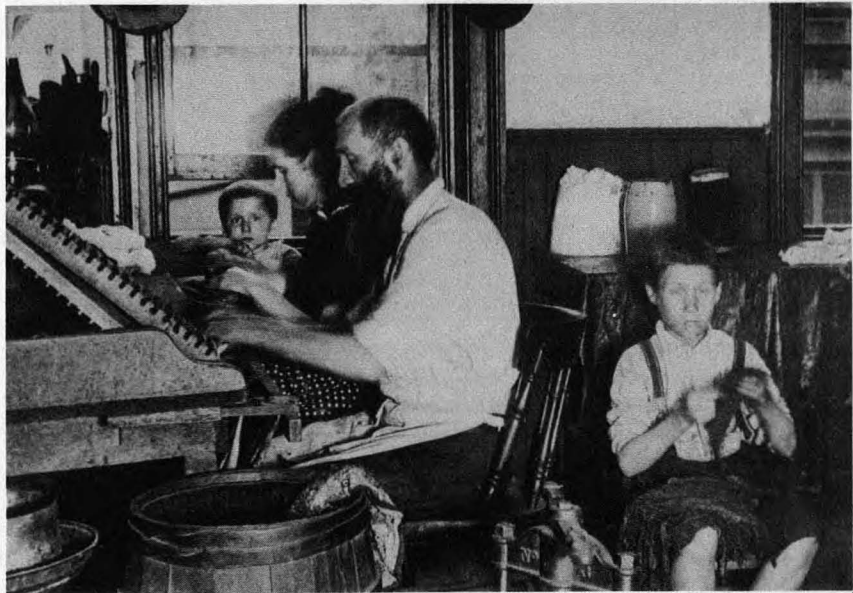
Because few places employed Jews, they often had to work in sweatshops from dawn to dusk. Others went into business for themselves. Because the Richmans had neither the means nor the drive to open a independent business, my father worked in one of these cigar factories. The shops were very interesting and had a unique quality — no ordinary sweatshop. True, people were paid by the "piece," so every worker had to make as many cigars as possible; but people didn't just spend their days making tobies and stogies. The workers would discuss all kinds of things. A popular topic was the matter of low wages, and how to get more. As I recall, this led Marsh, a leading cigar factory, to move to Wheeling from Pittsburgh. Mountaineer labor was cheaper. Block Brothers was here in the beginning, then they moved their snuff and chewing tobacco operation to West Virginia. (They kept using Pennsylvania tobacco, a very strong tobacco used in the shops of Pittsburgh until the 1930s but now seldom used except in Italian Parodi cigars. Incidentally, one of the claimed uses for those powerful Pittsburgh cigars was as an extermination agent to smoke out unwanted bugs at home!)

Anyway, the discussions were fantastic at these cigarshops, while the workers rolled and cut thousands and thousands of cigars. Keep in mind these people had to work a whole day and there was no opportunity or money to go to school when they arrived from Europe. But these

resourceful immigrants found a way to fill the gap: many shops had a "reader." Now keep in mind these were piece workers. They made \$2 or \$3 a day, and this was a big deal. But their love of learning was so great that many would give a few of their "pieces" to the reader, so the reader also made a living.

The reader read to his co-workers from many papers with differing points of view — the *Freiheit*, the *Tageblat*, the *Morgan (Morning) Journal*, the *Forward*. One advantage to this system, too, was that only one copy of each paper was bought and shared by the group. But the reader wasn't limited to newspapers. I found out years later how well the readers "educated" their co-workers when I studied English at Pitt. I came home one day and started talking about Shakespeare and my father corrected me. I asked him where he learned about *Macbeth*, and he said, "We studied it in the shop."

Much of the credit for the level of education acquired by the people of the Hill goes to the Carnegie Library on Wylie Avenue. It had stacks and stacks of non-English books — in Yiddish, Italian, Polish, even some Armenian and Greek. That was because the workshops were not just Jewish; immigrants from many countries worked and lived in the Hill. From Fullerton Street to Roberts Street were the Jewish shops, in the center of the Hill. But there were, of course, Polish sections, and below Fullerton Street, the Italian section. I first learned of the importance of shop readers when I went to Israel about 10 years ago with a group of trade unionists. There I met this fellow from the retail clerks union, which has absorbed the cigar makers union, and told him about the readers in the old cigar shops on the Hill. And he said, "You just answered something that I wondered about for years. We have a few contracts



A family at home making stogies in the Hill, c. 1905. There were about 100 Pittsburgh cigar factories in 1900 — most in Hill district homes.

in Florida, and the contract — from 60, 70, 80 years ago — has language in it to this day that if employees want to have a chair for a reader, one must be

provided by the employer but the employees must pay for the reader." To me, that is a touching carry-over from the Hill's past.

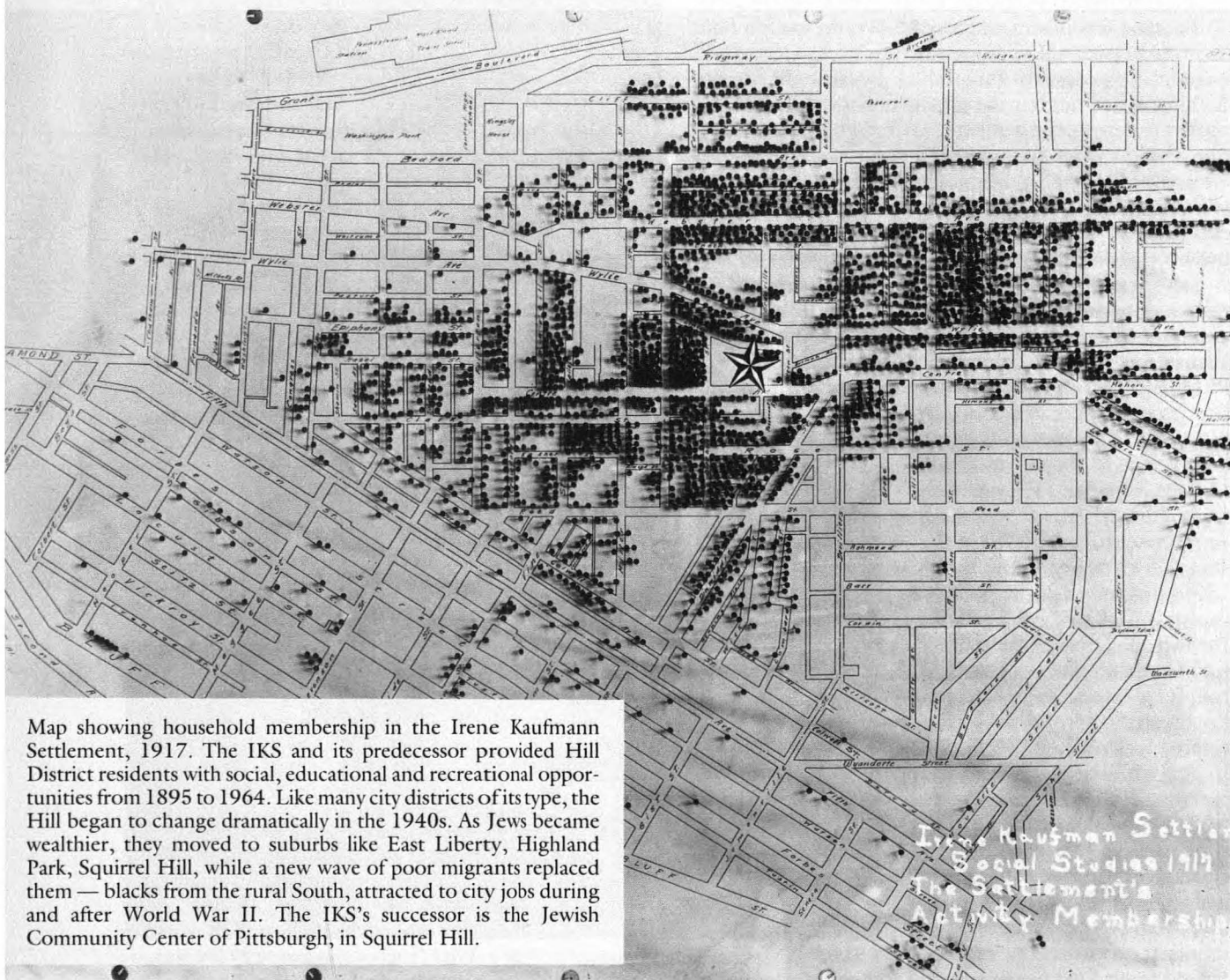
There are many other stories. I remember my Uncle Ben, who became a union steward. Every Thursday, he collected union dues. Well, it seemed that an attractive young woman named Lena was always first in

line with her dues. Uncle Ben, who had his private prejudices, explained that even though she was a Rumanian, she was "all right" — she had a lot of union spirit. They began to date, and not long after that, they were married. Since they didn't have either the money or the time for a honeymoon, on Monday they went to work as usual. On Thursday, everyone lined up to pay dues, but Lena wasn't in line. "What is this?" Uncle Ben asked her. "It used to be you were first in line; now you won't even get up." Then she said, "I didn't care about the union. I wanted you."

He was a big, powerful guy who stood six-four. Years later, when they moved to Cincinnati, he went to apply at the Southern Railway and he had a European Jewish accent. And the superintendent asked, "What are ya?" Sometimes people would try to hide being Jewish: "I am a Russian" or "a Pole." Ben says, "I'm Jewish." The guy said, "We don't hire Jews around here." Ben reached over and grabbed



Built in 1899, the Carnegie Library on Wylie Avenue was a Hill district hub, in part because of its large collection of foreign language books. As immigration to the Hill slowed, the number of foreign languages available in books diminished, to 11 by 1924 and to virtually none by 1949.



Lighting Sabbath candles, c. 1932, at the Jewish Home for the Aged on Brackenridge Avenue in the Hill. Founded in 1906, the home relocated in 1933 to Brown's Hill Road in Squirrel Hill.



the guy, pulled him across the desk, and said, "You're looking at the first one." He was hired, and he joined the railworkers union.

In those days, ethnic organizations offered more than mere group identity. Immigrants from every country valued the benefits that came from membership in groups. Burial benefits are one example. The one thing Jews had in common with all Europeans was belief in the right, even if you lived poor, to a decent burial. All the groups had cemeteries and offered insurance to cover burial costs. The Jewish Arbeiter Ring insurance was very interesting. Not only did it insure members for a decent burial, it provided benefits for people when they were sick and out of work. The Ring met another need. It had a *shula* (school) which could well have been called the "Shalom Alechem School." It was at the Labor Lyceum on Miller Street, with classes in Yiddish.

I went to that school, and like others, held the *lehrer* (teacher) in high regard. He was, as my father explained, a very fine teacher: "He went to Columbia, you know." He would write in Yiddish on the board, and we would copy it. I copied along with the others, but I must admit, I didn't know what I was copying. And my father would ask, "How is it going in school?" and I would say things were going very well. It so happened that the *lehrer* not only wrote in

Yiddish on the blackboard, but he also wrote a sentence or two evaluating the Yiddish we had written in our books. What did I know? I just copied sentences. My dad took one look at what the teacher had written in my notebook and he went into orbit. "For three bucks a month the *lehrer* writes, 'Nit goot,' you're 'no good.'" So much for my formal education in Yiddish. I was a *shula* dropout.

But, even for dropouts there were many activities available to young people in the Hill. One of life's greatest pleasures was to go to the *schvitz* (steam bath) on a Saturday afternoon. One of the reasons for the *schvitz* was that very few homes had baths. Many had a big, galvanized tub for bathing, and as you moved from poor to upper poor, maybe your family got a bathtub. So the *schvitz* was very important and this is one reason why the "IKS" (Irene Kaufmann Settlement house) had baths. There was also the Columbia Baths, the Daniel's Baths, and later, the Arena Baths and Kalson's Baths. My father's personal favorite was Daniel's, because, he explained, there were "too many *Roumanishe*" (Rumanian Jews) at Kalson's.

We would have these wonderful, wonderful arguments at the *schvitz*. Now keep in mind that we would go on Saturday. If you went on Saturday, it meant that you were a socialist or communist, by

definition, because the religious Jews went to the synagogue on Saturday, not the baths. The baths were very democratic, everybody nude and with a sheet. And there would be an aisle in the middle where there would be tables and you would have a *glezela tay* (a glass of tea). You'd have your hands around it and you'd put a cube of sugar between your teeth and drink the tea through the sugar. On one side of the aisle were the "*linka*" and on the other side was the "*rechta*," the left wing and the right wing. The right wing wasn't what we think of today as the right wing — the Moral Majority and Jerry Falwell; it was the socialists. The left wing were the communists. What disputes they would have, these bathers to the left and bathers to the right! During the week they would do research, everything else, and then they'd have these unending disputations that would go on in the middle aisle. If you wanted to sleep you moved out to beds on the side. I had no idea of the value of these bath sessions until I started college. When I walked in I found I was at the level of someone with four years of public education.

I remember Daniel's *schvitz* very distinctly because it was about 10 doors from the house of orthodox Rabbi Kaplan. When we would come out of the baths on these Saturdays, with all the communists, the short way home to our house up on Webster Avenue was to go straight up past Rabbi Kaplan's house. We never did. My father said, "It will hurt the Rabbi." It wasn't that he felt uncomfortable, but he didn't want the Rabbi to feel uncomfortable. I admired him for that.

But the one story about the baths that sticks with me very much is about my father's prime enemy, a *linka*. We'll call him Lev. He and my father would have these terrible arguments. So one day we walked in — it was 50 cents for an adult and 25 cents for a kid — we pay, my father looks around, and says, "Where's Lev?" Someone said he was "*zeyr krank*" (sick). So we get dressed, we don't go in the shower. And we went out into the bitter cold and walked from down there on Epiphany Street, up to near Herron Avenue, quite a walk, about four miles. We go to Lev's house and my father says, "How do you feel?" I'm looking at this... you know, here I am, a kid looking at his dad who, just an hour before, couldn't wait to tell this Lev guy how stupid he was.

We walked out of Lev's house, and here we paid 75 cents, and we didn't go to the *schvitz* and we walked in the snow all the way because he'd heard the man was sick. I said to him, "I can't understand it." And he looked at me in wonderment, and he said, "*Zindela, er iz a nar, ober er is mine frient.*" ("The man is a fool, but he's my friend.") That civil libertarian attitude will stick with me the rest of my life. You find a great deal of this attitude among Jews and I think a lot of it came from that time. The recognition and acceptance of diverse points of view, I think, is exceedingly important. But, this wasn't just a Jewish

tradition; it was and is an American tradition, too. The right to freedom of speech was something the immigrants cherished when they came to this country.

At almost every street corner in the Hill on Saturday night there would be someone who was arguing for something. One guy could talk on any topic on any side and sometimes would charge \$5 to give a speech, and he provided his own step-ladder. He'd come up the step-ladder and talk and people would hold court. It was like Hyde Park. Amazing. All kinds of viewpoints.

There was also the matter of using neighborhood resources, and here a European tradition really carried over. People rarely went to court — that was for others. The Jews took their problems to the Rabbi, whose word was law. And, there was another resource, Anna Heldman, at the IKS.

Now, Anna Heldman had in her head the case history of every Jew on the Hill. You walked in, and she didn't have to reach for a file. She knew about you. She was an amazing woman who had been a nurse and then developed a social work department at the Settlement house. She never went to social work school, but there was no domestic problem that she could not settle or help to solve. I remember once when a man and his wife came to the diminutive "Mrs. Heldman." He was a great big guy, and I remember Mrs. Heldman balling out this guy and reducing him to tears because he had struck his wife, and him promising never to do that again. When Anna Heldman died, she was buried from the Smithfield Street Lutheran Church. She had spoken a beautiful Yiddish and everyone had just assumed she was Jewish. I worked at the Settlement for a while and I knew she went to church every Sunday morning and people just took it for granted she was Jewish because she understood and worked so well within the culture. She was a real "*mensch*" (a good person), who transcended differences.

There are many other tales that convey the flavor of life on the Hill. In certain areas of the Hill ladies would whisper from windows, but it was part of the tradition that males from the neighborhood didn't go to such places; strangers went there. But near our

house, a middle-aged woman moved in and she had with her a number of women younger than her. My dad had joked, "Only in America can one woman have so many daughters the same age." Years later I figured out what the double meaning was and why



Anna Heldman, well-known Kaufmann Settlement caseworker



Although the Hill had a bustling social and commercial life, the residents — Jewish, Italian, Polish, Armenian, Greek and

black families — often had to rely on charity. A Kaufmann Settlement nurse visits a patient's home in 1920.

my mother was so very, very angry about that situation.

I got a kick out of so many of my dad's attitudes. Although he was a free-thinker, as he got older he remembered how to pray. I remember once he was quite sick and was praying, and I said, "Pop, you are a hypocrite." He says, "No, I'm just bettin' on both teams." Another thing he would say was, "No shame in being poor, but not to be decent and learned — that's a real sin." That was implicitly the thinking all around because the most unsavory character on the Hill still had respect for the learned man. The character could be in the rackets or anything else, but he had a respect for the guy who was learned, and this was a carry-over from the European tradition.

And my father was always a strong union man, and he always observed picket lines. We bought only bread with the union sticker on it, and I remember I would sometimes eat it by mistake. They would stick it on the heel of the bread, and it was hard to get off.

There were stories that organized crime operated in the Hill and that crimes were planned at a certain restaurant. I wasn't privy, of course, but my brothers told me that when gangsters would come through town they would stop at this one place. My understanding was that there was arson, maybe some embezzlement, some hijacking, but comparatively



Colwell Street in the Hill, c. 1928.

few crimes of violence. In fact, during the Watergate hearings — we stayed up half the night listening to them — a friend of mine called and he wants to talk about Watergate. I'm sleepy, I've been up half the night, and I say, "Look, unless there is something new, I don't want to talk about it." And he said, "No, it is something old."

He said, "You see what happens when you hand a job like this to a bunch of educated WASPS. They have surreptitious entry, electronic detection, everything else." That's not how it would have been

handled in the old days, he said. The Watergate Hotel would have been burned down, there wouldn't have been witnesses, and if there were, they would have been taken care of, he said. "There would have been no witnesses. You hand this to a bunch of WASPS and they really screw it up."

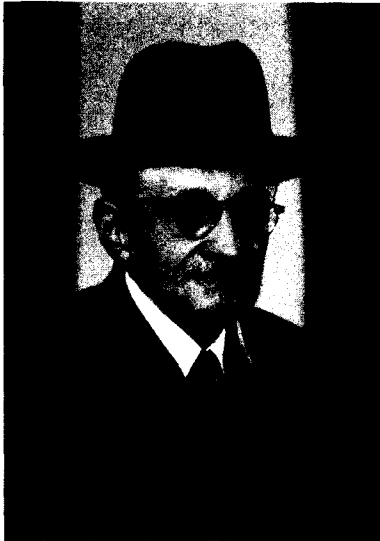
There are many other stories about how life was lived on the Hill. On Miller Street, just a few doors up from the Labor Lyceum, were two synagogues. I never knew them by name. There was the big one with the steps going up and the one next door. Interestingly enough, even the socialists went to synagogue on Yom Kippur. This included my dad. It was part of being Jewish, I guess. We went to the one with the steps going up, authentically orthodox — no ventilation allowed. It was the afternoon of Yom Kippur, well into the fast and everything, and these old Jews come out on the landing to get a little air, and just then some Italian kids came up the street and started to yell anti-semitic things. Right around the corner there was a place called Ludini's. That's where the bums would go, the gamblers. And many of the religious Jews, as they would walk down the street, would spit on the sidewalk there. These were the dregs as far as they were concerned, the dregs of the Jewish community. So, these Italian kids are coming up the street yelling anti-semitic things and it is Yom Kippur. People were out on the landing, and there was real consternation. Someone slips around the corner to Ludini's and tells the bums, these gamblers, what is going on. These guys come marching around the corner and start beating the hell out of these kids. It is a day of peace, and violence is going on and not only that, it is the dregs of the Jewish community, as far as these old Jews are concerned. Finally, they can't stand it. They start yelling, "Hit 'em, hit 'em!" And these kids could barely get away. From that point on, I would guess, there was very little spitting on the sidewalk at Ludini's.

I always got a kick out of one thing that happened with my dad. There was a very religious man who was elected president of a synagogue. Now the background is to remember that most people had no money. Generally, the ones who had money were professionals who moved out to the East End or south of Forbes Avenue, not north of Forbes, or the racketeers who stayed in the Hill. And yet the synagogue had a mortgage on it, so sometimes the congregation swallowed its pride a little, and very often perhaps not the most pious man, but the one who could help pay the mortgage, would become the president. But in this one case, the man was very pious, tremendously so. My father, upon learning the man had been elected president, said, very seriously: "I didn't know he was a bootlegger."

As far as politics were concerned, you had all points of view, and I had never heard of the Democratic party until Franklin Roosevelt. But politics was always something on the street; I mean, it was going

on all the time. And there was a great deal of interest. Many of the Jews became leaders in the unions and carried a lot of their social values into those situations. Some of the old socialists, of course, became New Dealers, and some of them even recently became Republicans!

I used to carry the *Jewish Forward*, and that gave

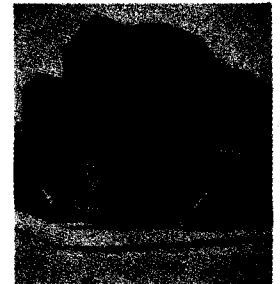


me the opportunity to really network the area, as I would have 100 customers. Selling the papers would bring in \$1 a day: 3 cents and I kept 1 cent, and 5 cents on Sunday for the brown sepia issue. I didn't get any tips — people used to pinch my cheek instead — except from one person. I could never figure him out

because he would buy just the Sunday issue. The paper was a nickel, but he would give me a dime; it worked out the same as buying a paper every day, so he wasn't saving any money. Years later, I learned from someone that this man who had always tipped me could not read and write. So he would get the Sunday issue because it had pictures.

And the anti-climax, I think, is better than the story itself. I was told that he was so well respected that shortly before his death, he had been elected recording secretary of his synagogue. But since he was such a busy man, they had also elected an assistant to do the work.

There was a feeling of community in the Hill that made us sensitive to the problems of the less fortunate among us. There was a sordid side to the area as well, "characters" who survived in this free environment. There were poor boys and girls who struggled and succeeded in academia and entered the professions, business and public service (among them Pittsburgh's current mayor). Affluence led to the outward movement of Jews, Greeks, Italians, Irish, Armenians, Lithuanians, and others. In time, new groups moved to the area. In the years to come, they will tell their own stories of life and living on the "Hill" in Pittsburgh. ■



Founded in 1914, Keser Torah, *above*, 2043 Webster Avenue, was an Orthodox Jewish congregation whose members immigrated from the Russian province of Volinia. At left is the congregation's Men's Study Group, c. 1925. Keser Torah's Rabbi A.M. Ashinsky, *upper left*, was one of the Hill's key spiritual leaders.