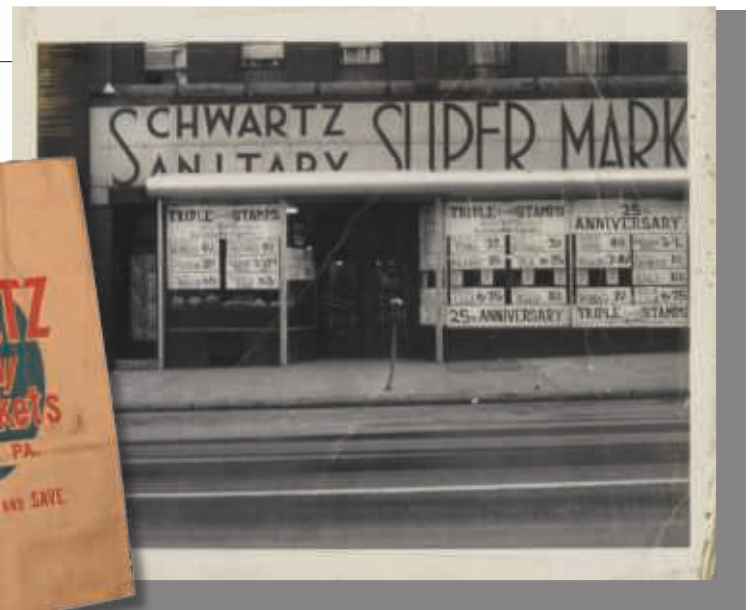


UP FRONT



CURATOR'S CORNER

By Eric Lidji, Director,
Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives



A grocery bag from Schwartz Sanitary Super Markets bears the slogan “serve yourself and save.” Before self-service, grocers often retrieved items for each customer.

HHC Collections, gift of Stan Beck, 2019.81.1. Photo by Nicole Lauletta.

Between the late 1930s and the late 1960s, Schwartz Market ran grocery stores in at least nine Pittsburgh neighborhoods. The windows of each were filled iconic posters for weekly sales. The signs were hand painted by Joe Liotta, who began his craft in 1938.

HHC Detre L&A, Rauh Jewish Archives, Schwartz Market Records, 2019.0138.

Schwartz Market

Grocery stores reflect the patterns of a community. After all, everybody needs to eat. The old corner stores inspired nostalgia even as consumer trends were turning to larger supermarkets with amenities like pharmacies, dry cleaners, and generous parking. The recent revival of smaller neighborhood stores throughout Western Pennsylvania suggests that some still long for the days when getting groceries meant walking down the block.

For the South Side of Pittsburgh, Schwartz Market was the neighborhood corner store for nearly a century. Morris Schwartz (1897–1952) immigrated to Pittsburgh as a young boy and started Schwartz’s Market with his brothers in the 1920s. The store bounced from one South Side storefront to another until 1938, when it settled at 1317-1319 East Carson Street. Over the next three decades, the Carson Street store became the flagship branch of a small local chain extending throughout the city, including markets in Bloomfield, Carrick, East Liberty, Lawrenceville, Homewood, Mt. Oliver, Sheraden, and Uptown.

The materials in the Schwartz Market Records (2019.0138) vividly evoke the homey feel of these grocery stores. A selection of displays, for example, all bear the mark of a human hand. Signs indicating the contents of each aisle are painted on sheets of shirt cardboard stapled back-to-back. Window banners advertising weekly sales were hand lettered on butcher paper in red and blue paint by Joe Liotta, who began practicing his craft in 1938.

The charm of these stores was their scale. A grocery cart recovered from the Carson Street branch is noticeably smaller than the ones commonly used today at big supermarkets, reflecting narrower aisles and perhaps also the tendency toward smaller and more frequent shopping trips throughout the week. A paper shopping bag featuring the tagline “serve yourself and save” is a remnant of the era when grocery stores were transitioning to self-service. Originally, an employee would go around retrieving all the items on each customer’s list. A promotional leather change purse comes

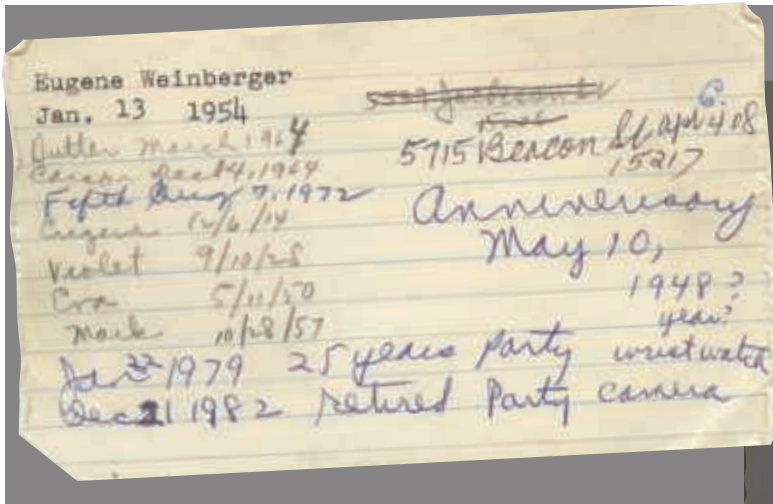
from a time when relatively low prices and a mostly cash economy justified such an accessory.

The company records give the sense of a warm and familial spirit animating daily operations. A set of handwritten index cards serve as employee files. Each card includes professional data such as dates of employment and changing work assignments, but the cards also provide insights into the personally engaged management style of the company. The cards contain notes on birthdays, wedding anniversaries, maternity leaves and the birth of children, illnesses, and military service. For a few longtime employees, the cards also list gifts given by management on milestone anniversaries with the company and upon retirement. (The index cards also contain social security numbers, which have been redacted whenever necessary according to best archival practices.)

The Schwartz Market Records document the gradual changes within the broader grocery business. Just the name alone tells a story.

A grocery cart recovered from the East Carson Street branch of Schwartz Super Market is much smaller than the grocery carts found at many larger supermarkets today.

HHC Collections, gift of Stan Beck, 2019.81.1. Photo by Nicole Lauletta.



Eugene Weinberger (1914-2015) worked at Schwartz Market for nearly 30 years, including stints at its Lawrenceville, South Side, and Uptown stores. His employee file lists his birthday, the birthdays of his wife and children, his wedding anniversary, his different home addresses, and gifts received at milestone anniversaries with the company.

HHC Detre L&A, Rauh Jewish Archives, Schwartz Market Records, 2019.0138.



“Schwartz Market” became “Schwartz Sanitary Super Market” in 1938, when the business expanded into its new Carson Street headquarters. “Super” reflected the larger operation. The word “sanitary” was trendy among food establishments at the time, much like “all-natural” or “artisan” today.

In time, Schwartz Market consolidated to its South Side branch. The Schwartz family sold the Carson Street operation in 1985 to Martin and Audrey Dorfner and Richard and Donna Stanton. The new owners maintained the services desired by longtime working-class South Side clientele. As the demographics of the neighborhood changed in the first decade of the 21st century, they also expanded into organic and sustainable products.

The Schwartz family retained ownership of the Carson Street building. After the new

owners retired, Elisa and Stan Beck, direct descendants of Morris Schwartz, revived the store as Schwartz’s Living Market. The new name reflected a more decisive shift toward environmental sustainability while preserving the family name as a testament to continuity. In the new iteration, the store housed various environmentally sustainable vendors, arranged in small stalls throughout the store. The Becks attempted to renovate the building according to the ambitious guidelines of the Living Building Challenge, but those plans proved to be cost prohibitive. When the family finally sold the building in 2019, it ended a long and beloved era in the way South Siders put food on their tables.



Schwartz Market used handmade displays for much of its existence, including this hanging sign used to indicate the contents of each aisle in its South Side store.

HHC Detre L&A, Rauh Jewish Archives, Schwartz Market Records, 2019.0138.