



Sheila and Sam Rosenfield

by Tonyia Sullivan

From the time Sam Rosenfield moved from Galveston to Austin in 1936 to attend business school at the University of Texas, he and his family have been involved in Congregation Beth Israel.

“My family entwined themselves in the activities of this congregation. I have done everything, from the janitor to the rabbi. I was on the board, served as president and was on every committee that existed. I did everything that was available to do,” Mr. Rosenfield said.

As a student, Sam Rosenfield began attending services at Congregation Beth Israel. At the time, Congregation Agudas Achim was the only other synagogue in town, and there were approximately 250 to 300 affiliated Jews in Austin. Mr. Rosenfield, who was born in 1919, remembers that other Jewish organizations in Austin at that time included B’nai B’rith, Hillel Foundation, Hadassah and the National Association of Jewish Women.

After graduating from the University of Texas, he began his career as a businessman at Kruger’s Diamond Jewelers, where he worked as a credit manager, salesman and manager for 20 years, before moving on to co-found Payless Shoes with his brother. Sam Rosenfield wanted to be connected to a congregation; and with the encouragement of a math professor at the university, he joined Congregation Beth Israel in 1940.

"I liked the size of the congregation, the rabbi at the time, and the curriculum. Now I've been a member for 70 years," Mr. Rosenfield said.

Out of the many projects he has been involved in, Sam Rosenfield's best memories are of paying off the building mortgages in 1960 and 1969. He was also instrumental in moving the congregation from its downtown location at Eleventh Street and San Jacinto Boulevard to its present Shoal Creek Boulevard location. He explained that before they made the decision to move, every time the congregation stood during services, the building would creak. He called in an engineer from the city of Austin to investigate the problem.

"The engineer said, 'Can't you have the rabbi tell them to sit down more and not stand up?' We ended up selling the building and built the new temple," Mr. Rosenfield said.

He was an instrumental part of the building committee and the three fundraising drives. Mr. Rosenfield explains that when he and Milton Smith presented the new building location to the board, the whole congregation drove to the site "car by car."

"It was like a ranch. There was no house on it, and mules, cows and animals all over the place. Shoal Creek was not cut through; it was a dead end street. The members asked why we brought them that far out of town, but we ended up buying the property and building the buildings," he said.

Mr. Rosenfield describes the outbreak of World War II as the toughest challenge the Austin Jewish community has seen in his time. Most of the men in the community left to contribute to the war.

"They did not take me, so I was here. In the meantime I had three children, which I had to raise and educate. The women were busy so they could not go to work, and whoever was left did work for congregation. The rabbi used to leave for summers so we were stuck with laymen conducting services. It was a tough row," he said.

Sam Rosenfield's family is equally involved with Congregation Beth Israel.

"I have been married to two ladies. I was fortunate; both embraced the temple," Mr. Rosenfield said.

His first wife, Annette, was the first woman elected to the board of the directors. Mr. Rosenfield explained she helped to equip the kitchen and classrooms.

He married his current wife, Shiela, in 1992, although they have known each other for many years. She has been a chairman or member of almost every committee at Congregation Beth Israel, and started a Criminal Justice

Outreach committee 19 years ago. She and the other members of the committee visited Jewish inmates at federal and state level prisons in the area.

"I found out there were a great many Jewish inmates and the prisons were not instructed with any rabbis or laypersons names if the inmates requested them," she said. The program lasted for about two or three years.

The Rosenfields were also involved in the International Jewish community. Sheila was chair of the Soviet Jewry Task Force in Austin and the Austin delegate to the International Conference on Soviet Jewry in Jerusalem in 1982. And, as a student, Sam opened a Jewish co-op house at the University of Texas, which took in six refugees from Czechoslovakia.

"We ought to take care of fellow man, women and those who have less than we do," he said. The couple also supports the arts and other causes.

Sam Rosenfield has passed this legacy of giving on to his children and grandchildren.

"One of the main things the temple and religion did for me was to involve my children and grandchildren in all working activities in the city and temples they live in," he said. His grandchildren are involved in temples in Dallas, and his daughter "just about runs her temple in Saratoga Springs, New York." His granddaughter in Nashville works for her Jewish community, and even his grandson-in-laws are involved in their Jewish communities.

Shelley Solka, one of his granddaughters in Austin who is also a Congregation Beth Israel member, said, "Growing up, watching him as an example, he was so involved. When we visited we did things at the temple, and I felt at home here even though I did not live here. So when I moved here it felt natural to volunteer where needed. He paved the way for my involvement."

Shelley Solka serves on Congregation Beth Israel's Sisterhood board, the Child Development Center board, and is the Youth Committee chair.

"He instilled it in my parents. It was passed down through the generations," she said.

She also said that her grandfather passed the importance of Jewish culture on to his children and grandchildren. She remembers how important milestones such as bar and bat mitzvahs were in her family, as well as Seders and the high holidays. She remembers visiting her grandparents on weekends, when they would play rummy gin and mah jongg with a group called the Cocker Club.

Sam Rosenfield said, "I always thought about the welfare of this congregation as my number one project in life. I did not agree with everything everybody did but I made peace and got along, which is what you are supposed to do."

"His devotion is unfailing," Sheila Rosenfield said.