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# South Bay Historical Society Bulletin

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Ruth Sax and her daughter Sandra Scheller have been speaking to local schools about remembering the Holocaust. This photo was taken several months ago at a school in San Diego. This month they have visited Ella B. Allen, Finney, Vista Square, Mueller and Parkview, and have a dozen more schools scheduled for the next several months. At the age of 90, Ruth is still going strong. She brings with her to the schools the actual dress worn by her mother at Auschwitz, marked with an "X" by the German guards at the camps. Incredibly, one of these guards was recently discovered living in Hamburg and with the help of Ruth has been conclusively identified. Don Harrison has written about Ruth in his *San Diego Jewish World* and Sandra Scheller has

published her story in the book *Try to Remember- Never Forget* (see the list of Sources at the end of the article).



Ruth and her husband Kurt Sax, shown in this photo shortly before his death in 2012, were married 63 years. They lived in Chula Vista since 1952.

## Chula Vista has diverse Jewish history

By Donald H. Harrison

(reprinted with added illustrations from the online San Diego Jewish World of 29 November 2018)

CHULA VISTA, California -- Steven Schoenherr, a professor emeritus of history at the University of San Diego, researched information for a book celebrating the Chula Vista Centennial, published in 2011. As the book could not contain all Schoenherr's research, unpublished material subsequently was put on line. In 2014, Schoenherr and Susan Walter, a historic archaeologist specializing in San Diego County, founded the South Bay Historical Society. Since that time, they have been adding to the community's online knowledge, drawing on back issues of the Chula Vista Star-News, the San Diego Union-Tribune, and other local publications, among other sources. Here is a link to the society's website: <http://southbayhistoricalsociety.org/>

The clippings they found concerning the Jewish community of Chula Vista tell interesting stories about doctors, a tomato farmer, a school superintendent, a double PTA president, Holocaust survivors, and rabbis. As Schoenherr and Walter add to the Historical Society's collection, doubtlessly more Jewish stories will emerge.

U.S. Census records don't ask for a person's religion, even on an optional basis, which, in the absence of more definitive records, makes determining whether a person was Jewish a matter of guess work. Sometimes names are good indicators, but not always. For example, in developing research notes, Schoenherr listed some people as "possibly Jewish." Among those possibilities were the following people. As you read their names, try to guess which of them you think were Jews: Abraham Eitzen, Stanly Karas, Jake Lenikow; Isaak Ainbinder, Moses S. Berlin; David G. Horowitz.

Eitzen, an immigrant from Russia who moved to Chula Vista in 1911, purchased a 5-acre lemon ranch that had been subdivided 24 years before by the Santa Fe Railroad Company. He served as a Chula Vista City Councilman. However, if the tombstone that bears his name in the Glenn Abbey Cemetery is a reliable indication, Eitzen was not Jewish. The tombstone reads: "Jesus Saves."

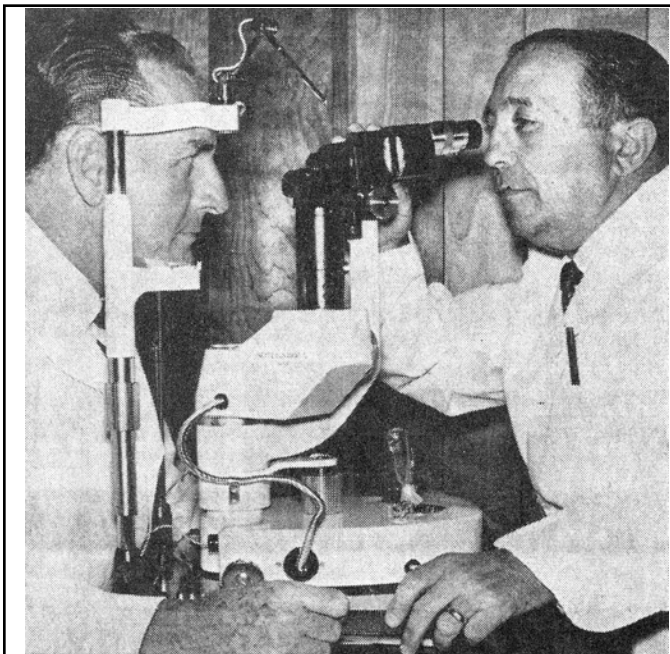


On the other hand, the tombstones of David Horowitz and his wife Elizabeth can be found in the Home of Peace Cemetery. There is a slight discrepancy in the dates listed on the tombstone for David and that which is listed on the census forms, but as genealogists can woefully tell you, when it comes to dates, neither census data nor tombstone inscriptions are 100 percent accurate.

As for Moses S. Berlin, owner of a salvage yard, he definitely can be put into the Jewish column. He was a president during the early 1950s of Tifereth Israel Synagogue.

What about Karas and Lenikow? I can't say for certain as there were no relevant records immediately available to me. But if I had to bet, I'd guess that Karas is not Jewish, and that Lenikow and Ainbinder are Jewish. But, pending further documentation, I'd keep them in the "maybe" column.

So let's move on to the Chula Vistans whom Schoenherr knew were Jewish.



Alvin May was the first eye doctor south of San Diego. In this photo of 1968, he is examining his colleague Dr. Charles Smith. They opened their first office at 288 Third Avenue in 1943 in Chula Vista, "a heavenly haven of 5,000 people." He remembered "my office was flanked by the post office and city hall. Lots of people used to come in and yack all the time. E street was narrow with pepper trees on it. There was no commercial development whatsoever. They cut down the trees to widen the street. Land up around east J street where the water tower is was selling for \$50 an acre. Palomar street was the boondocks. Old mama and papa stores were everywhere, where today everything is supermarkets." Dr. May loved the small town of early Chula Vista, but helped develop the future. He invested in land on Otay Mesa and served on the Chamber of Commerce industrial committee. In 1958 helped found the Temple Beth Sholom.

There was Dr. Alvin May, an eye doctor, who moved in 1943 to Chula Vista. Like Moses Berlin, Dr. May was a president of Tifereth Israel Synagogue. He was not the only doctor who had his eyes on Chula Vista. Dr. Milton Lincoff started an ophthalmology practice there in 1957. He later was joined by two other Jewish doctors, Aaron Mannis in 1960 and

Robert Penner in 1967, their offices eventually becoming known as the Eye Physicians Medical Group. Dr. Lincoff was one of the founders of Temple Beth Sholom, a Conservative congregation serving southeastern San Diego County. Penner during the 1980s served as a member of the San Diego Unified Port Commission. He was married and later divorced from Gloria Penner, who was a well-known host and news analyst on KPBS-Television.

Sam Shapov, a real estate developer, was frequently in the news during the 1950's. He sold an acre of land for \$1,000 in 1950 for the right of way for the Third Avenue extension to San Diego Bay; and won Planning Commission approval in 1953 to build a 20-acre shopping center on Fourth Avenue. However, Shapov eventually had to drop that project, but he did build a café at the Third Avenue extension in 1954, and a year later was one of the people who objected to renaming the Third Avenue extension as Memorial Drive, as suggested by the Junior Women's Club. In 1957, a 24-lane bowling alley on Fourth Avenue was constructed on Shapov-owned land. The former cattle dealer, turned real estate developer, died in 1963.

Temple Beth Sholom's last name was later changed by its current Rabbi Michael Leo Samuel to the Sephardic pronunciation 'Shalom.' The congregation was begun in 1958 in the former home of St. John's Episcopal Church at 202-206 Madrona Street. St. John's had sold the church and rectory to move to a larger facility at 760 1st Avenue. The dedication of the first Jewish congregation south of metropolitan San Diego was a well-attended event. Photos show such participants as Sam Vener, who owned a large tomato farm on the Bay end of E. Street; Max Weinstock, the lay leader of Tijuana's Jewish community; Dr. May; Sisterhood President Mrs. Sidney Cornell; Sam Dimenstein, who owned a trailer park and a shopping center, among other businesses; and Dr. David Epstein, a dentist.





(above) St. John's Episcopal Church at 202 Madrona Street was built in 1924.  
The rectory was built in 1926.

(below) Temple Beth Sholom today occupies the same buildings.



Well-wishers in attendance included Congressman Bob Wilson (R-San Diego), Chula Vista Mayor Keith Menzel, and Rabbis Monroe Levens, Morton Cohn, and Baruch Stern, respectively representing Tifereth Israel (Conservative), Beth Israel (Reform), and Beth Jacob (Orthodox), and ministers from two local Christian congregations. Max Furmansky served as the new congregation's cantor, and Saul Singer was listed as its president.

Vener served on the Chula Vista Harbor Commission, but he resigned a year later amid criticism that he was "filibustering" against the city's master plan. His tomato fields were on property abutting the harbor. In 1961, Vener's home at 15 East Cresta Way was the subject of vandalism. Some person or persons threw rocks at his window. Vener hosted representatives of Chula Vista's Sister City in Argentina, General Roca, at his farm in 1964. The following year saw farmworkers struggling against tomato growers, including Vener, for higher wages. Union pickets sought a raise from \$1.25 to \$1.40 an hour. In 1966, Vener ran unsuccessfully as a Republican for Congress in a race against U.S. Rep.

Lionel Van Deerlin (D-San Diego) who continued in Congress until 1981. (Van Deerlin was defeated in a political surprise by Republican Duncan Hunter). Tomato trouble for Vener came when Tideland's Avenue was routed through his property, despite his protests. In 1975, Vener threw open his tomato fields to the public, saying they could take for free the tomatoes which were no longer profitable to pick. The Farmworkers Union meanwhile had organized his workers. In 1979, Vener auctioned off \$1.9 million in farm equipment, ending a 33-year career raising tomatoes and cucumbers.

Although Schoenherr's notes did not reflect this, 1961 proved an eventful year for Chula Vista because Lowell Blankfort took over the Chula Vista Star News and campaigned unabashedly for liberal and Democratic causes. Wadie P. Deddeh, an Iraqi Christian (Chaldean) immigrant who had taught at Southwestern Community College, was elected to the state Assembly, and Deddeh gratefully credited Blankfort's endorsement for putting him over the top.



Sam Vener, born in Texas, came to Chula Vista in 1946 and started his farm at the west end of E Street.

In 1963, Sidney Cornell was appointed to the South Bay Historical Society, and the following year saw Leonard Servetter become the principal at Rosebank Elementary School in the Chula Vista Elementary School District. Before too long, he was elevated to assistant superintendent, and in 1975 he became the superintendent of all the schools in the district. Servetter had grown up in an Orthodox Jewish home, and continued to be Shomer Shabbos. Named “newsmaker of the year” by the Star-News, Servetter told an interviewer that “religion doesn’t enter into my job but it does affect my philosophy. My religion teaches how to conduct myself, to be concerned, to help those less fortunate and not to embarrass anyone in public.”



Sid Cornell

years as spiritual leader at Temple Beth Shalom, was replaced by Rabbi Moshe Frankel. Previously, Stauber had asked the board for a vote of confidence, but the board split 7-7. Larry Lassman, who was then president of the congregation, explained: “Sometimes a person’s effectiveness lasts just so long. Ideas and people change. ... One of the main needs of any religious organization is to have an individual who can teach and especially teach children.”

That same year saw the beginning of the county’s only Sephardic shul, Congregation Beth Torah, in the Bonita neighborhood of Chula Vista. It subsequently changed its name to Congregation Beth Eliyahu in honor of Elias Mizrahi, father of the donor who deeded buildings to the congregation that it used to rent.



Len Servetter

Two years later, the Chula Vista Elementary School Board members had some fun at Servetter’s expense. Learning that whenever Servetter had gone to a San Diego Chargers football game, they passed a resolution “barring” him from ever attending another game.



Helen Waterford and Alfons Heck of San Diego spoke at Hilltop High School in October 1981.

The Star-News dutifully recorded ceremonies honoring Jewish residents, including an Israel Bonds dinner at Temple Beth Shalom for the philanthropy of Sam Shapov’s widow, Leah, and a 1978 dinner at the Sheraton Harbor Island for dentist Harold Weinberger for his contributions to the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, today known as the American Jewish University.



Leah Shapov

In 1981, Chula Vista resident Helen Waterford, a Holocaust survivor, attracted notice for her joint appearances with Alfons Heck, a former member of the Hitler Youth, who later in life repudiated his youthful Nazi beliefs. In their joint presentations, Heck and Waterford would alternate telling the chronology of their lives, vividly depicting how different in Germany were the fates of Jews versus non-Jewish supporters of Hitler. They continued talking to high schools and universities for many years.

Temple politics also made the news in 1979. Rabbi Harold Stauber, who had served for the previous 14



In 1993, following reapportionment, Chula Vista was taken out of Duncan Hunter's district, and put into a new district running along the California/ Baja California border. Bob Filner, a San Diego City Councilman, was elected to the seat, in which he served until being elected as mayor of San Diego – a position he was forced to resign in a sexual scandal.



Bob Filner

an honorary degree from Southwestern College; a “Mother of the Year” award from state Senator Ben Hueso; and portrayed as a “Woman of Valor” at the San Diego Jewish Arts Festival. To top it off, at age 89, Sax had a bat mitzvah!

Chula Vista grew from two Jewish congregations to three in 2016, when Chabad Rabbi Mendy Begun, a Brazilian, and his wife, Mendy, opened a Chabad House.

Longevity seems to favor Jews who live in Chula Vista. Earlier this year, at age 105, although ailing, Norbert Stein got married to Edelmira Velasquez, 72, who had been his companion for 45 years. Alas, Stein, whom the San Diego Sockers considered their greatest fan, died just two months later.



Anne Hedenkamp

In 2003, the Chula Vista Elementary School District named a new school for Anne and William Hedenkamp. Anne, who previously had been saluted by Congregation Beth Israel, as a “woman of valor” had served as president of the Ladies

Auxiliary of Carpenter Local 170, had been instrumental in establishing Sister City relations with General Roca, Argentina, and had been the president of two PTAs, those of Chula Vista Junior High School and Hilltop Junior High.

In 2012, Chula Vista's Historic Preservation Commission listed Temple Beth Shalom as eligible for historic designation. Currently there is an official plaque on the property. That same year, Kurt Sax who had been a financial mainstay for the small congregation died. At a crowded service, the current rabbi, Michael Leo Samuel, related that Sax had loved opera, and while serving as a lay leader once taught the congregation to sing “Adon Olam” to a melody from the opera Carmen. Sax was a Holocaust survivor, as was his widow, Ruth Sax, who in 2018 was honored at various venues for her teaching about the Holocaust. The subject of a biography by her daughter Sandy Scheller, Ruth Sax was the star of a panel on art and the Holocaust at last year's Comic-Con. She also was the recipient of



Steve Goldkrantz has developed a museum at the Temple Beth Shalom, preserving artifacts such as this 100-year old Torah. He led the successful campaign in 2016 to have the Temple designated a Historic Site by the city of Chula Vista.



Norbert Stein was the “Butcher of Seville” who ran a butcher shop in the Seville building on Third Avenue from 1958 to 1974. He was a flamboyant character, fond of making rhymes, and became known as the “Poet Laureate of Chula Vista.” He often donated meat for community events. In the photo above, Stein, on the right, is serving his meat to Dan McCorquodale, chairman of the annual Fiesta de la Luna. The popular “McC” was the first elected mayor of Chula Vista in 1968.

Stein was born in Germany in 1913 and fled from Hitler’s Germany in 1935. He worked as a truck driver in New York until moving to Havana, Cuba, in 1939, to run a slaughter house and learning his trade as a butcher. During World War II he joined the Army and received a Bronze Star for capturing three Japanese soldiers on Okinawa.

Stein was a sports enthusiast who played soccer as a boy in Germany. When the San Diego Sockers started playing indoor soccer at the Sports Arena in 1978, Stein became their biggest supporter. He was invited to the locker room to give the players a pep talk before every game, usually in rhyme, and became known as “The Captain.”

In Chula Vista he was a great booster for the city. He appeared as a regular guest on local TV shows hosted by Bob Dale and Regis Philbin in the 1960s. He conducted cooking classes and created the “Miss Downtowner” beauty contest held in the Vogue Theater. He was often seen with sports stars such as Billy Casper, and with Hollywood stars such as Jack Lemmon. In 1994 he was an extra in the film “Top Dog” that was shooting in Balboa Park, and the photo below shows him with the film’s star Chuck Norris and his brother Aaron Norris.



## SOURCES

- Don Harrison is editor of *San Diego Jewish World* and this article was first published at <http://www.sdjewishworld.com/2018/11/29/chula-vista-has-diverse-jewish-history/>
- Don Harrison article “Temple Beth Shalom declared a historic site,” <http://www.sdjewishworld.com/2016/02/17/67503/>
- Ayer, Eleanor H. with Helen Waterford and Alfons Heck. *Parallel Journeys*. NY: Atheneum, 1995.
- Scheller, Sandra. *Try To Remember-Never Forget: Memoirs of Holocaust Survivor Ruth Goldschmiedova Sax*. iUniverse, 2016.
- Try to Remember-Never Forget Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/trytorememberneverforget/>
- Eitzen tombstone photo by Jane Gilman



## NEXT MEETING.....

Join us on Thursday, December 13, at 6 pm in the Chula Vista Public Library Auditorium for: The KUMEYAAY: Astronomers, Artisans, Environmentalists, and Cosmologists with guest Richard L. Carrico, Lecturer, Department of American Indian Studies, San Diego State University

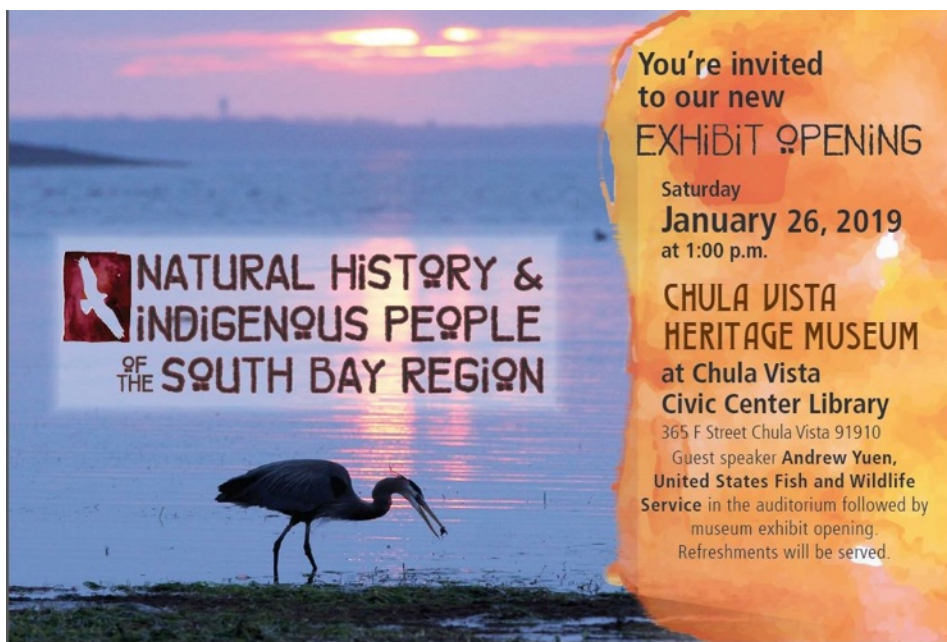
When discussing the indigenous people of San Diego County, the narrative too often focuses on native food, food processing and tool making. Worthy subjects for certain, but hardly a fair explication of a rich and complex culture that stretches back thousands of years. Mr. Carrico's presentation will focus on the South Bay and the topical discussion will greatly enhance the audience's understanding of native life before the arrival of Spanish explorers.

This presentation will delve into several important aspects of Kumeyaay life to include

1. Astronomy and how the constellations and the sky are tied into the religion and cosmology of the people,
2. Rock art, the painted and carved rock panels that dot the San Diego landscape—how they were made and what the intricate designs might mean,

3. The relationship between the Kumeyaay and their environment with an emphasis on fire and vegetation management, and
4. Kumeyaay cosmological constructs and beliefs including creation, the importance of the animal world and cultural landscapes.

## MUSEUM EXHIBIT COMING SOON.....



Parking at the library Dec. 13 will be limited due to the solar panel construction. Please use the parking garage behind Marie Callender's.

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