

JACKSONVILLE'S LIVING JEWISH TREASURE – MEET HAZEL MACK

By, Judith Fox-Goldstein, "Word by Word"



And the grounds were hallowed!

Entering Temple Ahavath Chesed's archives, I had no idea what to expect. Greeted



Hazel Mack, "I chose Judaism"

by 91-yr-old archivist Hazel Mack, I immediately knew this was going to be a very memorable interview. Leaving my pre-conceptions in the halls of the Temple, I stilled myself, listened, learned and was amazed by the breadth of knowledge from this dynamic, definitive, determined and devoted woman.

Judith Fox-Goldstein

A detective at heart, Hazel holds the history of Jacksonville's Jewish heritage in her mind and heart. With unparalleled research and organizational skills, Hazel enthusiastically shared her archival collection, and her own life's journey, in a very animated conversation. Her dedication to preserving our community's Jewish history and culture is evident. *"It's so important for us to remember our past, our lineage and our strong sense of Jewish community so we can move forward into the future with the knowledge and wisdom from the past."*

Serving as the archivist since 1987 at Congregation Ahavath Chesed, the first congregation founded in Northeast Florida, Hazel dedicates her time researching, gathering and recording vital information and statistics celebrating current congregants and their forebearers. *"There's not a week that passes that someone doesn't call requesting information about their family's history or location of a deceased relative. This is my job now... this is my life!"*

Shivering because it was so extremely cold in the room - I asked Hazel "Is this how you've preserved your beauty all these years?" With a robust laugh, *(and a sweater she unearthed for me from the archives)*, we began our memorable morning digging through the archives as Hazel shared the highlights of the collection and the stories behind the photos, gifts, memorabilia and treasured books stored with magnificent care, order and pride. **Q. Were you always committed to preserving Jewish History?**

A. 'Well, I've lived my life in cycles...where would you like me to begin?'

"I was born in Canada to a Roman Catholic mother and a Protestant father, married 3x (my first husband's last name was HAZLE), - Yes, my name was Hazel Hazle! I had 4 children (one is Catholic, one Jewish and two born-again Christians) and I LOVE my multi-cultural roots. In 1980, I moved to Jacksonville and began another exciting LIFE CYCLE!"



Hazel displays photos of the 1st Jewish resident, Philip Dzialynski (1850) & his brother, Morris, the first Jewish Mayor of Jacksonville. Phillip sent for his family in 1853.

I started to explore my own relationship with G-D and I studied under Rabbi Greenstein for 4 years and, in 1983, I converted to Judaism. This was also the year that I met my dear husband, J.L. Mack Jr. - "Pete" to his friends and family, who was the Past President of the Temple from 1971-'73. In 2008, along with my

daughter Barbara, I celebrated my B’Nai Mitzvah. When Pete said, “Don’t convert for me”, I said, “I am not doing this for you, I am doing this for me!” **Yes, I chose Judaism!**

Q. Converting to Judaism is a big step... WHY did you make this commitment?

“Growing up in Canada, there was a great deal of antisemitism. As a child, I didn’t recognize the hate and discrimination, but I was very against the mean-spirited and disparaging remarks about Jews. These were my friends...I liked these people, but what was all this hate and fear about?

I was curious and very interested in other cultures so I continued to explore and learn. I was fortunate to get to know more about Jewish traditions, customs and the old testament and I knew I had found a home in Judaism.”

Hazel proudly displays embroidered replicas of Chagall's windows that were donated to the Temple by Sharon Juhasz who gave these to her parents over 40 years ago.



Q. Can you tell me about your work with the Jewish Cemetery?

A. “In my continuing quest to preserve Jacksonville’s Jewish history, I decided that restoring the Old City Cemetery was vital so I undertook a fundraising campaign for the restoration. I wanted to clean the grave sites, restore the markers and replace the fencing. Success came in 2009 when Rabbi Joshua B. Lief, Mayor John Peyton, and descendants of those buried in the cemetery, came together on this sacred ground to remember and to honor our shared past.”



Q Why did you feel this was such an important undertaking?

A. “The Old City Cemetery was the first Jewish Cemetery in Florida. **This was work that had to be done!** Malicious pranks left significant damage to the cemetery and it was very important to repair the destruction. The Cemetery, established in 1857, remains the resting place of descendants of Temple members who were living in Jacksonville. Our first resident, Philip Dzialynski, is buried there and the Cemetery continues to be a place of honor and remembrance. I occasionally visit the cemetery to assure myself that it has not been destroyed again.”

In 2010, Goldie Lansky, recently retired Executive Director of the Temple, referred to Hazel as a **“WOMAN OF VALOR.”** In 2019, Hazel Mack continues to display the same courage, vigor, intelligence and dedication that has propelled her into the role of Jacksonville’s **“Living Jewish Treasure.”** A woman of enormous capacity for compassion and generosity, Hazel can look back on a legacy of love and remembrance that she has gifted to her family and to our Jewish community. **Stand proud Hazel, you deserve our salute!**