ATOMIC CITY

By ANDREA JACOBS

Jewish microcosm in top secret Manhattan Project in Los Alamos, New Mexico
"Jewish Life Flourishes in Atomic City!" This intriguing headline, accompanied by a three-column article by publisher Max Goldberg, ran in the Intermountain Jewish News on June 30, 1949.

Goldberg was visiting Los Alamos, NM, the highly secretive, barricaded site of the Manhattan Project from 1943 to 1945, for a United Jewish Appeal fundraising event.

Four years earlier, on Aug. 6 and 9 respectively, the US dropped “Little Boy” (Uranium-235) on Hiroshima and “Fat Man” (Plutonium-239) on Nagasaki. Japan surrendered on Sept. 2, 1945.

By 1946, the military jeeps had departed — but the “Keep Mum” signs remained.

The Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL), now part of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), recruited physicists, engineers and others to address the mounting Soviet threat.

These are the Jewish men and women — and a few who remained after WW II and established roots in the area — who welcomed Max Goldberg in 1949.

“Seventy-three hundred feet above sea level in Los Alamos, New Mexico, resides one of the most unusual Jewish communities in the world,” he begins the article.

“Nestled in the Sangre de Cristo range, approximately 100 Jewish folk (about 35 families) move about their tasks intently, skillfully and enthusiastically contributing to the development of atomic energy.

“This tiny group, representing nearly every state in the Union, includes some of the finest scientific brains in the world — theoretical physicists, chemists, engineers and technicians.”

Los Alamos, he writes, “has the highest average I.Q. of any US city.”

Sam Mozer, originally from Denver and owner of the sole jewelry store in Los Alamos, was one of the few non-scientists at the fundraiser.

“Mozer has ingratiated himself as one of the most popular residents of The Hill (Los Alamos’ venerated nickname). Everywhere you go it’s ‘Hi, Sam,’ ‘Hello, Sam,’ ‘What are you doing tonight, Sam?’”

He gave the largest donation at the UJA fundraiser — $300.

The jewelry store owner, a dentist, shoe repairman, clerk and “barbenologist” (barber) blended in with the majority of scientists in the crowd.

At the time, most Jewish residents were in their 20s and 30s. One man boasted that Los Alamos had the highest birthrate in America.

“Yes, sir,” Goldberg concludes, “if you want to test your I.Q. against the best and the brightest in the world, take a trip up to Los Alamos.”

The Los Alamos Jewish community most likely sprang from a cadre of laboratory physicists, engineers, mathematicians and lab assistants similar to the ones Goldberg met that summer.

Goldberg’s list, which identified all 24 attendees at the fundraiser by name and profession, was heavily weighted by LANL employees:

Dr. Leon Brown; physicist; Bertram Heil, physicist; Dr. Leonard Treiman,

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A community bound by shared values and high IQs
physicist; Larry Weintraub, engineer; Tracy Snelling, AEC information officer; Leo Ziffin, engineer; Dr. Charles Goldstein, physicist; Max Goldstein, mathematician; Ted Ehrenkranz, safety engineer; Murray Lieboff, security inspector; Dr. Rolf Lanshoff, physicist; Bert Schnap, chemist; Dr. Harris Mayer, physicist; Paul Sperling, electronics; Roy Reider, safety director; Bernard Pollack, chemist; Milt Krupka, chemist; Jacob (Jack) Wechsler, physicist.

The fact that Los Alamos had a Jewish community came as no surprise to Goldberg. A first-generation Coloradan, he was familiar with non-regional astonishment over the fact that Jews actually lived in the West.

It was the pedigree of the place, and its mix of science and religion — those two traditional sparring partners — that impressed the veteran newspaperman.

The Manhattan Project elevated Jews to major players at a time when anti-Semitism was rampant in the US. The names of WWII Jewish scientists at Los Alamos read like a who’s who of cerebral giants:


Rabbi Jack Shlachter, a physicist at LANL for 40 years, rabbi emeritus of the Los Alamos Jewish Center and an expert on the The Hill’s Jewish presence, says Jews held top leadership roles in WWII.


“Ten years ago, the head of the theoretical division at LANL showed me a roster from May 10, 1945,” he says. “I looked at the leadership, and it struck me that most of them were Jewish.”

Shlachter says the Manhattan Project was in many ways a European refugee story.

“Europeans formed the bulk of Jewish leadership, not Americans. They were probably born in the early 1900s as the Jewish population rapidly expanded in the US.

“Nuclear physics was called Jewish physics, somewhat
disparagingly by the Germans. But it was the most necessary profession in WW II.”

“They were secular,” New Mexico Jewish Historical Society archivist Noel Pugach says of the Jews on The Hill. “They were scientists after all, and most had rejected their Jewish upbringing.

“But they had similar values — and that’s what encouraged the Jews of Los Alamos to form a community. You want to be with your own kind.”

Dr. Harris Mayer, now 98, attended the UJA fundraiser Goldberg covered in 1949. A physicist in the T-6 (theoretical) division at LANL from 1947 to 1956, he moved back to the town in 1990.

Mayer is one of last surviving voices of the Manhattan Project, a pivotal era in American history, as well as the formative years of Los Alamos’ Jewish community.

He and his late wife Rosalie were quite active in the small Los Alamos Jewish enclave from ’47 to ’56.

Mayer belonged to B’nai B’rith chapter No. 1771, founded in 1948, and Rosalie was involved in the Hadassah chapter organized by Mrs. Louis E. Gelt of Denver.

“Most of the scientists were ‘fairly’ religious but our work took priority,” he says. “Some Jews were able to read Hebrew at the Friday night services. I hardly ever went to them but I knew all the people. We were pretty close.”

The late physicist Frederick “Fred” Reines, also Jewish, was his best friend. “Fred won the Nobel Prize in 1955 for the work he did at Los Alamos in 1954. Our families knew each other well.”

Mayer was born in 1921 in New York City to secular Jewish parents. A precocious child, he was already trying to master the violin and telescope at age seven.

In his junior year at NYU in the Bronx, Mayer had to choose a major. “I loved English literature, particularly Shakespeare. But I also loved science.”

He met with the head of the English department, “a complete stranger. The man said, ‘If you really want to major in English you’ll have to take a lot more courses than you need for science.’ I said thank you very much and walked out of his office. That’s how I became a scientist instead of a writer,” he laughs.

Mayer pursued his PhD at Columbia University, where he began working for the Manhattan Project (Columbia was one of 30 sites in the
Los Alamos Jewish scientific and military personnel had access to High Holiday services, Purim programs and Passover seders in 1944 . . .
The Los Alamos Jewish community formed 10 years later

for too long.

“So every month, Teller spent what little time he had — Friday through Sunday — helping Maria at Columbia. I worked under both of them.”

Mayer met Rosalie Holtzberg in the opacity calculations group. “Everyone could tell we liked each other and kept wondering when we’d get together,” he says with a soft laugh. They were married on Oct. 30, 1946.

Mayer transferred to the University of Chicago in 1946 and completed his PhD under Edward Teller. Due to his work on the Manhattan Project, Teller arranged for Mayer to receive his doctorate early, in 1947.

In 1991, Karen Hack wrote the paper “The Formation of a Jewish Community in Los Alamos” for the University of Mexico-Los Alamos. The wife of Alan Hack and a longtime member of the Jewish center, she died in 2010.

Her carefully researched study examining the Los Alamos Jewish community from 1943 to 1945 demonstrates that Judaism survived in spite of the frenetic race to build the bomb and prevailing secularism.

Jewish scientific and military personnel at The Hill had access to High Holiday services, Purim programs and Passover seders as early as 1944.

“A ‘Jewish Group’ of soldiers and civilians and their families met during the war years, holding services and a number of social events,” she writes.

“The National Jewish Welfare Board’s Committee on Army and Navy Religious Activities for Jews in the Armed Forces provided prayer books and other liturgical items.”

A quote she includes by electronics specialist Paul Sperling describes the unique Shabbat gatherings in Los Alamos.

“... was nothing. It was a barren mesa with one long winding dirt road — very isolated but perfect for the project.

“It was so top secret that the government had to build a whole new city from scratch.”

Few realize that Los Alamos barely existed before Dr. Oppenheimer, nuclear director of the Manhattan Project, chose it for the facility's future site.

Oppenheimer’s New York Jewish parents sent their young son West with a teacher to improve his health. The wiry youth who often rode the valley from Santa Fe to Los Alamos and visited the Los Alamos Ranch School fell in love with the other-worldly New Mexican landscape.


“This was the city on the mesa,” he writes. “Sentries manned guard gates

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Insert: Dr. Mayer, captured in a contemplative moment in the 1940s; Below: reminiscing at age 98.
on all approaches to the town. Official badges were inspected when people entered and left. Guests had to be approved.”

Although officials considered closing Los Alamos after WW II, the Soviet nuclear threat secured its continuance and further intensified security.

“Los Alamos was a closed city,” says engineer David Izraelevitz, a resident since 1995.

“Probably everyone worked at the lab. If you didn’t, you left town because there was nowhere else to find a job.

“The AEC contracted the dentists, barbers and builders. There would be no Los Alamos without the laboratory.”

Pugach says that Los Alamos remained fenced-in until the late 1960s, “when it gradually became more and more normal.”

The Mayers were unable to adopt a child in Los Alamos. “We tried very hard,” Dr. Mayer says. But the state, which supported New Mexico’s Catholic majority, “would not allow a Jewish family to adopt a non-Jewish child.”

The couple moved to California in 1956. Three months after their arrival, they adopted two boys and one daughter — now in their 60s — and raised them as Jews.

Mayer, who headed the Orion Project at LANL in 1958 and remained affiliated with the lab as a consultant, worked for several private concerns in Los Angeles, including the Aerospace Corp.

After Rosalie passed away in 1990, Mayer moved back to Los Alamos.

He married Frances (“Francie”) Richey, a physicist he worked with in the 1960s and a longtime friend, in 1994.

Rebbe Jack Shlachter, who now works at Brookhaven National Laboratory in Long Island and is known as the “Physics Rabbi” on the internet, joined the Los Alamos’ lab in 1979.

“I was a grad student and I didn’t know a single person in town,” he says, “so I thought I’d go to synagogue and meet a few people.” This desire for companionship resulted in his 20-year part-time rabbinic tenure at the LAJC.

“I was blessed with a decent singing voice, liturgical knowledge and was fairly good at leading services,” he says. “People were extremely supportive and had me do more and more.

“It’s a do-it-yourself community. And if you learn anything from physics, it’s how to teach yourself something.”

(The Los Alamos National Lab was reorganized under the Dept. of Energy during the Carter administration.)

Shlachter, who studied Judaism seriously at the LAJC, began working privately with Rabbi Gershon Winkler in 1992 and was ordained in 1995.

In addition to serving as LAJC’s rabbi emeritus, he is the rabbi at HaMakom in Santa Fe and spiritual leader of the Jewish Center of the Moriches in New York.

David Izraelevitz was born in South America and immigrated to the US at age 11.

A member of LAJC, he was a satellite data engineer at LANL for 12 years and writes for the Los Alamos Daily Post.

The LAJC is 100% lay-led — “dur-
ing Friday night and bi-weekly Saturday morning services, on the High Holidays and at Bar and Bat Mitzvahs,” he says.

For Izraelevitz, this entailed a significant learning curve. “I’ve learned a lot about Jewish culture and how to read Torah because more knowledgeable people taught the rest of us,” he says.

“It’s very much a bootstraps phenomenon. We’ve learned as much out of necessity as devotion.”

Izraelevitz says that Los Alamos “has the highest percentage of PhDs per capita in the US,” confirming Max Goldberg’s 70-year-old observation.

“I have a PhD. But we only use the word ‘doctor’ for physicians. Oppenheimer started this in the

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Although the sole doctor who belonged to the Jewish center has moved to Santa Fe, Izrailevitz says the congregation boasts a large contingent of the scientifically-inclined. Raising a family in Los Alamos — according to a 2015 study, there are about 24,000 Jews in the entire state of New Mexico — is simultaneously simpler and more difficult, he says. “We joke that if you show up you might be the person who makes the minyan,” he says. “If we need people, we call around. But those who come will feel integral to our community.”

The LAJC is egalitarian and unaffiliated. Membership, which fluctuates, stands at about 55 family units.

Jews have forged communities since time immemorial. Regardless of the country or conditions, the need to interact, pray and study with each other was a powerful antidote to isolation. But Los Alamos’ history — the Manhattan Project, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, science and religion — are interrelated pieces of the same equation.

Some of the greatest Jewish minds of the 20th century working in the tense confines of the Manhattan Project solved the unprecedented challenge of building a nuclear bomb.

President Harry S Truman considered four options before approving a nuclear attack, including a US invasion of Japan. However, experts warned this would result in millions of dead and wounded American troops.

Little Boy, dropped on Aug. 6, 1945, instantly wiped out 90% of Hiroshima and killed 80,000 residents. Radiation sickness claimed 60,000 lives.

Truman made the call to drop the bombs — and stood by his decision the rest of his life.

On Aug. 6, 1945, Little Boy targeted the heart of Hiroshima. The massive explosion instantly wiped out 90% of the city and killed 80,000 Japanese. At least another 60,000 died from radiation exposure by the end of the year.

Three days later, Fat Man whistled eerily toward Nagasaki. At least 40,000 people were killed. Japan, unable to fight this new terror, surrendered.

Today, visitors completing a tour of the Los Alamos History Museum on Bathtub Row are asked to share their thoughts about those two days in August.

Even now, the conversation splits like an ethical atom.

Dr. Mayer says that Los Alamos will always be synonymous with Hiroshima and Nagasaki. “Of course it will. But people got the name wrong — it wasn’t an atom bomb, it was a nuclear bomb.”
He realizes that not everyone agrees with the horrifying resolution of the war, “and they are entitled to their opinion.

“But the scientists who were working on the bombs were very worried that the Nazis would get them first.”

Mayer’s position on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, while not unsympathetic, is based on statistical outcomes.

“What I would say is that two bombs killed 150,000 Japanese,” he says. “If the US had invaded Japan, almost two million would have died or been wounded.

“I now regret nuclear weapons,” he says, “but it was the best thing to do at the time — and it would have been even better if there had been no war at all.”

Shlachter’s take is personal.

“My father fought in Europe during WW II. He came home on leave before being shipped out to the Pacific. To this day he says that the bomb saved his life.

“What we did in the war was a service to the nation.”

The debate between science and religion continues, not only in Judaism but particularly in the Los Alamos Jewish community.

“Religious observance vs. philosophy — is there a G-d; the conflict between the two streams of thought — is very Jewish,” he says.

“I can bet that even Jews who are not at all religious have thought about these issues.”

Shlachter says that the two domains are innately adversarial.

Judaism stresses Torah, meaning, ritual and ethical behavior. Physicists study the nature of matter and energy.

“Religion and science don’t address the same issues,” he says.

“Many scientists claim they are atheists. But it’s not like you can prove there’s a G-d.

“Besides, we all have our ideas of G-d within the spectrum of Jewish thought.”

Can two dramatically different experiences, like watching that first nuclear explosion at Alamogordo in 1945 or peering into your newborn’s eyes, speak the same language?

Perhaps, if you listen closely.

Albert Einstein, who dispensed with Judaism, rejected a personal G-d but was a zealous Israel supporter all his life, unified religion and science in four powerful lines in 1954:

“A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, or the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty — it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitutes the truly religious attitude.

“In this sense and this sense alone, I am a deeply religious man.”

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David Izraelevitz, an engineer at LANL for 12 years, belongs to the Los Alamos Jewish Center.

Noel Pugach, archivist, New Mexico Jewish Historical Society