



Agudath
B'nai
Israel
Synagogue
Lorain, Ohio

THE GERDA & WARREN KLEIN FAMILY

(Randi Klein, March 2022)



Warren, Julius & Allan Klein - Late 1960s

My family's story at ABI begins with a store that bore our family name, but no familial connection.

In 1927, my paternal grandfather and the only member of his large Hungarian immigrant family born in the US, Julius Klein (b. 1889, d.1970) purchased Sam Klein Co. (founded 1891) -- a men's clothing store at 425 Broadway Ave. in Lorain--and moved with my grandmother, Sylvia (b. 1898, d. 1989) and my uncle, Allan (b. 1921, d. 2009) from Cleveland to Lorain.

My dad, Warren (b. 1932, d. 2018) was born, grew up, and raised his own family in Lorain as did Allan. We were fortunate to have family in town and celebrated most holidays with my grandparents and Allan's family, that included my Aunt Sunny (b. 1925), and cousins Laurie (b. 1950), Roz (b.1952) and Charlie (b. 1960). Because we are the same age, and both ended up raising our own families in New England, Charlie and I remain especially close to this day.

That store (from Broadway to the brand-new Midway Mall, and ultimately to Midway Square) sustained our 3 families and employed most of us kids (and at least one other ABI member that I know of, Joe Schiffman) at various times over the 7+ decades that our family owned and operated it. They were good family

business partners, and all 3 were respected members of both the local business and Jewish communities.

To quote my Uncle Allan Klein's 1991 autobiography, "throughout his years, [Julius] was always active in the affairs of the Lorain Jewish community, as a founder and trustee of Agudath B'nai Israel...president and then for many years treasurer of the B'nai B'rith chapter, board member and treasurer for many years of the Lorain Jewish Welfare Fund / UJA...and headed a committee that cared for indigent Jewish travelers."

My grandmother, Sylvia (originally from Brooklyn), was also active at ABI, serving as president of both Sisterhood and Hadassah. My mom, Gerda's (b.1934) rich and steady involvement and leadership roles at ABI could fill an entire chapter, but a few highlights include president of Hadassah, the first woman president of the congregation, and the first adult bat mitzvah (pushing the envelope of the conservative ABI culture at the time such that while she chanted her own haftarah--trained by none other than beloved family friend Erwin Froman -- my two younger brothers still had to do the blessings before and after as a woman was not permitted).

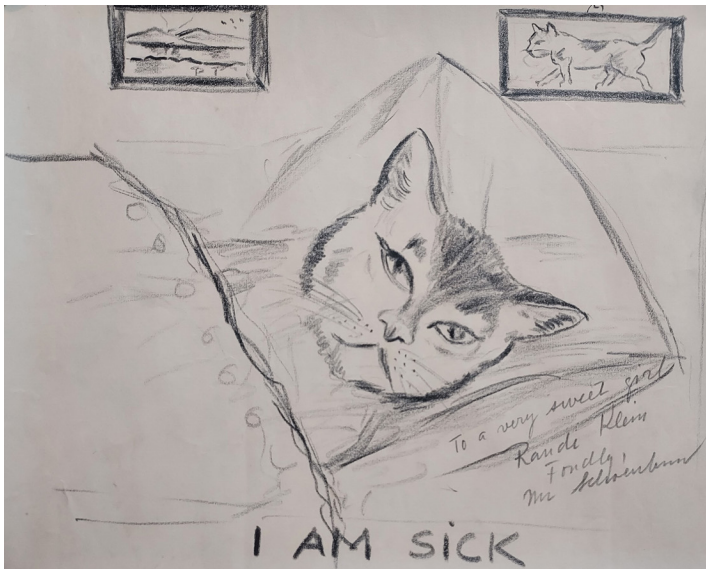


Gerda - from the 1969 Dedication Book

Since this essay is focused primarily on some of my own experiences growing up in the Lorain Jewish community, it is my mom's singing in the choir that anchors my first clear ABI memory. I can still feel my 3- or 4-year-old self (so maybe 1964?) sitting in the first row in the 9th and Reid sanctuary at the start of a Friday evening service, turning to look behind me to watch my mom in the choir up in the balcony. I think it was a young teen Debbie Hettler who sat with me (decades later she was my optometrist in Chicago!), and Rabbi Meyer was directly in front of us on the bima.

This must have inspired me years later, when, at 14 or 15 years old I decided to join the ABI choir myself, singing alto at Shabbat and high holiday services throughout my high school years (Mom had moved on to other roles by then). I was the youngest by decades, and so inspired by the wonderful, more experienced voices of those around me, including our director Joe Schwartz, Betty Goodman's clear, strong soprano and Joe Bernay's rich baritone that I still hear in my head whenever I listen to Kol Nidre chanted.

A couple of fond ABI memories involve Holocaust survivor and my beloved 3rd grade Hebrew school teacher, Mr. Schoenbrun. I recall him as a gentle man who was also a talented artist. When I gave him a small school photo of me that year, he surprised me with a drawing of it the next week! I still have it, along with another he made of a cat in bed, captioned, "I'm Sick" that he gave my mom for me after I didn't tag along as I sometimes did when he tutored my older brother, Peter (b. 1955), to prep for his bar mitzvah. Regular trips to Mr. Froman's market sometimes yielded sweet surprises as well.



I also recall with a smile the annual Purim carnivals and costume parades. At about age 11 I took over Mom's role of making the costumes for myself, and my younger brothers, David (b. 1965, d. 2006), and Jonathan (b. 1966, d. 1985). As they got older, David and Jonathan used to coordinate their costumes to hilarious effect with their good buddies, brothers Grant and Lee Gelb (one year they were the Coneheads of SNL)!

My mom's role in Hadassah connected her with its youth movement, Young Judaea, which inspired her to send me, David and Jonathan to its midwestern camp in Michigan in the summer of 1975. I was so transformed by the experience that I came back determined that Lorain should have its own chapter. ABI had BBYO youth groups for high school kids (my dad had been in Lorain's AZA chapter as a teen), led for years by Art Goodman, but there was nothing for younger kids. I somehow mustered the chutzpah, at 14, to arrange a meeting with Art to discuss why I thought ABI needed another movement's youth group and proposed to start it myself. Apparently, I'd ultimately convinced him, as with the guidance and support of the Central States (OH, KY, WV) YJ regional staff and peer leaders, I organized, planned and led regular programs for the Ofarim (3-5th graders) and Tsofim (6-8th graders) groups at ABI. A year or 2 later, after a kid got hurt running around in the new ABI basement rec room during one of our group activities, Leah D Sepsenwol volunteered to join my efforts as my YJ adult advisor and designed our very own Lorain Young Judaea chapter sweatshirt, which I still have.



Growing up in the ABI community felt like having an enormous extended family. I called so many of my parents' and grandparents' ABI friends "aunt" and "uncle" that I was probably 9 or 10 before I realized that they weren't actually relatives. So it felt completely natural that more than a dozen years after I moved away from Lorain I came back, with my fiancé, Scott Barton, to get married at ABI in 1992, and where my brother, David, accompanied by Judy Herman (my childhood piano teacher), played the music as we entered the sanctuary, surrounded by so many who'd been such an integral part of my life there..

Sean Martin is prepared to help put me in touch with anyone who's interested in reconnecting.

Email him at (smartin@wrhs.org)

Photos courtesy of the Klein Family.



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