

SAID COHEN

Said, where you were born?

I was born in Tehran, Iran.

What were the names of your parents and grandparents and siblings?

My father was Meir Cohen; my mother was Heshmet Cohen.

What kind of work did your father do?

My father imported textiles (primarily silk) from France and Italy.

Were people there dressing similarly to Europeans at the time?

Yes.

How old were you when you came to America?

I was about 23 or 24.

What was it was like being Jewish in Tehran?

When I was a little boy, most Jews lived in an area in the center of the city, in a community by themselves. After some time, my father bought a house outside the Jewish community. It was a spacious house with beautiful gardens. We were comfortable there.

Were there many Jews in the area where you lived?

Over time, more Jewish families moved out of the Jewish community; some moved near us.

Was it a problem that there were so few Jews?

No. I never felt there were any restrictions on where Jews could live or in the business we could pursue. I had no fear of being harmed and wasn't afraid to walk in the street and go places. We never had any problem.

Did you go to Jewish schools?

From 1st to 6th grade, I went to the Alliance Israeli that was French. In this school, they taught a very short session of Hebrew. After 6th grade, I went to Tehran's public high school where all religions, ethnicities and nationalities mixed harmoniously.

Had your family been in Iran for many generations?

I really do not know. I would say for at least three generations.

Was your family religious?

My grandfather was the rabbi at his own synagogue in the Jewish community in Tehran. After he passed away, my uncle—my father's brother--became sort of a rabbi

there for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. We were very far away, so we only went there for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. We walked an hour to get there. [Laughs.] Yes!

For Yom Kippur, we would ride there, before sundown, in a little horse-drawn carriage. Because Yom Kippur would end late - by the time they said the Bracha for the moon and had completed the ritual of the Yom Kippur - there were not many carriages available. My father wouldn't want to wait. He'd say, "Let's go. Let's walk." So we would end up walking an hour, late at night. For Rosh Hashanah, it wasn't that strict. We rode in the carriage back and forth.

Being far away from the Jewish community, we missed most of the ceremonies and the activities in that temple.

Did you have a Bar Mitzvah?

No.

Was your practice of Judaism Orthodox?

Yes. I learned some Hebrew and Judaica, but not as much as I wanted to learn. The people who were in the Jewish community

and had the opportunity to go to temple every Saturday really participated in most of the Jewish activities and had a better education in Judaism and the Hebrew language.

After we moved to our new house, we didn't keep kosher anymore. Since there were no kosher stores in the area, my father decided to get meat from the local butcher.

How did the Jewish community change while you were there?

There was no synagogue outside of the Jewish community until about the time that I came to America, after World War II. At that time, Tehran was expanding and people started to build synagogues and Jewish schools outside the original Jewish community.

I was really surprised at how fast things were changing. More Jews started their own businesses, became very active in the social life of the city, and got involved in civic organizations and other activities. I heard that a cousin became president of a Jewish school outside the community, and some of my other relatives entered other fields such

as medicine, law, engineering, etc. Jews were able to take advantage of all the business and educational opportunities.

Was this because of changes in the government?

No, people just started to become more active, as the Jewish community was growing. Eventually people started to travel to Europe - mostly to France, Italy and Switzerland. Automobiles were coming in, and roads were being built; the city was growing. People were building houses and apartments on the new streets, and the business district developed a couple of nice big avenues with new stores.

Did you want to leave Iran for years before you actually did?

Yes, I wanted to leave. Also, my father felt that Tehran was not a place for the future. So, when I said that I was going to go to America for an education, he encouraged me. All my siblings came later. My father never encouraged us to go back to visit. He would visit us here, but he never wanted us to go back to Iran.

Why did he think it was not a good place for Jews?

He just didn't think that the level of education was good, and he didn't think the way that business was conducted was ethical; everybody was trying to get a piece of the pie. He wasn't too happy about some of the conditions and practices that existed.

Did he ever think of going to Palestine?

Actually my uncle had a piece of property in Palestine. They would visit Palestine, but not to live there, or for an education. My older sister got married in Tel Aviv.

So you stayed in Iran through high school, and then you came here to college?

Yes. I went to Springfield, Massachusetts to learn English at the International College, and then I got my engineering degree from Syracuse University.

What was it like coming to the United States initially?

[Laughs.] It was very exciting, but I was mostly interested in getting an education and a job. It was good and very enjoyable.

Was the transition to living in America very difficult?

No. Nothing was so difficult.

Did you find a Jewish community in Syracuse?

I was focused mostly on my studies. I didn't really participate too much in Jewish activities.

Where did you go after you graduated in 1949?

I got a job in New York City. After that I went into my own air conditioning business. In 1956, I married Joan, an American girl. We were in New York for another six years. In 1962, we came to California. I had never visited California, but I had heard so much. I didn't think my parents would like New York's severe winters. My father was an outdoors man, and I knew he would really enjoy being able to be outdoors. I thought,

should my father want to come to America, he would love to be in California rather than New York.

My younger brother had been in Orange County, so that's where we came. At the time I decided to come to California, my brother decided to go back to Tehran to get married. Afterwards, he returned to California. We settled in Tustin.

When we came to California, we already had two boys, Peter and Steven, and then we had a girl, Natalie, in California.

I worked in real estate sales and did a little bit of dabbling in developing joint ventures with a builder. But in 1967, there was very severe downturn in construction and development, so I went into the manufacturing of printed circuit boards. These were used primarily in aerospace applications.

How much of a Jewish community was there at the time?

There wasn't much. At the time that we came, there was only Temple Beth Sholom on Tustin Avenue, in Santa Ana. We joined

that congregation in 1963. It was a reform synagogue. We didn't participate in too many activities except for High Holidays and some other functions. We had a very good rabbi, Rabbi Bergman. He was very affectionate, warm and inviting. We liked him very much.

Were the services quite different in American synagogues than the services that you had in Tehran for the holidays?

Our services in Tehran were more similar to Chabad services.

Beth Meir HaCohen is named after your father. How did you come to join this Chabad community?

[Laughs.] It's a funny story. One day, Rabbi Eliezrie called me; I don't know where he got my name, but he just called up and said he wanted to see me. He came over to my office in the manufacturing business. He told me that he would like to build a synagogue and develop it for the Jewish community in Yorba Linda, where there was nothing for Jews. He said he had this house in escrow, and he needed \$50,000 to close the escrow.

I thought he was very friendly and I liked the way that he approached the situation, to get the property in escrow and then look around for financing. I told him that if we could honor my father with the name Congregation Beth Meir Hacohen, I would give him the money. He was very happy. I had my attorney draw up a letter of commitment, and Mr. Cunin, who at that time was sort of a regional rabbi for Chabad, agreed. We went to my attorney's office, signed the documents, and I paid the deposit to close the escrow.

That must have had a lot of meaning for you.

Yes. My father died in 1986. I remembered my father's wishes, what he wanted to do in his life, and his attitude toward things. He was a very honest man, and he was a man of principle. He was the head of the family, and I was very fond of him. I was proud that he accomplished so much without compromising his character. So I just felt that I wanted to honor him in a way that recognized some of his values.

At the point when you paid for the escrow, did you still belong to Temple Beth Sholom?

Yes.

Were you ever already familiar with Chabad?

I was not familiar with it. It was just the rabbi's personality and his disposition, and the fact that I could honor my father in a Jewish synagogue that led to my decision. I had a great deal of faith in the rabbi and his enthusiasm and his hardworking position so I thought it would go well.

Did you then start coming to services in the house?

Yes.

Can you describe that original house that you helped purchase?

It was a two-story house, and it was not in the best condition. We used the living room for services. There was a kitchen, and the upstairs rooms were used for classes and offices.

What struck you about these services?

Chabad services are more animated and have more energy. In Tehran and in some of the synagogues here there is a little more formality. At our shul now, the rabbi comes on the pulpit and delivers the sermon, and it is organized; however, it's also a little bit more friendly, with the congregation talking among themselves.

How many people were there at that beginning, when you first had services?

Well, we usually had a minyan. Sometimes we had more, but there were times when we were only six or seven men, so we couldn't take out the Torah. The rabbi's energy and fortitude really kept everything moving.

After a time, we decided to build the shul. The architect drew up plans. During construction after we tore down the house, the rabbi conducted services at his home.

Would you say something about the fundraising for this building?

The rabbi was very active and he worked hard to raise the funds. I didn't participate

in fundraising, but when he got in a tight spot, he had a supporter; I would help. At the end, we were still a little bit short, so I told him that I would match every dollar that he collected. He raised half of the amount that we needed, and I helped with the other half.

Has the rabbi had any impact on your life outside of the shul?

It is really a great comfort knowing him and knowing the support or whatever I might need is available. I have a really good feeling from knowing him and having him here. When my wife died, Rabbi Eliezrie did the services. I feel very close to him.

What are your favorite experiences at this shul?

I come on Yom Kippur, and the second day of Rosh Hashanah, and some Saturdays. I enjoy the congregation, and Stanley, the chazan. He is very, very vivacious and so exuberant. It is uplifting to hear him. He is great.

Is there anything else that you want to say about how this congregation has evolved?

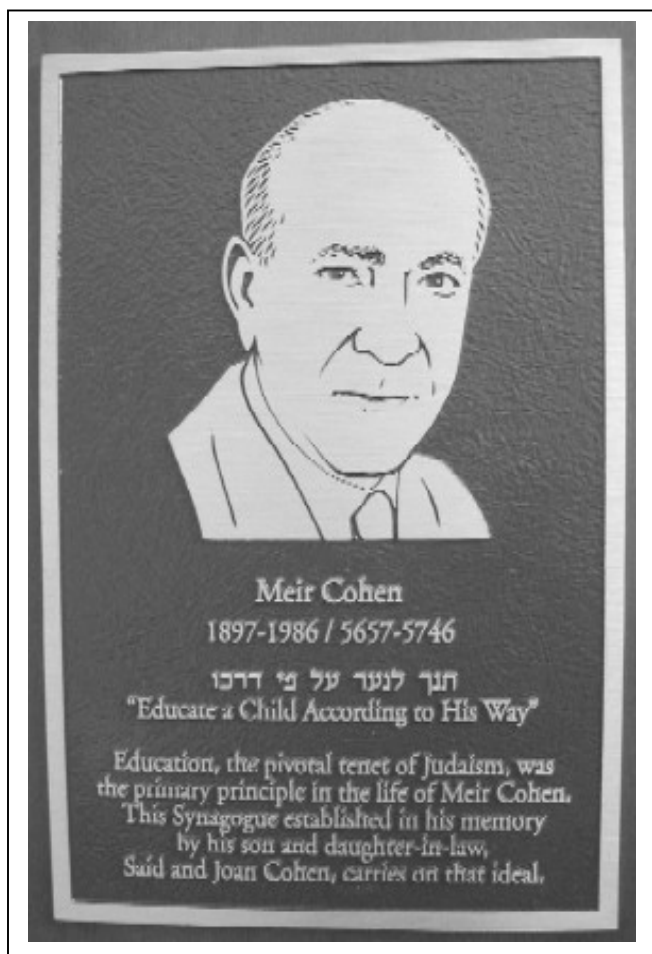
It was made possible by our very energetic and hardworking rabbi, his wife and some of the congregants. I'm sure it has been very satisfying for the rabbi to see how this really has developed into a significant Jewish community—with Jewish education and activities. The very hard work has laid a strong foundation that will continue to nurture and grow the Jewish community for many years to come.

Is it is very heartwarming to know that we are really embarking on the second phase of such a beautiful plan. It will be something to be very proud of and I look forward to seeing it completed. It's exciting just to anticipate the future activities and the future students and children coming here for an education. It's maybe a little bit more than I anticipated, but it's very, very gratifying to see it come to this.

My father was very supportive of education and helping the community, and so the way that this congregation has come together gives me great satisfaction. I see that what I was hoping for is becoming a reality



Said Cohen at the Aron HaKodesh



Meir Cohen Memorial Plaque



Original Social Hall and Sukkah Area



A large, grassy field remains after removal of the old modular building.