

# HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

[Return to the Otterbein History Page](#)

## Jos. A. Bank and His Family Lived and Worked in the Neighborhood

by David Safier

Joseph Albert Bank was two years old when he arrived at Locust Point with his parents and grandparents in 1888. They were among the many Lithuanian Jews who came to the U.S. in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and settled in Baltimore. We know him now as Jos. A. Bank, who created a clothing line and a chain of men's clothing stores. Some 500 outlets around the country carry his name.

According to the Baltimore City Directories of the time, the Bank family lived and worked in at least 17 houses in and around what is now the Otterbein neighborhood. The addresses are listed below.

408 Hanover	802 Hanover
602 Hanover	806 Hanover
610 Hanover	708 S Charles
612 Hanover	716 S Charles
613 Hanover	412 S Sharp
615 Hanover	103 W Hill
631 Hanover	137 W Lee
733 Hanover	38 E Montgomery

Most of the city's Jewish population in the 1800s and early 1900s lived in East Baltimore in the general vicinity of what is now Little Italy. The Bank family was one of many Jewish families who chose to live in South Baltimore, enough to maintain two synagogues within a few blocks of each other on Hanover Street and Hill Street, and two synagogues in the area to the east of what is now Camden Yards Stadium.

The Bank family began moving out of the area in the early 1920s, locating in Northwest Baltimore and the suburbs further north. At the time of his death in 1954, Jos. A. Bank was living at 6801 Park Heights Ave. in Pikesville.

The Banks and other Jewish families in South Baltimore may have lived in a separate location from the larger East Baltimore Jewish community in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, but the stories of the families in both areas are similar.

That is the short version of the history of Jos. A. Bank and his family. For a more detailed look at their story and the story of Baltimore's Jewish community, read on.

## Jewish Beginnings in Baltimore

The first Jews to settle in the Baltimore area were from Germany and Central Europe. A few arrived as early as the 1700s, but most came between 1800 and 1850. The community was centered in East Baltimore near what is now Little Italy. They set up businesses and shops, and built synagogues in the neighborhood.

German and other Central European Jews had become an established part of the city when the next wave of Jewish immigrants came from eastern Europe, many from Lithuania,

# HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

beginning in the 1860s. The new immigrants disembarked at Locust Point. From there, they followed three separate paths. Some boarded trains and traveled to other cities. Among those who stayed in Baltimore, most went to live in the existing Jewish community in East Baltimore, but a smaller group ended up in and around the current Otterbein neighborhood. Harry Shofer, who lived in the neighborhood and began Shofer's Furniture on South Charles and Hamburg, gave a simple description for how his people ended up here: "My family got off the boat at Locust Point and we walked up to South Hanover Street."

## The Bank Family in South Baltimore

Like the Shofer family, the Bank family walked up to South Hanover Street and stayed. The family arrived in 1888: Charles Bank and his wife Hannah, their four children and their children's children, including two year old Joseph Albert. Charles may have arrived a few years earlier to set himself up before the others came, but the records from the time give different dates for his arrival, so that's not certain. What is certain is, the entire Bank family lived and worked within a few blocks of each other. This is where they set up their businesses and had their children.

The first reference to the Bank family in the yearly Baltimore City Directory is in 1891. It lists Charles Bank living at 705 South Charles Street and working as a tailor. The next year he moved across the street to 708 South Charles Street with his three sons, also listed in the directory as tailors. The Banks were among the many Eastern European Jews who became an important part of the city's clothing industry.

According to the 1900 census, Charles' household included his wife Hannah and six other family members. Their son Simon lived with his wife Mary and their seven children ranging in age from 5 to 14, including Joseph, the oldest child. According to Joseph's official biography, he began cutting cloth for his grandfather at age 11.

In 1901 the Bank family occupied five different houses: 408 Hanover, 733 Hanover, 802 Hanover, 806 Hanover, and 708 South Charles. The Baltimore Directory refers to the family members as pants manufacturers, clothing manufacturers and salesmen. They were wholesalers who sold the clothing they made to stores in the Baltimore area and beyond. Since the homes of many Baltimore Jewish families involved in the clothing business served a dual purpose as work places and living quarters, it is not clear which houses served which purposes.

The Bank family's primary language was Yiddish. They and many other Jewish families in the area attended the Anshe Emunah Synagogue on Hanover Street near Welcome Alley. The synagogue was also referred to as the Tavriger Shul (Shul is the Yiddish word for synagogue), referring to Taurage, Lithuania, where many of the congregation's families lived before immigrating to the U.S. In Charles' obituary, he is credited with being among the synagogue's founders and one of its most active members.

By 1903, Charles had formed a business with his son Ellis: Chas Bank & Son. Charles was listed as living at 610 Hanover, which appears to have been his permanent residence until his death in 1916. His business with Ellis was centered at 615 Hanover.

In the following years, Bank family members lived and worked in a number of houses in the neighborhood, including houses on Sharp Street, Hill Street and East Montgomery.



# HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

When Joseph was 21, he was listed in the city directory as a laborer working at 610 Hanover. The next year his job description changed to commercial traveler. He carried his family's wares into the South to make business contacts and find buyers.



Another Jewish family headed by Moses Hartz, who came to the U.S. around the same time as the Banks and lived in the East Baltimore Jewish community, also had a clothing business, Hartz and Sugar, located at 1171 East Lombard. Moses' daughter, Annie E. Hartz, like Joseph, was a salesperson for the family business. Annie and Joseph married in 1912 and had their first of four children, Mignon Mozelle Bank, in 1914. They were living at 612 Hanover.

Charles Bank died in 1916 at age 70, six months after the death of his wife. According to his obituary Charles was survived by 2 daughters, 2 sons, 30 grandchildren and 7 great-grandchildren.

When Annie's father Moses died in 1921, his widow Lena took over the family business. In 1922, Lena and Joseph formed the company L. Hartz and Bank, continuing to work as wholesalers.

The Bank family was one of a number of financially successful Jewish families that got off the boat at Locust Point, walked up Hanover Street and stayed. Others included: The Shofer family, which arrived in 1904, lived at 626 Hanover and started Shofer's Furniture; The Krieger family, which lived at 601 South Charles Street and went into the wholesale liquor business; The Shaivitz family, which lived at 816 Charles Street and opened a chain of furniture stores; And the Epstein family, which arrived in Baltimore in 1882 and opened a store at 48 West Barre Street selling pots, pans and furniture while living over the store. Their small enterprise grew into the Baltimore Bargain House, one of the largest businesses of its kind in the country. Jacob Epstein became one of the city's major Jewish philanthropists.

## The Bank Family Moves to Northwest Baltimore

As Eastern European Jewish immigrants crowded into East Baltimore, the more established German Jewish families moved out, relocating in neighborhoods south of Druid Hill Park in Northwest Baltimore, beginning as early as the 1880s. By the 1920s, some of the more successful Eastern European Jewish families followed suit, including those like the Banks who lived in South Baltimore. The dwindling membership in the Anshe Emunah Synagogue was an indicator of the community's relocation. The synagogue had more than 1,000 members during World War I. When it closed its doors on Hanover Street in 1955 and moved to Northwest Baltimore, it was down to 60 members. The smaller synagogue on Hill Street closed as well for lack of members.

By 1920 Joseph and Annie had moved to 810 Chauncey, four blocks south of Druid Park Lake Drive. In a few years, Bank family members were living in three houses on the block. By the 1930s, the only remnant of the Bank family in the Otterbein area was Morris & Son clothing manufacturers situated at 103 West Hill.

# HISTORIC OTTERBEIN



Joseph's son Howard joined his father's business. In 1945 they bought out Lena Hartz and formed Jos. A. Bank and Co. In the next few years the company began selling retail. By 1981 it had 11 stores and a catalog business.

Joseph died in 1954. He and Annie had followed the migration of Jews further north and were living at 6801 Park Heights Ave in Pikesville. Today, Baltimore's Jewish community is centered in Pikesville, Owings Mills and Reisterstown.

In the 1980s the Bank family sold their business to the Quaker Oats Company. After it was purchased away from Quaker Oats in a leveraged buyout, the business fell on hard times, then was rebuilt into a thriving enterprise with 500 stores around the country.

**A Bibliographical Note:** The articles I write on this website aren't meant to be scholarly works, so I usually don't include bibliographies. In this case, however, I will make an exception and give credit to two books which do a wonderful job tracing the history of Jews in Baltimore and provided most of the information here which is not directly related to the Bank family: **Jewish Baltimore, A Family Album** by Gilbert Sandler; and **On Middle Ground, the History of Jews in Baltimore** by Eric L. Goldstein and Deborah R. Weiner.