

Rabbi Ely E. Pilchik Collection
Jewish Historical Society of MetroWest Archives
Prepared by Jill Hershshorin, January 2012

Record Group: 1

Collection Number: 10-99

Creator: Rabbi Ely E. Pilchik

Inclusive Dates: 1937-1993

Extent: 13 Boxes, 6.5 cubic feet

Abstract: Published and private writings of Rabbi Ely Pilchik, including: sermons, letters, cantatas, poetry, and programs. Most were typed and organized by Rabbi Pilchik in loose leaf binders. All documents are in English, but occasionally have notes in Hebrew or German. For preservation purposes, staples and files were removed and original order has been kept.

Acquisition information: Donated by Judy Zucker, daughter of Rabbi Ely Pilchik, to Warren Grover.

Preferred Citation: Rabbi Ely E. Pilchik Collection

Access restrictions:

The collections of the Society shall be available for examination and study by any member of the public under the normal security procedures and other special procedures established for the protection of the specific collections.

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Biography:

Ely Emanuel Pilchik was born in 1913 in Baranovich, a largely Jewish town in Czarist Russia. His family immigrated to the United States in 1920. Pilchik's family settled in Saint Louis, Missouri, where he attended school and continued Talmudic studies at a local Orthodox yeshiva. Pilchik began to question his religious affiliation. In his words 'I began to feel that much of Orthodoxy was no longer applicable to Jewish life...I came to feel that Reform Judaism...was more applicable...I therefore consecrated myself to the life of a Rabbi¹.'

Pilchik attended the University of Cincinnati, where he received a BA in Hebrew Literature in 1935. He was ordained as a Reform Rabbi in 1939 at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. He later was granted a doctorate in divinity degree in 1964. An important figure in his development was historian Jacob Mann, who supervised his thesis on the Talmudic figure Abba Arikha, called 'Rav and Shmuel.' The same year, he began to write 'What They Say' for 'The Reconstructionist' magazine, the start of a lifetime of success in publishing. Around this time he met and had a conversation with Louis Brandeis².

¹ Pg. 3 'Palestine and Zionism, Part III' 1942

² Pg. 13 'Palestine and Zionism, Part III' 1942

Pilchik's first rabbinic post was founding and directing at the University of Maryland Hillel in College Park, where he taught 'The Old Testament and Literature.' He also served as assistant Rabbi in Temple Har Sinai in Baltimore. In 1944, after a training course at William and Mary, Pilchik served as a Navy chaplain during World War II, for two years in the South Pacific. Returning to the United States, he was hired as the rabbi in Temple Israel in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

In 1947, Pilchik was hired as rabbi of the Reform Temple B'nai Jeshurun of Newark, New Jersey. He soon became a popular speaker, and many of his writings were published by the synagogue and assorted magazines. He was frequently a guest on WNJR, a local radio station, delivering sermons and services.

In 1954, Rabbi Pilchik corresponded with Albert Einstein and spent several hours in discussion at Einstein's home in Princeton. Pilchik would recount his correspondence and his brief encounter with Einstein, which was the basis of a miniature book entitled 'Einstein: Touches of Genius.'

As Rabbi of one of Newark's largest Synagogues, Pilchik was involved with the greater community. Personal campaigns included Pilchik's regular letters to editors of newspapers and periodicals covering a variety of topics. An example of such correspondence to newspapers called for a 'review (of firearm) laws pertaining to the selling and possessing of firearms and other lethal weapons' in 1963 and 'a law, preferably a federal law, abolishing professional boxing' in 1962. He also served as President of the Jewish Book Council of America between 1954-1958.

In the 1960's tensions between Jewish and African-American residents of Newark continued to rise. Under the guidance of Pilchik, B'nai Jeshurun teenagers ran a tutoring program for poor African-American children in Newark. As B'nai Jeshurun moved to Short Hills in 1968, Pilchik's involvement in civil rights activism continued. In 1986 he was invited to speak at New Jersey's first Martin Luther King Day service.

In 1971, Rabbi Ely Pilchik was named Man of the Year by the NJ Conference of Christians and Jews. In 1978, Pilchik served as head of the Central Conference of Rabbis (CCAR). In 1980, despite his criticism of militarism he was invited to speak at American military installations in Hawaii and Japan.

Pilchik authored many books, essays and the text of many cantatas, many of which were used for confirmation services on Shavout, often featuring choirs and musicians of other faiths

Pilchik married Harriet Perlmutter, the widow of businessman Milton Perlmutter, a founding member of PathMark supermarkets. In 1981, Pilchik retired as Rabbi Emeritus and traveled, occasionally speaking at the Synagogue. Rabbi Ely Pilchik passed away in West Orange's Daughters of Israel Home nursing home in 2003 at the age of 89, after twelve years of struggling with Alzheimer's disease.

Scope and Content: This collection was obtained by the Society in 1999. The arrangement and finding aid was originally prepared by archival assistant, David Druce. While Druce kept the arrangement in original order, the subject hierarchies were never established. In order to have intellectual control of the extensive collection, archivist Jill Hershorin disassembled the collection and arranged the materials in a manner more consistent and adhering to archival arrangement standards. In addition, the original finding aid written by Druce was discarded and a more concise one was created.

Most of the documents found in the collection are primary materials. Pilchik's handwritten speeches and sermons, musical cantatas and other personal writings are within this collection and are housed in the same folders with their typed and printed counterparts.

Of interest is the correspondence between Pilchik and Einstein.

Conservation Notes: Many documents were in binders, but were removed for preservation purposes. Some handwritten documents should be photocopied for longevity.

Removals: Material relating to Albert Einstein, including a letter autographed by Einstein had been removed for an exhibit before this collection was processed. Photocopies of this letter remain in the collection.

Organization: This collection is arranged chronologically. This collection is comprised of paper and a few photographs and is divided into five series as follows:

- I. Subject Files
 - a. Congregation B'nai Jeshurun
 - b. Correspondence
 - c. Events
 - d. General Subjects
 - e. Photographs
 - f. Legal
- II. Sermons
- III. Speeches
- IV. Writings
- V. Publications