

‘In one day’ safety of longtime Jewish enclave shattered

By Matt Sedensky, Maryclaire Dale
The Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — In a city known for its Jewish population, the neighborhood was the faith’s spiritual heart and the synagogue a cornerstone of the community.

For generations, Squirrel Hill has been known as one of Pittsburgh’s most special enclaves, where the Tree of Life temple stood as a welcoming landmark. Residents marveled over their good fortune to live in a place that seemed open, accepting and secure.

“People always felt safe here,” said Jules Stein, a lifelong resident of Squirrel Hill who until recently belonged to Tree of Life. “In one day, that changed.”

A gunman opened fire Saturday at the synagogue, killing 11 people. It was the type of violence that seemed impossible to many who called the neighborhood home.

Tanya Cohen, who emigrated from Russia and lives near Tree of Life, always knew anti-Semitism existed but never thought it would strike so close.

“It seemed like here, those things were really far away and really removed from our reality,” said Cohen, whose 12-year-old daughter was shaken by the sight of rifle-carrying men in fatigues passing by their

home. “Those are the things that we read in a newspaper or in a book or watch in a movie.”

The former leader of Tree of Life, Rabbi Alvin Berkun, was dressed and ready to head to the synagogue on Saturday when his wife asked him to stay home because she didn’t feel well. He said the congregation only posted security officers on the High Holidays, but even so never felt unsafe there.

“The community is very resilient and we will rebound,” he said, “but it will leave a scar forever.”

Others, though grateful for

the seeming bubble in which they lived, always feared such hatred could visit them.

A 2017 report on Pittsburgh’s Jewish community by Brandeis University researchers found 70 percent of area Jews were a little or somewhat concerned about anti-Semitism. Older Jews expressed the most fear: One-third of those 65 and older said they were very concerned, versus 10 percent of those 18 to 34.

The report estimated about 50,000 Jews call Greater Pittsburgh home.

About one in six respondents

said they had directly experienced anti-Semitism in the preceding year, mostly involving comments, insults, jokes and stereotypes. One person quoted in the report said, while walking to a synagogue, a motorist yelled “dumb Jew” and spat at them, before warning them to “go back to Squirrel Hill.”

Another told of a campaign sign for Donald Trump being put in their yard with a note saying it was from their “neighborhood youth Hitler.”

There have been scattered incidents of anti-Semitism in the area over the years that have occasionally drawn con-

cern, including spray-painted swastikas. In 1986, a rabbinical student from Toronto visiting his in-laws was shot on the street in a killing many believed was motivated by the victim’s appearance. He was bearded and wore a yarmulke with a long black coat, black suit and black hat — hallmarks of Orthodox Judaism.

As jarring and violent as that killing was, though, it came nowhere close to the impact of Saturday’s attack.

German Jews began arriving in Pittsburgh in the 1840s, followed later by Eastern European Jews. Tree of Life broke

off from a reform congregation in 1865, moving to the Oakland neighborhood before building its current Squirrel Hill home after World War II.

Sarah Elbling Straus, a 41-year-old who grew up in Squirrel Hill, said she felt so secure in the neighborhood that she never experienced anti-Semitism until she left for college. She now lives in Gaithersburg, Maryland, and has been active in her new congregation, including on security issues.

“You never think it would happen here,” she said, “until it happens.”

IMBLER

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storage cart with wheels to hold and transport the sheet music stands. She said the instruments make a unique addition to the program.

“I wanted instruments the school never had, that were different and would add to each of the songs,” Mullarkey said. “We’ve never had timpani drums before, and they make a huge difference in the sound of the song.”

The baritone and euphonium provide some of the lower tones necessary for a fuller, richer-sounding song, and they are easier for kids to hold than a trombone.

The former drum set was in poor condition after much use, and Mullarkey wanted a higher quality drum set that would last longer.

“We just got the drum set last week,” Christensen said, adding that the drums are pretty popular among the kids.

“There is usually a line of kids wanting to play them,” she said.

Mullarkey appreciates the cart because it was difficult to transport the music stands between buildings on school campus, especially on windier days.

There was one other instrument that Mullarkey wanted to purchase — a digital piano — but was short about \$500 for the purchase. So for now, she is using her piano from home, hoping one day to replace it with a new one belonging to the school.

Christensen said any other additions to the collection would be appreciated.

“If you have a musical instrument gathering dust in a closet or under a bed, contact Mrs. Mullarkey at the school,” Christensen said. “She may be able to put it to good use.”

For now, Mullarkey and her 63 students are thrilled to have their new instruments and hear the difference it makes in their songs.

“I would like to thank the Wildhorse Foundation, Soroptomist International and Imbler’s PAC for their generous donations,” Mullarkey said. “The kids are very excited to learn their new instruments and perform in front of everyone at their concerts.”

The next concert begins at 7 p.m. Dec. 13.



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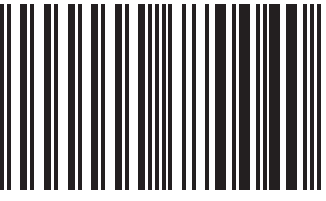


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