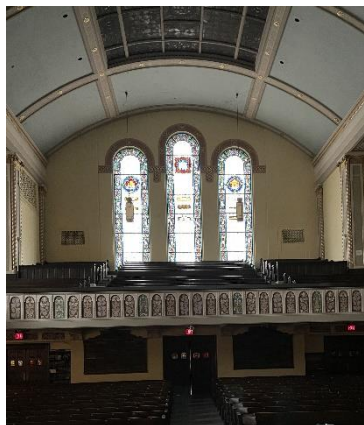


Mutterperl Window/Anshe Chesed

Susan Cohen



Should you be sitting in the Anshe Chesed balcony and find your eyes wandering away from the bimah, you may – as I have – wonder about the people whose names are emblazoned in colors in the three large stained-glass downs on the west-facing wall. Who were these "all-right-niks," as my mother would have said? Where did they live? What did they do?

The northern of the three

windows reads: *Dedicated by the Mutterperl Foundation in Honor of Sol and Susanne Mutterperl; In Loving Memory of Susanne R. Mutterperl; In memory of Sol and Susanne Mutterperl.* Here is some information about those Mutterperls, from Ancestry.com via a link at the local public library, and Google. It is not quite the lives themselves, but it is some of the scaffolding.



Solomon Mutterperl was born in 1878 in Romania -- Galutz, according to his 1924 passport application, Galati in Romanian, a city on the Danube in eastern Romania -- and came to New York in 1893,¹ at age 15. He gave his name on that application as "Solomon (Sol) Mutterperl", each S written with a great flourish. The JewishGen webpage for Galutz reports a number of pogroms there in the 1800s, and an expulsion of Jewish bakers in 1893 following a strike. Likely Sol joined more than just bakers leaving, as the Jewish population there fell from 14,500 in 1894 to 12,000 in 1910. I don't know if he immigrated with his parents, but they were listed together in the 1900 U. S. Census, with Sol as a pocketbook maker. The address was 210 Thatford Ave., Brooklyn. That part of Thatford no longer exists; the street breaks at New York City Housing Authority's Langston Hughes Houses.

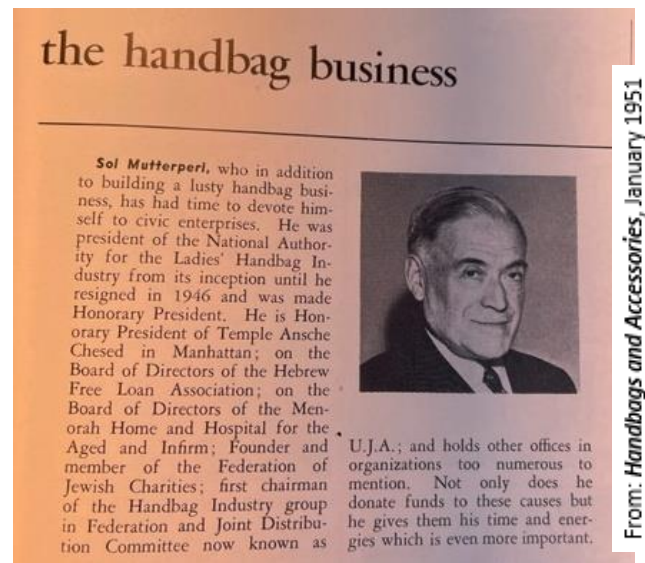
Thatford Ave. was still his address months later at the very end of 1900 in his application papers for citizenship, where he listed his occupation as clerk. He did become a citizen that year, according to the passport application, and was married to Susanne in Brooklyn in 1903 (Susanne's name providing another occasion for a lovely "S"). A 1905 state census lists them living at 318 East 56 St., with a baby, Raphael. In the 1910 Census, Sol and "Susie" were living on 103 St. (I could not determine the street number), with three children -- Raphael, Ruth (about 3), and Frieda (1) -- and a 15-year-old servant born in Poland. Sol's occupation was "Manufacturer", with "Pocketbooks" listed as the industry. He was 39 when he filled out the mandatory World War I draft registration card, by which time he lived at 133 West 113 St., at the corner of Lenox Ave. (now Malcolm X Boulevard). The 1920 census has the Mutterperls at that same address, with one more child, Martin, born around 1912.² That meant they were only a short walk to Anshe Chesed in its 1908 building at the corner of 114th Street and Seventh (now Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard). When Sol died in 1968, a paid obituary in the New York Times

from the AC Sisterhood mentioned his "sixty years of affiliation with our temple," evidence that he was part of the congregation when it was in that building.

But then they moved. By the time of the 1924 passport application, they lived at 510 West 110 St., which we locals also know at Cathedral Parkway. When I was in graduate school, I lived just across the street from that building. I gained a certain appreciation for the street name when my great aunt Ruth, born about 1900, told me that her father used to do work in his tailor shop on Columbus Avenue near 104th Street for women in the grand apartments on Cathedral Parkway. Who knows? Maybe Aunt Ruth's father made some garments for Susanne Mutterperl to wear abroad. After all, the purpose of that passport application was "touring and commercial business" in "France, Germany, Austria, CzechoSlovakia, Italy, Switzerland, and Roumania." Of course she likely made purchases in Europe, but would have needed something first for the ocean voyage -- it was on the SS Reliance, a transatlantic steamer out with capacity for over 300 first class passengers (and another 300 second class passengers, plus 850 each in third class and steerage).

Three other Upper West Side apartments were homes to the Mutterperls in the next two-plus decades. Were the moves for more space? Better rent? Better views? In 1930, they lived at 685 West End Ave. By this time, Raphael, the oldest, then about 25, was married and living at 710 West End Ave; Ruth was also married and living elsewhere. Frieda, the third child, was listed in the Census as Fritzi, and the household included a 21-year-old German-born servant, the same age as Fritzi. was an "Owner" in leather manufacturing ("Mnf leather" as industry). They were at 262 Central Park West, just north of 86th St., when the 1940 Census was taken. Martin had not been listed as part of the household in 1930 - - perhaps off to college -- but he was in the 1940 Census, along with a different German-born servant, also 21, this one named Herta Weinstein. Finally at some point the Mutterperls moved to 350 Central Park West (at 94th St.). That address appears on Sol's World War II draft registration card and on a first-class passenger list on the SS United States, coming to New York from Le Havre in 1952.

So what was the leather manufacturing? Sol Mutterperl started a pocketbook business in a loft in lower Manhattan in 1901, eight years after immigrating. The business evidently flourished and moved uptown in steps, ending up with 30,000 square feet at 18 West 18th St. in 1921. In 1931 they leased space for their showroom at 330 Fifth Ave., just south of the Empire State Building. They still occupied that showroom when they had 450 employees and were featured in the January 1951 issue of *Handbags and Accessories*,³ in a two-page spread entitled "A half-century in the handbag business: Story of the 50th anniversary of the firm of Sol Mutterperl." That article (which I read in the original format at the New York Public Library) did not pop up directly in a Google search; what did pop up was a reference to it in



an entry in Dartmouth college's Alumni Magazine from June 1951, from the 1932 Class Notes, with this comment (is there a slight whiff of distaste for the merchant class here?): *It's quite a story of the growth of a little shop into a vast manufacturing and selling operation. The buyer of all the supplies for the factory is Martin Mutterperl of our own class.* In fact both sons and one son-in-law (Ludwig Bickhardt, who married Fritzi) worked for and became partners in the firm.

Thanks to website Bag Lady U, you can see original advertisements for Mutterperl pocketbooks, branded as "Stylemark". And thanks to Etsy,



LUGGAGE & LEATHER GOODS for August, 1936

you may be able to buy one! I did not find early or late examples in leather, but vinyl bags designed to sell for one to two dollars in the 1930s and 1940s are for sale today for around \$50. Trade-journal advertisements range from routine ("The Buyers Choice Since 1901; Dollar Bags of the Better Kind"), to mildly humorous (that same text with an election year theme, as shown here; or the New Year's themed January 1955 ad with a crystal ball and the statement: "We predict



that...this year, as always, the bulk of the business will go to those merchants who go after it most aggressively. This means those who feature the line that offers women the most style and value -- Stylemark by Mutterperl.") Some advertisements list sales offices in Boston, Chicago, and L.A. in addition to 330 Fifth Ave., further indication of the scale of the company.

The fact of the Anshe Chesed window suggests good deeds from those named there. For Sol Mutterperl, the Handbags and Accessories article has details. The pull-out box shown above, with his photo, lists many of his community and charitable affiliations, including among others Anshe Chesed, the Hebrew Free Loan Association, the Menorah Home and Hospital, the Federation of Jewish Charities, and industry groups like the Handbag Industry group in Federation and Joint Distribution Committee. Other instances of activities surface in seemingly randomly posted documents in Google searches. For example, Mutterperl was one of about 60 people listed as part of the Executive Committee on a dinner invitation at the Biltmore Hotel honoring Abba Hillel Silver, May 1938, sponsored by the National Chair of the United Palestine Appeal. His name is also part of a much longer list of the "Dinner Committee" for an Annual Hanukkah Dinner invitation from the Jewish Education Committee of New York, to be held at the Waldorf Astoria, with Mrs. Felix Warburg chair of the dinner committee. The image of this invitation is from Columbia University files; penciled at top is "Governor and Mrs. HHL" (Herbert H. Lehman). One wonders if the dinner was ever held: it was scheduled for 6:30 pm, Sunday, December 7, 1941.

More comprehensive are obituary notices. Susanne died at age 82 in January 1964, Sol at 90 in October 1968.⁴ Both merited New York Times obituaries -- hers one paragraph, his four, from which we also

learn that there were scholarships in his name at both JTS and Brandeis. The paid obituaries were particularly interesting: the early sixties may have been a period of decline at Anshe Chesed, but even individual committees were heard from. For Susanne those made up half of the ten paid notices: Anshe Chesed Hebrew School board of trustees; the Young Married League of Temple Anshe Chesed (also signed as the Mr. and Mrs. Club.);⁵ the Men's Club of Temple Anshe Chesed, which referred to her as the "first lady of our congregation";⁶ Anshe Chesed itself, which noted that two of her children, with spouses, were AC members;⁷ and finally the Anshe Chesed Sisterhood.⁸ There was also a notice from the family, a few from organizations that Sol supported, and one from Congregation Shaare Tefila of Far Rockaway, where daughter Ruth (identified as Mrs. William Ginsberg) was a member.⁹ For Sol, there were six paid obituaries. One was from the family; it asked that in lieu of flowers, donations be made to the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies. One was from the National Handbag Association, of which Sol was a founder and president from 1935 to 1947; it called him a "dean of the industry." One was from Anshe Chesed and another from the AC sisterhood (with the reference to his 60 years of affiliation with the "temple"). The other notices were from the Menorah Home and Hospital, and the UJA.

Mutterperl was also the president of the National Authority for the Ladies' Handbag Industry for many years. Bag Lady U tells us that this depression-era trade association helped stabilize the industry in the mid-1930s, including a commitment to a 40-hour work week and a minimum wage of 35 cents an hour. But that was less than union demands for a 30-hour week and fifty cents an hour. Following a strike, many handbag manufacturers left New York City. Mutterperl was somewhat ahead of the curve: By 1931 it was doing its manufacturing at what was described as a "huge" (85,000 sq. ft) factory in New Bedford, Massachusetts. And here, finally, is where the picture of the good deeds gets more complicated, as it often is. In a history of New Bedford,¹⁰ also found on a Google search, there is a 1931 photograph of six women picketing the Mutterperl plant, which operated under the name Fairhaven. It seems that there were 500 applicants for 50 positions. The pay was reported to be as low as 48 cents a *day* under a piecework system. Could that have been an exaggeration? Actual earnings under the piecework system were not reported in this labor history, and the New York industry's stated commitment to 35 cents an *hour* is closer to regional average rates reported by the federal government. Still, a strike began three weeks after the plant opened. Raphael, by then living in New Bedford to run the factory, was described as saying that the strikers were "mesmerized by New York agitators" who wanted to force Fairhaven to move back to New York. Strikers were arrested, but they clearly did not shut down the plant. The Mutterperls went on to make their "handbags of incomparable value at a popular price", and to contribute generously to their community. Might they perhaps have contributed less and paid their workers more? My first instinct is to say yes, but then I am not making risky business decisions and providing employment during a depression. Based on the rest of the record here, let us assume the best and give our thanks for the Mutterperls' sixty years of support for Anshe Chesed.

¹ The records are not all consistent here. The 1900 Census says 1892, and his citizenship application says December 1894.

² The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, whether done by humans or coding, has an entry for Solomon Mutterperl that lists a fifth child, Rachel Haia, born in 1906, "deceased" with no date.

³ I read this early in 2022, when supply-chain problems were surfacing. The magazine's editorial that January 1951 was "Buy American!" Betty Held, the editor, wrote, "We believe that American industry should be protected and

honored because it is your constant source of supply. Your regular suppliers are the ones you call long distance or wire when stocks are low."

⁴ All the children in the Census listings survived them, and when Sol died there were six grandchildren and ten great-grandchildren.

⁵ The notice was from The Young Married League of Temple Anshe Chesed and stated, "The family's interest in the development of our group will always be remembered." It was signed "Board of Officers, Mr. and Mrs. Club."

⁶ This notice was made under the name of I. Roger Klein as President of the Men's Club.

⁷ The notice named them: Martin and Muriel; and Fritzi and Ludwig Bickhardt

⁸ The Sisterhood notice identified Susanne as the mother of their member Fritzi Bickhardt. It described Susanne as "lovable, kindly, outstanding personality".

⁹ The Mutterperls' good example of support for one's synagogue has gone at least as far as the grandchildren's generation. The *Memory Book, 5782, Tifereth Israel Congregation, New Bedford (2021-22)*, which came up in one of the searches, has an entry in memory of Raphael Mutterperl and his wife Ruth, from their daughter Betty, and her husband, Alan Novick; both Betty and Alan were born in New Bedford. (Their entry in the Tifereth Israel book is in "loving memory" of each of their parents, her brother, and beloved relatives and friends.)

¹⁰ A Picture History of New Bedford, Vol. 2, pg.29.