

Hometown Boy:

by Daniel S. Mariaschin

Elvis and the Jews of Memphis

25 years after his death, Memphis Jews remember Elvis

Elvis was a hometown boy. He owned houses in California, but he always came back to Graceland, the home he purchased in Memphis in 1956 after his first hit records and the beginning of his movie career. He surrounded himself with a group that was known as the "Memphis Mafia," which included several Jews. They traveled with Elvis, offering companionship and assisted him as members of his entourage.

It wasn't always like that. Moving from Tupelo, Miss., to Memphis in the early 1950s, Vernon and Gladys Presley and their son, Elvis, were practically poor. His mother was a nurse's aide and his father worked at a paint store.

In 1953, they moved into the ground floor of a two-family house at 462 Alabama Street, owned by the widow of Abe Dubrovner, one of Memphis's kosher butchers. On the second floor lived the rabbi of Beth El Emeth Congregation, Alfred Fruchter, and his wife, Jeanette. Memphis in the 1950s was typical of many other American cities: there were restricted clubs that were off limits to Jews and minorities. But the North Memphis neighborhood surrounding Alabama Street was demographically mixed, though most of the Jewish community actually lived further east.

Abe Dubrovner's daughter, Fagie Schaffer, collected the Presleys' rent—$55 a month—and remembers the family well. She has maintained an Elvis scrapbook over the years, including carbon copies of the Presleys' rent receipts. On the occasions when Elvis came to pay the rent, "he was shy and not very talkative," she said. "He'd come on his motorcycle or in the truck he drove for the Crown Electric Co. He was a polite young man, and he'd never sit down while I was writing out the receipt."

Rebbetzin Jeanette Fruchter recalls that, "We became good neighbors and friends with the Presleys right away." She occasionally baked challah for the Presleys, and invited them into their *sukkah* on Sukkot. The Presleys' first knowledge of things Jewish most likely came from their upstairs neighbors, including the sounds of cantorial records Rabbi Fruchter played on his phonograph.

As for Elvis, he came upstairs every Shabbat morning, asking which light needed to be turned on. "He was very respectful," Fruchter recalls. "He'd always give his mother his weekly pay envelope from Crown Electric. And if Elvis saw us coming with grocery bags, he'd run down to meet us and carry the groceries upstairs for us." When the Fruchters' son was born and the family returned from the hospital, Elvis asked to carry the baby upstairs.

The Fruchters were quick to return the favors. When they went on vacation, they loaned Elvis their phonograph. For Elvis's high school graduation, the Fruchters gave him a tie clip and cuff link set, something he had wanted. In tough times, Rabbi Fruchter requested that the city send his neighbor's water bill directly to him. And the Fruchters' phone was always available to their downstairs neighbors, who didn't have one. It was the Fruchters' phone that rang off the



COURTESY OF RON LEVITCH

Elvis's jeweler, B'nai B'rith member Harry Levitch, was one of a handful of guests at the singer's wedding to Priscilla Beaulieu in 1967.

hook with congratulatory calls the night that Elvis's first hit record, "That's All Right Mama," was played on a local radio station.

Elvis never forgot the Fruchters. Years later the rabbi accepted a pulpit in Oakland, Calif. He learned that Elvis would be performing in San Francisco and quickly tracked down the singer. The two met at Elvis's press conference, where Elvis introduced Rabbi Fruchter as "my rabbi" to the gathered reporters.

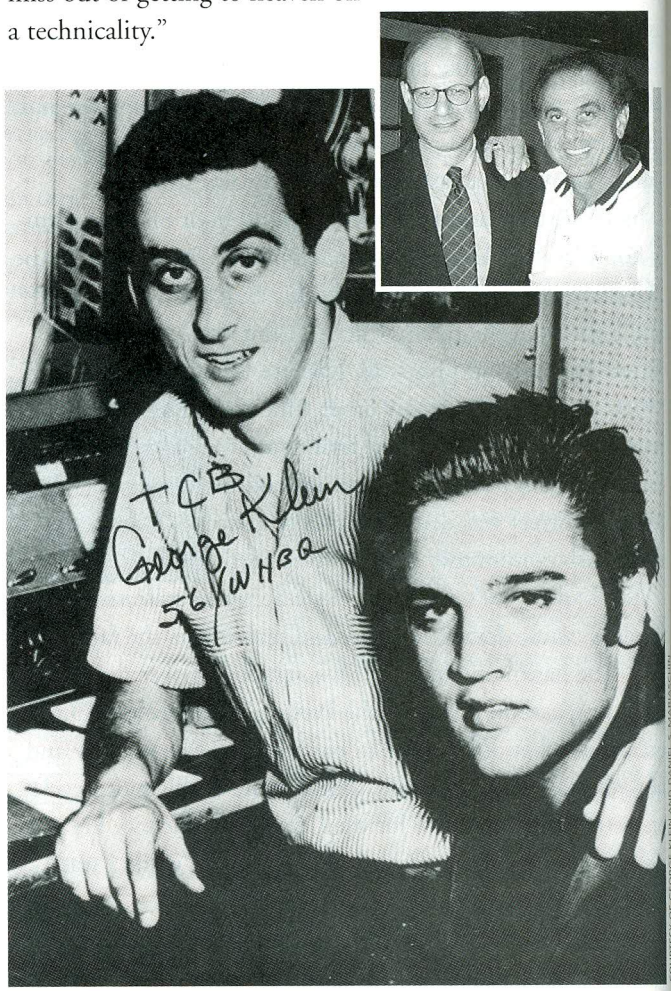
Harry Levitch opened his own shop in downtown Memphis in the mid 1950s, selling jewelry, luggage, and small household appliances. An active member of B'nai B'rith, Levitch was involved in a lodge project that provided underprivileged children in Memphis with shoes, coats, and other necessities. Receiving assistance was Red West, one of Elvis's best friends at Humes High School. As Levitch's son, Ron, tells it, "When Elvis started to make it, West suggested he shop at Levitch's store just off Main Street. Elvis was about 21. The first items he bought weren't jewelry—they were two electric mixers for his mother."

According to Levitch, "Every Christmas we'd go to Graceland. Basically, we'd pack up the whole store and sit in the living room," where Elvis would choose gifts for family and friends. "He took a big liking to my father, and told him if he ever got married, he'd buy his rings from him," says Levitch. That's what Elvis did—sworn to secrecy, Levitch had both the engagement and wedding rings made for Elvis's marriage to Priscilla Beaulieu in 1967, and personally brought them to the wedding in Las Vegas. Levitch was only one of a handful of people who attended the ceremony. "My dad never played on it," Levitch says of his father's relationship with Elvis. "He valued the friendship."

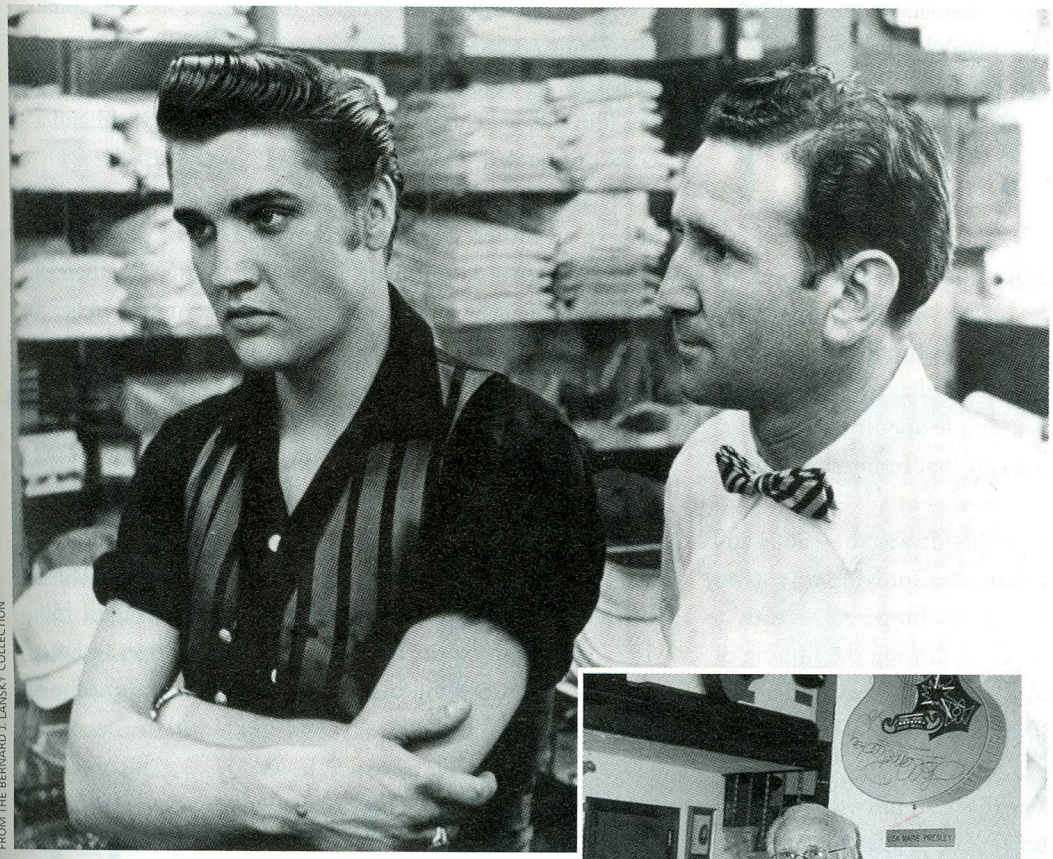
George Klein, 67, was the president of Elvis's senior class at Humes High School in Memphis. Klein, a Mississippi casino executive, played an important role in various stages of Elvis's life. They first met in eighth grade music class. Klein remembers some of their classmates making fun of Elvis for his long hair and the way he dressed. "But I liked him. I never, ever made fun of him. I looked down on the guys who did," Klein says. He heard Elvis sing in school talent shows, and his talent impressed Klein. He speaks fondly of a class picture taken at Graceland during a reunion, on which Elvis wrote: "To one of the few guys in class who was really nice to me."

In 1954 Klein had a hand in Elvis's overnight success in the music business. He worked part-time at radio station WHBQ and was at the station the evening that Elvis's Sun Records recording of "That's All Right, Mama" was played for the first time. It caused a sensation among listeners. Klein took the record to a small station in Arkansas where he had a show on weekends. "I was probably the second deejay to play Elvis," he recalls.

Klein knew most of the Jews with whom Elvis worked professionally, from songwriters Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller to the comedians Jackie Kahane and Sammy Shore, who opened for Elvis in Las Vegas. Klein tells a story of Jackie Kahane and the *chai* that Elvis wore around his neck, along with a crucifix. Kahane asked him why he wore both. Elvis supposedly replied, "Jackie, I don't want to miss out of getting to heaven on a technicality."



High school classmate George Klein was part of Elvis's inner circle. Pictured with Elvis in 1956 and, inset, with the author.



FROM THE BERNARD J. LANSKY COLLECTION



Clothier to the King Bernard Lansky, pictured with Elvis in his Memphis store in the 1950s and (inset) today, helped Elvis create his signature style.

Elvis also met Memphis B'nai B'rith Youth Organization AZA member Alan Fortas, nephew of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas, through Klein, who was also active in AZA. Now deceased, Fortas remained a member of Elvis's inner circle for many years.

Throughout Elvis's career, Klein remained close to him. Elvis was the best man at Klein's wedding. Today, Klein continues to be in demand as a guest on programs about Elvis, and remains a devoted, grateful friend.



Bernard Lansky, 75, is a salesman extraordinaire. In 1955 he and his brother opened Lansky's on Beale Street, selling high fashion clothing. A fast crowd, including many Memphis musicians, shopped at Lansky's, which featured a popular lay-away plan. "R&B, soul singers, the gospel groups, they all came in," Lansky says.

"Elvis worked as an usher at the Loew's Theater," Lansky recalls. "He used to come by here on his break. "Let me show you around," Lansky told Presley, who replied, "I like everything you got. When I get rich, I'll buy you out." That began a long and friendly relationship between Elvis and the Lanskys. Elvis appeared on the Tommy Dorsey television program in 1956 in an outfit purchased from Lansky's. The jacket is now on display at the Sun Records Studio in Memphis. And it was Bernard Lansky who introduced Elvis to the rolled collar style and bloom sleeves, with his own tailors doing special trimming and designs.

The Lanskys have since entered into a business partnership with Elvis Presley Enterprises, leasing their old store on Beale Street to the company for a theme restaurant called "Elvis Presley's Memphis."



Lester Hoffman is also proud of his longtime association with Elvis. A B'nai B'rith member for 50 years, Hoffman was Elvis's dentist from 1961 until the performer's death in 1977. Hoffman met Elvis right after the filming of "Blue Hawaii." He did more than take care of Elvis's teeth. "I became his friend," Hoffman says. Nevertheless, Elvis's Southern politeness hindered him from calling Hoffman by his first name. "He'd say, 'Oh, no. You went to school and earned that degree, so I'll call you Dr. Hoffman.'"

Elvis visited the office a few times a year, and special appointments were made in the evenings to avoid the fan pandemonium that followed the singer wherever he went. Hoffman describes his wife as somewhat of a foster mother to Elvis, and the two of them eventually became recipients of his legendary largesse. One day Elvis drove to the dental

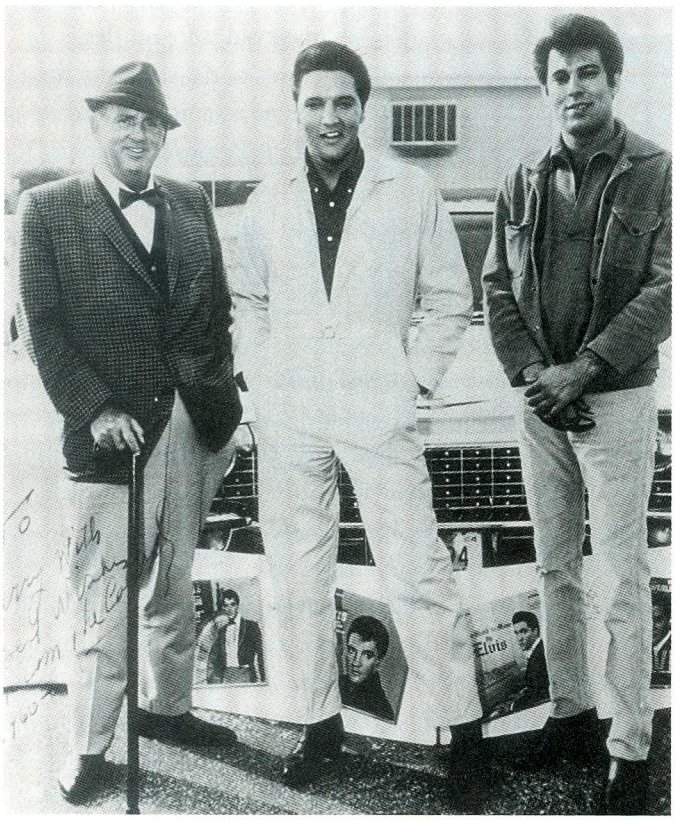
office and gave the keys to a new Cadillac Seville to the incredulous couple for Mrs. Hoffman's birthday.

Larry Geller isn't from Memphis, but he was an important member of Elvis's Jewish circle. Geller was Elvis's hairdresser. He began his career in 1959 with Jay Sebring's West Hollywood salon. In 1964 he went to Elvis's Bel Air home to do his hair. What started as a simple appointment ended after a three-hour-long conversation that resulted in a full-time job for Geller.

Geller spoke to Elvis's spiritual side. It was the 1960s and Geller, like many of his generation, was studying mysticism, Eastern religions, and metaphysical teachings. Apparently Elvis was also looking for answers. Following the filming of "Roustabout," Geller provided Elvis with dozens of books on religious and spiritual subjects, including "The Prophet," by Kahlil Gibran.

Though Judaism was only occasionally discussed, Geller says that Elvis had deep respect for the Jewish religion. "Everyone in the Bible is Jewish—everyone," he recalls Elvis saying. Elvis's interest in religion manifested itself in some interesting ways. After completing the film "Easy Come, Easy Go" in 1967, he gave dozens of people who worked on the film gift watches, featuring both a Star of David and a cross on the dial. "It was Elvis's idea," Geller recalls.

Elvis's wife and manager believed Geller's spiritualism was, at best, an unnecessary distraction for Elvis or, at worst, demonstrated undo influence over him. Some members of the Memphis Mafia also were critical, referring to Geller as "the Rabbi" or "the wandering Jew." Geller says that Elvis once told him, "I know what you're going through and what they say about me. But we know the spiritual truth." Geller believes the intense discussions about the meaning of life may have filled a tremendous void in Elvis's life. No one else, in Elvis's immediate circle, it seemed, was able to communicate with the singer about such things. Geller's last conversation with Elvis was on the evening of August 15, 1977, the night before he died. Today Geller lives in Los Angeles, is a successful businessman, and has returned to his Jewish roots.



COURTESY OF LARRY GELLER

Elvis found a kindred spirit in his hairdresser, Larry Geller (pictured far right with Elvis and Col. Tom Parker in 1966). The two of them often engaged in philosophical discussions.

Elvis's connection to Jews and Judaism produced some mysteries and contradictions. One theory is that Elvis's maternal great-grandmother was Jewish. Another is why his mother's first headstone featured both a cross and a Star of David, but when she was re-interred at Graceland a new stone was erected—without the Jewish symbol. And then there was the *chai* and the crucifix that Elvis wore around his neck.

Though we'll never know the answers to these questions, it is clear that Elvis felt comfortable in the company of his Jewish friends from Memphis and those who later joined his inner circle. He even contributed money to the Memphis Jewish Community Center, where he played racquetball with his friends. A complicated man and consummate performer, all of his associates agree he was kind, generous, tolerant, and harbored no prejudice—unusual for his time and place.

Asked what Elvis talked about in the dental chair, dental hygienist and daughter of Fagie Schaeffer, Sondra Lazarus, recalls, "We spoke about Alabama Street and the old neighborhood. You know, about people that we knew."

Daniel S. Mariaschin is executive vice president of B'nai B'rith. He has been an Elvis fan since the age of 8, when he begged his father to take him to see "Jailhouse Rock."