

This is Squirrel Hill: How one neighborhood became Pittsburgh's 'center of Jewish life'


"My hope is that the result of this event is that the things that make the neighborhood special get pushed to become even more special."




This photo from 1965 of Murray Avenue shows the neighborhood's older Jewish businesses. COURTESY OF HEINZ HISTORY CENTER

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Oct. 29, 2018, 8:15 a.m.

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With 13,000 Jewish residents, a dozen synagogues, and a long-running rotation of kosher restaurants, Squirrel Hill's Jewish community is like no other in the nation.

Nestled in the eastern part of the City of Pittsburgh, Squirrel Hill is its largest and most populous neighborhood, home to 26,500 people in a 3.89 square-mile area. While most Jewish populations moved from cities and into the suburbs, Pittsburgh's did not.

"That just didn't happen. That's what makes Squirrel Hill truly, truly unique. It's hard to explain how special that is," said Eric Lidji, director of the Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives at the Heinz History Center. "Aside from New York City, I don't know that there's any city in the country that the Jewish population is still centered within the city limits."

Why did it defy the trend?

"I think people just realized it was too special of a place to lose," he said.



MURRAY AVE., from Hobart St. - 11/3/65

This photo from 1965 of Murray Avenue shows the neighborhood's older Jewish businesses. COURTESY OF HEINZ HISTORY CENTER

Lidji moved to Squirrel Hill in 1995 at the age of 12 from Texas, where he recalls his family having to drive from one Jewish institution to another, a very different experience than living in walkable Squirrel Hill.

He remembers his first Friday night in Pittsburgh walking to the synagogue and passing others headed to their synagogue. They might not have been going to the same place, and they might not be the same denomination, but everybody greeted each other.

“You have this cluster of Jewish life that’s totally self-contained, totally within walking distance,” he said.

You can find just about everything here – synagogues, day schools, various Jewish organizations such as the Jewish Community Center, kosher restaurants, a kosher grocery store, and plenty of other businesses.

“Except for a maternity ward, you could live your whole life in the area and never leave,” Lidji said. “You go to other places, and it’s just not like that.”



Students of Yeshiva Girls High School walk along Forbes Avenue in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh Monday, Oct. 29, 2018. CARA OWSLEY/USA TODAY NETWORK

Squirrel Hill’s Jewish history

Squirrel Hill didn’t become a Jewish enclave until 1938.

Pittsburgh’s Jewish neighborhood, a German community, actually started Downtown in the 1840s, Lidji explained. In the late 1800s, the population of immigrants from Eastern Europe surged, and, at the same time, Downtown became a hub for industry.

The Jewish population moved to the Hill District, which eventually became crowded, pushing people into the North Side, Lawrenceville, and Hazelwood.

In October 1918, the “Squirrel Hill Congregation” began meeting at the Orpheum Theater. Eventually that became Beth Shalom Congregation.

Vibrant Jewish communities popped up in Oakland and what is today East Liberty.

In the 1920s, Squirrel Hill’s population increased rapidly, “when development of the automobile allowed people to move around more freely and the construction of the Boulevard of the Allies linked Squirrel Hill to Downtown Pittsburgh,” per the [Squirrel Hill Historical Society](https://squirrelhillhistory.org/squirrel-hill-history/). (<https://squirrelhillhistory.org/squirrel-hill-history/>).

“The increase in population consisted mainly of Eastern European Jews moving to central and southern Squirrel Hill from Oakland and the Hill District,” per the society.

By 1938, Lidji said, “Squirrel Hill became the largest Jewish community in Pittsburgh, and the Hill District stopped becoming the largest Jewish community. It just kind of just gradually grew and grew and grew.”

In 1963, there were 6,407 Jewish households in Squirrel Hill and Greenfield, according to data from the Berman Jewish Databank, a project of the Jewish Federations of North America.

These days, the data shows, there are 50,000 Jewish people in the Western Pennsylvania region, 13,000 in Squirrel Hill, and many others in the neighborhoods around Squirrel Hill.

“It’s definitely shrunk from its heyday, but it’s the center of Jewish life in the city,” Lidji said.



The intersection of Forbes and Shady Avenue in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh Monday, Oct. 29, 2018. CARA OWSLEY/USA TODAY NETWORK

Mister Rogers’ real-life neighborhood

Fred Rogers, creator of “Mister Rogers Neighborhood,” lived in Squirrel Hill.

“I don’t know if it’s the neighborhood that inspired him directly, but the spirit of the show and the spirit of the neighborhood probably come from the same place,” Lidji said.

Lidji grew up hearing about other famous Squirrel Hill residents, too. Gene Kelly got his start teaching dance lessons at Beth Shalom, and Willa Cather resided in the neighborhood.

“When I first got to Squirrel Hill, I was just incredibly enamored with it from the very instant I got there,” he said. “In the years since then, I always felt like it didn’t get its due – national and international. I always wanted people to fawn over it.”

So it’s “bittersweet” [in the wake of a tragedy](https://theincline.com/stories/shooting-at-tree-of-life-synagogue/). (<https://theincline.com/stories/shooting-at-tree-of-life-synagogue/>) to read all of the articles from people talking about how special it is, he said.

“My hope is that the result of this event is that the things that make the neighborhood special get pushed to become even more special,” he said.



An Israel Day parade in the 1980s in Squirrel Hill. COURTESY OF HEINZ HISTORY CENTER

Study Pittsburgh's Jewish archives

Lidji leads The Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives, which was founded in 1989 to collect, preserve, and make accessible the documentary history of Jews and Jewish communities of Western Pennsylvania. The archive will turn 30 years old this week, on Nov. 1.

The collection contains thousands of photos and documents, [available to explore in-person \(and online\)](https://www.heinzhistorycenter.org/collections/rauh-jewish-history-program-and-archives) (<https://www.heinzhistorycenter.org/collections/rauh-jewish-history-program-and-archives>), for free from Wednesday through Saturday at Heinz History Center.

The archives contain materials on every single Jewish congregation and organization dating back to the founding of Pittsburgh's Jewish community in the 1840s. The archives also include collections from families documenting Jewish life from Squirrel Hill to Oil City to Altoona to New Castle.

"We absolutely love when people come to look at them," he said.

In the past few months, Lidji had worked with New Light and Dor Hadash, two of the three congregations that met at Tree of Life Synagogue, where a [gunman](https://theincline.com/2018/10/29/accused-squirrel-hill-synagogue-shooter-appears-in-person-before-a-federal-judge-in-pittsburgh/) (<https://theincline.com/2018/10/29/accused-squirrel-hill-synagogue-shooter-appears-in-person-before-a-federal-judge-in-pittsburgh/>) killed [11 people](https://theincline.com/2018/10/28/the-names-of-those-killed-in-the-tree-of-life-synagogue-massacre-in-pittsburgh/) (<https://theincline.com/2018/10/28/the-names-of-those-killed-in-the-tree-of-life-synagogue-massacre-in-pittsburgh/>) and injured 6 more Saturday.

Lidji's helped to collect the two congregations' documents up to the present day.

"We look forward to collecting from both for many, many years," he said.

