

Mount Zion Hebrew Congregation

*Pioneering
in architecture,
education,
liturgy, and
outreach
to the
community.*

1948-1961

Postwar Mount Zion leadership makes a conscious decision to locate on the main avenue of churches with its spectacular building designed by Erich Mendelsohn.



Exterior of the fourth Temple building, 1300 Summit Ave., St. Paul, dedicated in November, 1954. Photo was taken from the north looking at the main entrance on Summit Avenue with Harris Chapel roof on the left, sanctuary roof in the middle, and Margolis Social hall extending to the right. The building is set at an angle on the rectangular site with the Administrative section between the Religious School and the Worship spaces. Facilities for the three main functions of the synagogue: Worship, Community (social hall), and School each end in semi-circular plazas.

Photo by Robert Grace c.1964 from the archives of Mt. Zion Temple.

Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut, a born leader with a creative mind, brings a scholarly approach, a love of Israel, involvement in the community, and much attention to the Religious School. A period of creative experimentation begins.

Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut served Mt. Zion Temple for 13 years from 1948-1961. He believed what the congregation needed was creative experimentation—bold in striking out in new paths but linked with historic and traditional Judaism. He left Mt. Zion to go to Holy Blossom Congregation in Toronto, Canada where he served until his retirement. He authored *Mount Zion 1856-1956 The First Hundred Years* (1956), *The Jews of Minnesota* (1959), and edited *The Book of Proverbs: A Commentary* (1961). He wrote many children's service liturgies (which were later included in the *Union Songster*) and liturgy for congregational use. He was a brilliant speaker and was loved for his storytelling. He worked diligently on interfaith and interracial relations, on support of Israel and on invigorating the Religious School.

While in St. Paul, he served on the Governor's Commission on Human Rights and was elected President of the St. Paul Gallery and School of Art.

He had a regular radio show. He began to publish articles on passages in the Torah and to add his own insights to passages. This custom provided him with the habit of study and commentary and produced some of the material for his later *Torah Commentary*.

Rabbi Plaut devoted himself to the Reform Movement and became one of its "giants." He went on to edit *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, and *The Haftarah Commentary*. He wrote many books—among them are *The Magen David*, *Shabbat Manual*, *Judaism and the Scientific Spirit*, *The Man Who Would Be Messiah*, *The Vanished Prophets of Prophetic Judaism*, *Holocaustological Viewpoints*, *Israel People Elu*, *The Case for the Chosen People: The Role of the Jewish People Yesterday and Today*, *Your Neighbor is a Jew*, *Asylum: A Moral Dilemma*, *Xenophobia and Racism*, *Hanging Threads*, *Stories Real and Surreal*, *The Price and Privilege of Growing Old* and two volumes of *Autobiography: Unfinished Business and More Unfinished Business*.



GOING OVER THE PLANS —Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut, left, discusses plans for the new Mount Zion temple with its designer, Erich Mendelsohn. —Staff Photos.

Rabbi Plaut, left, discussing plans with building designer Erich Mendelsohn. Mendelsohn, the famous Bauhaus architect, was chosen over the architect Percival Goodman. Amongst Mendelsohn's famous buildings was the Einstein Tower in Potsdam, Germany and the University Medical Center in Jerusalem. He also designed Park Synagogue in Cleveland and B'nai Amoona in St. Louis. While Mendelsohn died before the interior design was complete, rather than bringing in one of Mendelsohn's San Francisco associates, the Temple engaged a local architect, Milton Bergstedt, who used Mendelsohn's notes and drawings, to finish the work. Engineer Leopold Pistor, a Temple member, also gave his time to correct for Mendelsohn's weaknesses. Mendelsohn was opposed to bright colors and stained glass windows. *St. Paul Sunday Pioneer Press*, September 17, 1950.



Rabbi Plaut with Temple leadership ceremonially walking the Torahs from the Third Temple building at Holy and Avon to the Fourth Temple building at the present 1300 Summit Ave., Hanukkah, 1954. From the archives of Mt. Zion Temple.

1940's and 50's: Members say they joined because it was "tradition."

The old divisions between German and Eastern European Jews no longer matter. The congregation is at its largest membership, over 800 members.

- 1948** Rabbi Plaut's *Yom Kippur Services for Children* is published—by 1956 they are used by over 200 synagogues. Rabbi Plaut begins a weekly radio broadcast, followed by 57 television shows. 90% of Confirmands continue with high school classes.
- 1950** Full-time Education Director/Youth Director Alan Bennett is hired. Bennett later founds NoFTY and is a prime mover in the formation of the National Association of Temple Educators (NATE).
- 1951** Ground breaking for fourth Temple on Summit Avenue. Religious School: 400 students
- 1952** Construction of Temple on Summit designed by world-renowned Bauhaus architect Erich Mendelsohn. Family services are introduced.
- 1953** Summit Avenue Temple cornerstone is laid. Women receive equal voting rights. Sydney Berde is hired as part-time cantorial soloist; the music moves away from 19th century operatic melodies on the High Holidays. Janowski's "Avinu Malkeinu" is sung for the first time.
- 1954** Dedication of Temple on Summit Avenue. William Blaine and Arthur Goodman introduce daily services, which continue to this day under the leadership of William Blaine's daughter, Rita Grossman. Confirmation changed to the end of the tenth grade.
- 1956** Mount Zion Temple Centennial. Rabbi Plaut publishes *Mt. Zion 1856-1956 The First Hundred Years*.
- 1957** First Bat Mitzvah at Mt. Zion.
- 1958** Death of Temple President Louis Melamed. Louis Melamed Memorial Lectureship in Liberal Religion is established. Bulletin records that 11,000 people representing 276 non-Jewish groups have visited the Temple since the move to Summit Ave. Eugene Bluestein's record "Songs of the Holidays and Other Songs" featuring Mt. Zion students (Folkways Records Inc) is sold for \$4.95. It later gets a curriculum award from NATE. Rabbi's Publication Fund established.
- 1959** Charles Julian and Carolyn Kahn sing as cantorial soloists. UNICEF boxes are distributed for students to collect at Halloween.
- 1960** Rabbi Plaut spends summer abroad; rabbinic intern Herbert Rutman serves the Temple. New *Union Songster* and Hymnal introduced.
- 1961** Temple membership reaches 750. Rabbi Plaut accepts call to Holy Blossom Congregation, Toronto; leaves St. Paul during summer. Plaut's *Commentary on Proverbs* is published. Rabbi Eugene Mihaly (Professor of Homeletics at HUC) conducts High Holiday Services. Lipschultz Lounge is added.



Cover of Folkways recording "Songs of the Holidays and other Songs" sung by Gene Bluestein on his banjo and the children of Mount Zion Hebrew Congregation. Mr. Bluestein brought contemporary folk music to the congregation along with traditional songs. NATE gave it a curriculum award. From the Library of Mt. Zion Temple.



Interior of the sanctuary showing the first two words of each of the Ten Commandments on the ark wall, the metal grillwork of the ark, the open flame *ner tamid* (eternal light) reflected on the suspended world wheel. The *shin* (standing for *Shaddai*) was used as a symbol in all the metal work of the seven-branch menorah, the world wheel, and the *Magen David* on the *bima*. The twelve steps leading to the ark represent the 12 tribes of Israel. The numbers 7 and 10 are used throughout the space. From the archives of Mt. Zion Temple.



April, 1953 photo of Mt. Zion staff. Back row, left to right: Greg Schwartzbauer, (maintenance) Morris Pleason (art), Etta Fay Kosberg (music), Don Singerman (library). Front row: Alan D. Bennett (Director of Education), Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut, Sol Hirsch (Religious School Chair). From the archives of Mt. Zion Temple.

Members of Mt. Zion talk about their United Jewish Fund and Council study mission to Israel in March, 1959. Left to right: Marion Newman, Arthur Goodman, Alan Shores, Jerry Halper, Sam Singer. Rabbi Plaut brought a support for Israel to the congregation. From the archives of Mt. Zion Temple.



RABBIS

1948-61 Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut
1956 Rabbi Herbert Morris, Assistant

CANTORIAL SOLOISTS AND OTHER JEWISH PROFESSIONALS

1949-50 Morley Margolis, *Holy Day cantorial soloist*
1950-63 Alan D. Bennett, *Director of Youth Activities and then Director of Education*
1953-2002 Sydney Berde, *part-time cantorial soloist*
1958 Gene Bluestein, *song leader*
1959-62 Charles Julian, *part-time cantorial soloist*
1959-77 Carolyn Kahn, *part-time cantorial soloist*

ACCOMPANISTS
Agnes Lisowski, *organist*
Kay Olson, *organist*

St. Paul, Minnesota