

ON THE ROAD

I remember the team getting off the train once in a little town in Ohio and a group of people staring at us. They said we looked pretty normal—like they had never seen Jews before.

—SHIKEY GOTTHOFFER,
QUOTED IN THE *JEWISH EXPONENT*

On Sunday night, January 1, 1939, an estimated 13 million Americans around the country, including in the greater Detroit area, turned on their radios to listen to the popular weekly address of Father Charles Coughlin. Father Coughlin, the country's most well-known radio priest, oversaw the Shrine of the Little Flower in Royal Oak, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit. Throughout the 1930s, Coughlin grew increasingly disenchanted with President Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal. As the decade drew to a close, his rhetoric increasingly became anti-Semitic. Newspapers and radio were the two modes of keeping up with the news at that time, and radio proved widely popular as families would often gather around and listen to news, sports, and variety shows. Many listened to Father Coughlin.

Traveling that same New Year's weekend in an unheated car from Michigan to Wisconsin was a group of seven basketball players, their manager, and public address announcer. They hailed from Philadelphia, and they were all Jewish. The team was known as the Philadelphia SPHAS, which stood for South Philadelphia Hebrew Association. The SPHAS began as a club team in 1918; by the 1930s, they were regarded as one of the nation's top basketball squads. The team played in the American Basketball League (ABL), the premier professional basketball league in the country at the time. The SPHAS dominated the league; prior to the 1938–1939 season, they had captured three championships in five seasons and were gunning for another title.

For several years, Eddie Gottlieb, the team's manager and coach, took his team on the road between Christmas and New Year's when the ABL did not schedule any games. Gottlieb believed it was important to spread basketball through the Midwest and keep his team sharp before league play resumed. It also served as a way to add a few extra dollars to the bottom line. Above all, Gotty was a brilliant promoter, and keeping his team in the news and making some extra money would pay dividends in the future. The team began this Midwest ritual in 1936–1937; by 1938–1939, it had become an important aspect of the SPHAS itinerary and identity.

Moe Goldman, a regular on those trips, remembered traveling through the Midwest:

We'd make a Christmas trip out west each year and play the teams out there for about ten days in cities like Chicago, Oshkosh, and Sheboygan. The league had no games during the holidays. So we'd go out in Eddie Gottlieb's car. There would be seven of us. He had a specially built car that seated nine with three across. We'd leave Saturday night after a ball game. We'd stop in Harrisburg, Fort Wayne, and all the other towns. We'd travel for hours and hours.

Gottlieb kept us going. We went on the trips and we would come back and make very little money. Money was not there for a trip like this. I would say, "Eddie, why can't we take Christmas off instead of making this trip?" He said, "We are not making this trip for money. We are pioneers for the future of professional basketball."¹

The America of the 1930s was in a deep economic depression, and the rise of Nazism and anti-Semitism both devastated and united the American Jewish community. Jerry Fleishman played on the SPHAS during World War II and accompanied the team on a few of these trips. He recalled:

We went into towns like Oshkosh or Sheboygan in Wisconsin and we would have the Jewish star on our jerseys, and it took courage to do that. Most people were for us because of our ability to play. Each team always had one football player who would bully us. The Jewish star on the jerseys got us into trouble. We got into fights, but we got out of it. We were proud to represent the Jews, who were supposedly the weak ones. But we could handle ourselves. We became life friends with the basketball players who played with us and against us.²

The SPHAS traveled all through the Midwest and were a popular attraction wherever they went. Venlo Wolfson was a youngster in Wisconsin when he first saw them play. He later studied at the University of Pennsylvania and attended games at the Broadwood Hotel. "I grew up in Wisconsin, and the SPHAS came to Milwaukee to play Oshkosh and Sheboygan. This was around 1940, or during the early war years. The SPHAS would travel and play everyone. The roster at that time had seven or eight players at most."³

In the car on that January 1, 1939, night trip from Michigan to Wisconsin were the three-time ABL champions.

Howard (Red) Rosan, a 5'9" guard, graduated from Temple University (Philadelphia) in 1935. Rosan joined the SPHAS for the final three games in 1934–1935 and thereafter became a regular part of the rotation. During the 1936–1937 championship series against the Jersey Reds, Rosan was instrumental as the team rebounded from a 3–1 game deficit to win the title in overtime in the seventh game. He averaged 5.7 points during that championship series. A mild-mannered person, Rosan was a strong defensive player on the court.

George (Red) Wolfe, a 5'11" guard/forward, had been with the SPHAS since 1929–1930 when the team played in the Eastern Basketball League. Wolfe was dependable; he held the team record for playing the most seasons (15) and was second in total games played with 457. The 1938–1939 season marked Wolfe's tenth year as a member of the SPHAS, and he had already been a part of six championship teams.

Meyer (Mike) Bloom, a 6'5" center, led Temple University to the first ever National Invitational Tournament (NIT) championship in 1938. He joined the SPHAS for the final five games of the 1937–1938 season. His lone full season with the SPHAS would be 1938–1939. Bloom then jumped from team to team before finding a home with the Trenton Tigers and Baltimore Bullets. He was eventually twice voted the ABL's Most Valuable Player (MVP).

Joel (Shikey) Gotthoffer, a 6' forward, joined the team in 1933–1934 when the SPHAS first entered the ABL. A tough player, Gotthoffer was considered by many to be the best SPHAS player. For his efforts, he won the ABL MVP award. In his first five seasons, he averaged more than 7 points per game three times, which was considered high for that time.

Louis (Inky) Lautman, a 6'1" forward, came directly from high school to join the SPHAS for the 1933–1934 season. A reliable player, Lautman played fourteen seasons, second on the team only to George Wolfe, and missed only nine regular season games and one playoff game in his career.

He retired in 1946–1947, long after all his teammates had stopped playing. During his career, he averaged 7.2 points per game.

Alexander (Petey) Rosenberg, a 5'10" guard, joined the SPHAS after playing one season of college ball at St. Joseph's College (Philadelphia). The 1938–1939 season was his first, and in thirty-three games, he averaged 7.2 points. He helped the SPHAS win two championships in his first three years. A terrific dribbler, Rosenberg would often run out the clock to seal another victory.

David (Cy) Kaselman, a 5'10" guard, became a member of the SPHAS for the 1929–1930 campaign after graduating from Temple University. Known for his two-handed set shot, Kaselman was regularly a top scorer in league play. His high-arching shots from nearly half court would swish cleanly through the nets. In his first six seasons, he led the team in scoring each season, and twice he averaged more than 10 points per game. In his thirteen seasons, he won eight championships.

Eddie Gottlieb was a born promoter and helped found the SPHAS in 1918 with friends Hughie Black and Chickie Passon. After a brief career on the court, Gottlieb turned his attention to managing the club and was instrumental in signing the players, booking the games, and promoting the team. Along with basketball, Gottlieb promoted wrestling and baseball and was a key figure within Negro League baseball.

Dave Zinkoff became part of the SPHAS family as a Temple University student and served as the team's publicity manager, public address announcer, and publisher of the *Sphas Sparks*, a part-program, part-gossip-column magazine that was available at every home game. He and Gottlieb were inseparable and both played major roles in the development and growth of the NBA after World War II. Zinkoff later became the announcer for the Philadelphia Warriors and 76ers.

Moe Goldman, the team's starting center, did not accompany his teammates on this particular trip.

League play had ended on December 24, 1938, with a home victory over the Brooklyn Visitations, 50–38. The win raised the team's record to 11–4. Their trip would take them to Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin, where they would play six games in nine days. The SPHAS were not due back in Philadelphia until January 7, 1939, for a home contest against the Kingston Colonials.

The first stop, on December 28, 1938, was Akron, where the SPHAS faced the Goodyears, a top team in the recently formed National Basketball League (NBL).⁴ A preview article in the *Akron Beacon Journal* stated: "Philadelphia, rated by eastern sports scribes as the greatest team in basket-

ball and a worthy successor to the New York Celtics of Holman, Lapchick, Dehnert, Barry and Banks, is intent upon extending its supremacy to the Midwest.”⁵ The SPHAS did not disappoint, and before 2,700 fans, defeated the Akron Goodyears 48–33. The game was close at the outset, but baskets by Rosan and Lautman gave the SPHAS a lead they would not relinquish. Rosan led all scorers with 15, while Lautman chipped in with 13 points.

The SPHAS then traveled to Flint, Michigan, for a Friday night game against the Fisher Body team. The game was scheduled for 8:30 at the I.M.A. building on the eleventh floor. A preliminary game between two girls’ teams preceded the main event. This marked the SPHAS’ first trip to Flint, and the excitement was apparent in the *Flint Journal*. Al Zingone, a local basketball fan and former ABL player with Paterson and Ft. Wayne who had followed professional basketball since the 1920s, testified to the prowess of the SPHAS. “The Celtics are good and so is Renaissance. But if you want to see the best professional basketball team in the country, then you want to see the Philadelphia Hebrews.”⁶ The SPHAS lived up to Zingone’s advanced billing and defeated Fisher, 40–34. Fisher fought back valiantly, but could not overcome a 19-point second period outburst by the SPHAS that gave them a 27–12 lead. Gotthoffer led the scoring with 9 points.

With two wins in two games, the SPHAS made the drive to Wisconsin for three games against the Oshkosh All-Stars, a rising team in the NBL. Faced with the difficult challenge of containing LeRoy “Cowboy” Edwards, Oshkosh’s improving big man, the SPHAS dropped three straight to the All-Stars. On January 2, 1939, the SPHAS lost 47–36 in Fond du Lac. The following night, Oshkosh again held serve, 37–32, in West De Pere. In their final matchup, the SPHAS fell again, 36–31, at the Merrill Junior High School in Oshkosh.

Three straight games. Three straight losses, but the SPHAS did not have time to think about their losses. They had a 457-mile trip from Oshkosh to Detroit to face the New York Renaissance, the best black basketball team in the country. Before 1,500 fans at the Light Guard Armory, the SPHAS, behind Petey Rosenberg’s 17 points, defeated the Rens 51–45 to earn a split of their six-game trip.

After the last game of the road trip, the team piled into Gottlieb’s car for the 586-mile drive back to Philadelphia. Despite three straight losses to Oshkosh, the trip was deemed a success. The SPHAS played before sold-out crowds, made their first trip to Flint, and stayed sharp for the stretch run in league play. As the team drove back through the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic, the players had time to reflect on the games played and how far

basketball had progressed since they started playing. Gottlieb was thinking about the future. Even though his team lost three games, he knew they had been winners. It was all part of the journey of professional basketball. Years later, these games and many others like it would prove instrumental in the evolution and growth of basketball in the country.