

Look to the rock from which you were hewn
הביטו אל-צור חצבתם



chicago jewish historical society

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CHICAGO JEWISH *History*

Zionist Pioneer:

Bernhard Felsenthal Helped Settle Chicago as a Young Man and then Found He Stood Almost Alone as a German Jew Among the Zionists

By Walter Roth

Exactly one century ago, Bernard Horwich and other prominent Chicago Jews held a meeting in response to Theodore Herzl's call for a modern Jewish state in his famous book *Yudenstaat*. Horwich and the others were not alone in their response -- other groups all across the world would form Zionist organizations before long -- but Horwich did note that most of the people present that night shared an East-European background. Zionism, which favored a Jewish homeland, tended to appeal to East Europeans who had immigrated to America more recently and looked with alarm at the persecution being suffered by their brethren in Eastern Europe. Most Reform Jews, with their roots in Germany and the bulk of them German themselves, at that time opposed Zionism and were more involved with their integration into American society.

Most of the people at Horwich's meeting, then, were East Europeans. The one exception was 74 year old Bernhard Felsenthal, a former rabbi of the Reform Chicago Sinai Congregation, and a native of Bavaria. The meeting was hardly the first time that Felsenthal had taken a stand on his conscience that went against the bulk of his community, but it was still remarkable enough for Horwich to comment on it. As Horwich wrote in *My First Eighty Years*, his 1939 autobiography:

Then and there was formed the first organized Zionist group in America, of which I was the president. It was called

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Board Member Cutler's Book a Landmark in Jewish History

The publication of Irving Cutler's *The Jews of Chicago: From Shtetl to Suburb* is a landmark in the history of Chicago Jewish history. Cutler has not only compiled the most ambitious history of the community in seventy years, he has also broadened the range of that history.

The subtitle of Cutler's book tells much about the scope of his project. He traces the European roots of many of Chicago's Jewish immigrants,

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Inside:

- Society Member Morton Skidelsky Shares Personal Memories of Meyer Levin
- Oral History Excerpt from Erma Baer, Volunteer with Blind and Braille Pioneer
- New Spertus Exhibit Chronicles History of HIAS In Chicago and World-wide

President's Column

The month of March 1996 brought us the loss of two of our Rabbinic members, Rabbi Ralph Simon of Congregation Rodfei Zedek and Rabbi Daniel Leifer of the Hillel Foundation of the University of Chicago.



Walter Roth

Rabbi Leifer had also recently been elected as a member of the Board of

Directors of our Society.

Rabbi Simon passed away in Palm Springs, California at the age of 89 after a prolonged illness during which he courageously fought for his life.

Rabbi Leifer's life ended abruptly at the age of 60, as a result of a sudden heart attack. Two days earlier he had attended a Board meeting of our Society, having braved a late-season Chicago snowstorm to drive from his home in Hyde Park to the Federation Building downtown.

The deaths of Rabbi Simon and Rabbi Leifer will be felt deeply, not only by our Society and the Hyde Park

community in which they worked and lived, but also by the entire Chicago community.

Rabbi Simon served as the rabbi of Rodfei Zedek from 1943 until he took emeritus status in 1987. He became a leading voice of the Conservative movement in Chicago and nationwide. He delivered his last sermon to his congregation during last year's High Holiday's service.

Despite his afflictions resulting from his fight with cancer and the frailty of old age, the rabbi's oratorical skills were undiminished and his humor and good sense were uplifting to all who were privileged to pray with him.

Rabbi Leifer came to the Hillel Foundation nearly thirty years ago, becoming its Director in 1971. Like Rabbi Simon, he was also a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York.

The range of Rabbi Leifer's influence at the University community was enormous. He helped to organize diverse services to attract Jewish students of different religious practices.

His "Upstairs Minyan" became a model for the Chavura movement

throughout the United States. His interfaith activities and Bible and Talmud courses and discussion groups made the Hillel Foundation a unique intellectual and cultural center for the entire campus community.

I had the good fortune to serve with him on the boards of the Akiba Schechter Day School in Hyde Park and of Hillel, as well as on our Society board.

He succeeded in teaching generations of Jewish college students as well as the many alumni and friends who sought his counsel.

Perhaps Rabbi Leifer will best be remembered as the emcee of that great Purim *spiel* which he popularized and took over from Rabbi Maurice Pekarsky more than twenty years ago: "The Latke-Hamentashen Debate" held annually at the University to argue the eternal question: which is more important to the preservation of our Jewish heritage, the Hamentashen or the Latke? The answer is, of course, obvious.

We shall miss our two beloved Rabbinic friends and members. Our sympathy and condolences go to the families of Rabbi Simon and Rabbi Leifer.

The memory of the righteous is a blessing. The Lord giveth; the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the

There Might be Gold in Your Attic

One way you can consider helping the Society in our efforts to preserve and retell the history of the Jews of Chicago is to donate archival material that you have tucked away in old drawers, trunks, boxes, or attics.

Given the constraints of our own limited archival storage space, we unfortunately cannot take most documents relating to individual families. What we are looking for instead are documents relating to the history of the larger community. This might include synagogue directories,

programs from Jewish events, records of *landsmanshaften* or other Jewish community groups, or photographs depicting vanished sites of Jewish interest.

In doing local history, it is never easy to know what sorts of documents will unlock the riddles of how the everyday life of our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents went.

All too often, the material that might make clear the Chicago of 60 years ago -- or of a century or merely 30 years ago -- got thrown in the trash or was allowed to yellow or decay in the attic.

Next time you go through a Passover cleanup or find yourself looking through old family photographs, consider whether anything you find might not be of interest to the Society. If you find mysterious items -- photographs you can't identify or programs from events that you no longer remember -- consider sharing them with the Society to see whether we can clear up the mystery.

There is no telling what little treasure will help fill in the story of Jewish Chicago, no telling what yellow page is actually golden. □

Board Member

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recounts the physical and cultural qualities of several of the most significant Jewish communities in Chicago, and moves on to consider the phenomenon of Jewish suburbia.

His book is the first full-scale treatment of Chicago's Jews that considers the move to the suburbs as an event within a broad historical context. The Chicago that Cutler considers is a continuum from the Old World to Old Orchard.

The Jews of Chicago will inevitably draw comparisons to H.L. Meites' 1924 *History of the Jews of Chicago*. While Cutler's history does not boast the detail of Meites' -- Meites' book is more than three times as long -- its perspective is nevertheless broader.

Meites' history is a history of the thousands of individuals who built the Jewish community he chronicles; Cutler's is a history of the dozens of communities that have composed Chicago. Cutler's account is more democratic; it trades biography for cultural history.

Cutler is especially sensitive to the way communities begin, flourish, and fade away. His general approach is to review the settlement history of the various neighborhoods Jews have made their homes in the Chicago area. He then combines such demographic histories with cultural histories that account for the formation of synagogues, *landsmanshaften*, community centers, schools, famous restaurants, and other institutions.

The result is a book that makes sense in its entirety as a history of all Chicago, but also works well as a collection of histories of the various communities that have composed Jewish Chicago.

The book is worth reading cover to cover for the way it provides an unbroken record of 150 years of Chicago Jewish history, but it is profitable section by section as well.

In addition to the history the book narrates, it features a remarkable range of illustrations. Cutler does a fine job of selecting photographs from existing publications such as Meites, but he supplements them from an extensive private collection with many of his own photographs -- taken as he scrupulously chronicled the decay of Chicago Jewish institutions over the last three decades.

In addition, the book features several original maps, reflecting both Cutler's emphasis on the communal and his professional training as a geographer. The maps are impressive histories in their own right, and they serve as

◆ ***The Jews of Chicago: From Shtetl to Suburb***

By Irving Cutler

***Published March, 1996
University of Illinois Press
316 pages, \$29.95***
◆

possible keys for the neighborhood tours that Cutler has given for the Society and other groups so successfully over the last couple of decades.

There will no doubt be some readers who remark on what does not appear in the book. There are, of course, only a handful of individuals who draw more than mention, although many of the photographs and their captions provide additional information about individuals.

The book also gives only limited attention to groups other than neighborhood communities. While it does consider a series of histories of Jews in various professions, it necessarily runs through those histories quickly and with little detail. While it touches on some of the political highlights of the last century and a half, it generally avoids in-depth consideration of the political relationship of Jews and other

communities.

Such complaints are largely quibbles, however, and in fact overlook the remarkable quality of Cutler's overall project.

The most recent book-length history of Chicago's Jews is *The Sentinel History of Chicago Jewry*, published in 1986. That history was written by a series of authors on a series of subjects. It is certainly a valuable book, but it makes no effort at a synthetic history.

By comparison, Cutler is probably the first writer to attempt an extended single-author history of the entire community that extends not just beyond World War II, but through the beginning of the 1990s. Cutler's work is necessarily only a start. It provides a framework and suggests a model for future articles and possibly even future books that supplement his history and answer the questions he raises.

What's more, *The Jews of Chicago* proves at last to be an emotional book that shuns the easy road of nostalgia. Cutler was himself raised in Lawndale and he writes affectionately of the community he knew there. In many ways, he uses Lawndale as a measuring stick for considering subsequent Chicago Jewish communities.

He refuses to see Lawndale as any kind of pinnacle, however. He writes a history that includes not just other communities within Chicago, but also the suburban communities that emerged in the 1950s as well as those that are emerging today. There is room in Cutler's vision not merely for the old Jewish People's Institute and for the established Jewish community in Skokie, but also for the new and burgeoning Jewish community of Buffalo Grove.

Surprisingly concise and thoughtfully written, *The Jews of Chicago* extends Chicago Jewish history two decades beyond any comparable history. It is a testament not merely to the impressive work that Cutler himself has done, but also to the community he chronicles.

--Joe Kraus

Zionist Pioneer

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the Chicago Zionist Organization, No. 1... A lone member of the German-Jewish group was present -- Dr. Bernhard Felsenthal, who spoke in German. He encouraged us, and told us even though he was an old man and would not live to see the fruits of the vast undertaking, he would do everything he could, until his last day on earth, and in the world to come, to further the cause of Zionism. His words were very impressive, and he inspired the new members with enthusiasm for their work.

That Felsenthal proved to be one of the founders of the American Zionist movement in Chicago is certainly a most unusual fact. While he may largely be forgotten today, Felsenthal deserves to be remembered as one of Jewish Chicago's true pioneers.

* * *

Bernhard Felsenthal was born on January 2, 1822 in a village located in Northern Bavaria. He was born into a highly educated German Jewish family, well-versed in Jewish and German scholarship. As a young child, he was introduced to rabbinic and Talmudic literature, which became a passion for his entire life. He grew interested in Jewish genealogy and history, and remained an avid scholar all his life. He would eventually prove to be one of the first historians of Jewish Chicago. [See an excerpt from his *On the History of the Jews of Chicago* on page 4.]

Felsenthal originally desired a position in the Civil Service in Bavaria, but he soon learned that he would have no future in that field as a Jew. He took up teaching instead and graduated from a teachers' seminary in 1843.

With the defeat of the revolutionary uprisings sweeping Bavaria in the late 1840s, he and many members of his family joined other Jews in deciding to leave Germany. He emigrated to America in 1854 where he worked as a tutor for two years in Lawrenceburg, Indiana. He then accepted his first ministerial duties in Madison, Indiana in 1856.

Two years later, in April 1858, Felsenthal came to Chicago and obtained a position as a clerk in a banking house owned by Henry Greenebaum, an early Chicago settler and a relative of his. According to folklore, he

spent most of his leisure and working time continuing his Talmudic studies.

In 1859, while secretary of *Judische Reform Verein* (The Jewish Reform Group), an organization he had founded, he published "Kol Kore Bamidbar" ("A Voice in the Desert"), a pamphlet that did much to promote the Reform movement in Chicago and that brought Felsenthal national attention.

Felsenthal wrote a great deal (in German) of the objectives of the American Reform movement. In one of his propositions or "theses" as he called them, he wrote:

We are deeply convinced that Israel has been called by God to be the Messiah of the nations and to spread truth and virtue on earth. In order to fulfill this high mission, Israel has to undergo a process of purification in its own midst. This object

will best be accomplished in Israel and a free blessed America where no material forces check spiritual progress.

*While he may largely be forgotten today,
Felsenthal deserves to be remembered as
one of Jewish Chicago's true pioneers.*

The special mission of American Israel, therefore, is to place Judaism before the world, purified in doctrines and conduct, and so becoming a shining example for Israelites the world over.

In 1861 the Reform Verein formed the Chicago Sinai Congregation. Although Felsenthal was not an ordained rabbi, the congregation persuaded him to become the first rabbi. Sinai would go on to become one of the leading Reform congregations in America. Felsenthal quickly became known for his anti-slavery views and his liberal positions on traditional Jewish rituals.

Three years later, in a dispute with the congregation over his desire for a firm contract, he left Sinai. Within a few months, he was called upon to head the newly organized Zion Congregation, a position he held until retiring in 1886. He was an active writer throughout his years as a congregational leader and published many pamphlets, but no books, usually in German. He achieved recognition as one of America's great Jewish thinkers of the Reform movement.

During the mature years of his rabbinic career, Felsenthal joined many American leaders of the Reform movement in decrying Zionism and other forms of Jewish nationalism. The Reform movement's objectives were messianic, humanistic, and universal, and had no room for a movement seeking such an earthly end as the return of Jews to Palestine.

Felsenthal began to undergo a subtle change,

however, as East European immigrant Jews began to stream into Chicago after 1881. Felsenthal and his family lived on Desplaines Avenue, on the near West Side, where many of the new immigrants settled. Unlike many of his colleagues, he did not move further south but stayed and developed many personal ties within the Yiddish-speaking community.

Emma Felsenthal, in her biography of her father entitled *Teacher in Israel* (published by the Oxford University Press in 1924), wrote of her father at that time:

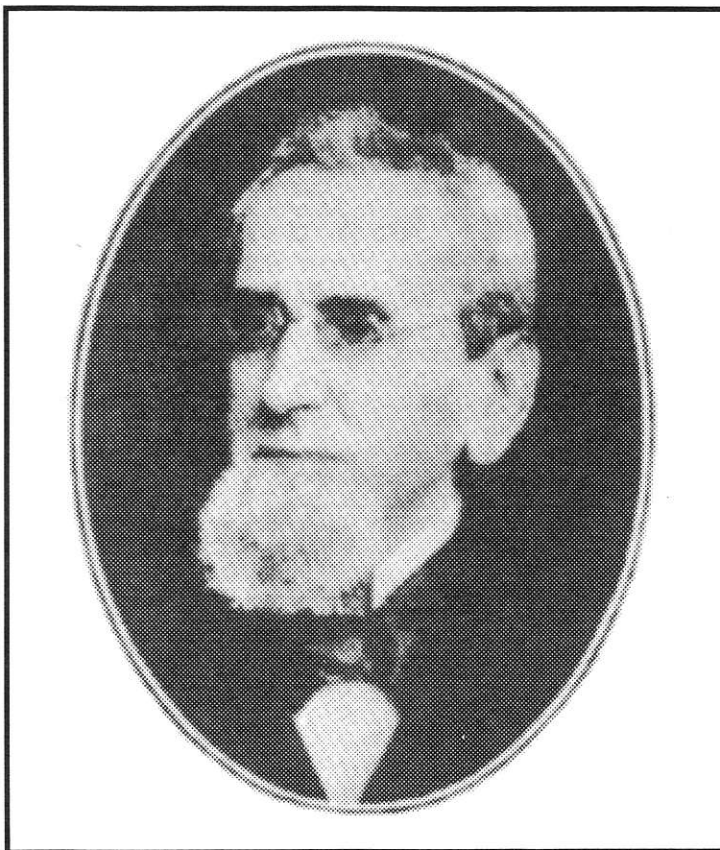
Every Jew, wherever and whatever he was, was his brother... And now that Jewish refugees were crowding into Twelfth Street, naturally the problems of Twelfth Street absorbed him, mind and heart. He consulted with others concerning the immediate economic welfare of the unfortunate people; he assisted in organizing evening schools; he made friends of their rabbis and leaders. He made frequent visits to the school established by the B'nai B'rith in 1888, and took deep personal interest in the progress of individual students. In recognition, they called a society which grew out of this school, "The Felsenthal Educational Society."

Though he could not accustom himself to the Yiddish spoken by the new immigrants, he studied Hebrew and wrote in the Hebrew language. When *Keren Or* ("A Ray of Light"), a Hebrew monthly, began in Chicago, he was one of the founders.

Felsenthal found himself questioning some of the earlier objectives of Reform Judaism. He wondered about the messianic nature of the movement and wondered how to include political and social issues in its mission. He began moving slowly to Zionism, then only a rumor being spoken of in the East European Jewish community.

In 1891 William Blackstone, a Christian millenarian, circulated a memorial to be presented to Benjamin Harrison, the President of the United States, proposing that a limited number of East European Jews be allowed to immigrate to Palestine and that a Jewish national home be established there. Nearly all Reform Jewish leaders opposed the memorial, but Felsenthal and Liebman Adler (the retired rabbi of K.A.M., another leading Reform congregation) agreed to sign it alongside more than 400 other well-known American intellectuals, business leaders, newspapers, and organizations. Newspaper publishers including *The Chicago Tribune's* Joseph Medill and *The Chicago Daily News's* Victor Lawson signed it as well.

Rabbi Emil Hirsch, Felsenthal's successor at Sinai



Bernhard Felsenthal

and a leader of the radical Reform movement, vigorously opposed the Blackstone initiative, and he and Felsenthal exchanged angry letters about the memorial. Hirsch declared, "We modern Jews do not wish to be restored to Palestine. We will not go back to form a nationality of our own." Felsenthal answered:

I vote for colonization. ... The Jewish colonies in Palestine -- hail to them! May they increase rapidly and vastly! May they flourish! May they bring happiness to those who dwell in them.

Thus was set the stage for the founding of the American Zionist organization No. 1 of the Knights of Zion in Chicago in 1896, with Bernhard Felsenthal as one of its founders.

* * *

When the first Zionist Congress met in Basel, Switzerland in August, 1897, Felsenthal was a natural choice to be Chicago's delegate. His advanced age and various other ailments deterred him, however, and Leon Zolotkoff, a writer, Hebraist, and long-time leader of the early Chicago Zionists, went instead.

While Felsenthal was unable to travel to Basel to meet Herzl, he threw his still considerable energies into Zionist endeavors. As his daughter Emma wrote:

After 1897 my father could scarcely write of any

subject other than Zionism. ... My father could not understand how others could remain from the movement.

Felsenthal was a close friend of Wolf Schur of 216 Maxwell Street, publisher of a Hebrew periodical, *Ha-Tehivyah* (Regeneration). Just as he had been at the meeting that Bernard Horwich remembered, Felsenthal was the only contributor to the periodical who was not of Russian or Lithuanian background. On January 5, 1899, the periodical published the following:

The Zionist Federation of Chicago, comprising five societies spread over the whole city, staged a meeting on New Year's day. The Hall was packed.

The Editor of *Ha-Tehivyah* introduced to the audience the President of the Federation, Rabbi Dr. B. Felsenthal. He opened the meeting with a fiery address on the Love of Zion.

Felsenthal continued his activities in many areas. He had been a founder of the American Jewish Historical Society, and he continued writing extensively on Chicago and American Jewish history. He was a founder of the Jewish Publication Society and wrote for it as well.

In 1903, during the bitter debates within the Zionist movement over the possibility of settling Jews in Uganda, Felsenthal sought a way of reconciling the two camps. He wrote that he was willing to accept Uganda "as a temporary place of refuge but not as the final aim of the Zionist movement. ... The Zionist movement cannot cease and shall not cease until Israel dwell again, a fit people in its own land."

In 1905 Felsenthal received an honorary degree from the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, the teaching school of the Conservative movement presided over by Dr. Solomon Schechter. By that time Felsenthal had come to repudiate the central teaching of the Reform movement: the idea of the special mission of Israel. He now saw the route being taken by Emil Hirsch and other Reform leaders as a form of "euthanasia" for Judaism. He wrote, "The thought that carries to my mind that this extreme Reform we have in America will lead gradually to the extinction of Israel and its religion. Do you not agree with me that our Reform friends are preparing a beautiful death for Judaism?"

When Herzl died in 1904, Chicago joined Zionists all over the world in mourning the death of their leader. Jewish youths, "Volunteers of Zion," marched in

uniform with Zionist flags through the streets of Chicago's West Side, escorting an empty carriage. Felsenthal was one of the marchers.

In the last years of his life, Felsenthal, confined to his home, carried on a lively correspondence with friends and family in Chicago and Germany. He frequently wrote in German to a young niece in Frankfurt. The letters are lovingly reproduced in the biography of him by his daughter and are a clear manifestation of the love and kindness which radiated from Felsenthal.

On Sunday, October 15, 1905 Felsenthal, then 83, visited Sinai for services to honor the twenty-fifth anniversary of Rabbi Hirsch's service as rabbi. On that

day he suffered a severe stroke and was hospitalized for nearly two months before he could return home.

Weakened by his illness, he would suffer for the remaining two years of his life. He was able, however, to continue his support for Zionism. One new chapter (Gate) of the Knights of Zion was named after Felsenthal in Chicago.

He became even more convinced that Zionism alone could save Judaism. In a letter written in March, 1907, he again voiced his distress at the fruits of radical Reform which, "will lead gradually to the extinction of Israel and its religion."

At the end of 1907, Felsenthal contracted pneumonia and died on January 12, 1908. In an ironic reflection of the many boundaries he had crossed in his life, both Reform and Zionist groups held memorials for him. The memorials were separate.

The Chicago Rabbinical Association issued a memorial statement on his accomplishments. It read in part:

Of a peaceful disposition, he was a true disciple of Aaron, the High-Priest, seeking and pursuing peace. He proclaimed the truth as he saw it, though this may have been contrary to commonly accepted notions. Thus, too, he espoused the cause of Zionism, though that was not popular.

Anita Libman Lebeson wrote of him with similar admiration in her 1958 article "Zionism Comes to Chicago." As she put it, "Bernhard Felsenthal, whom his daughter calls 'Teacher in Israel,' continues to amaze and astound the student of history. He was an anomaly, a deviate whose personality shines through intervening years with undiminished radiance."

Although his voice was largely ignored by the Sinai

*"Of a peaceful disposition,
he was a true disciple of
Aaron, the High-Priest,
seeking and pursuing
peace. He proclaimed the
truth as he saw it."*

From *On the History of the Jews of Chicago*

By Dr. B. Felsenthal, Chicago, Ill.

A full and thorough history of Jews and Judaism in Chicago must not be expected here. Such a history would, among other matters, also have to consider the inner life, the religious life of the Jews of Chicago, and would have to show how the so-called reform ideas germinated there, how they grew up and developed, how at one time they were retarded and obstructed, and at another promoted and quickened. Many of the persons who took an active part in making the history of Chicago Judaism are still among the living, and the Muse of History can therefore not yet sit in judgment over them, their endeavors and their doings.

I desire to give here only a few contributions to the work of a future historian of Chicago Judaism -- mere dry, detached and, moreover, incomplete facts. My statements rest partly upon information which I gathered from some of the earliest Jewish immigrants who had settled there, and partly upon my own personal observations and experiences. Living in Chicago since April, 1858, I am in a position to speak as an eye-witness in regard to many things and happenings during the past thirty-five years.

It is very likely that some single Jewish individuals settled in Chicago, or attempted to settle there, between 1830 and 1840, for in this decade large numbers of German Jews had come to America, expecting to find here not only better prospects in their various pursuits of life, but also a refuge from the oppressive and exclusive laws under which the Jews still had to suffer at that time in the old fatherland. Here in the United States they found a new

fatherland, granting them full civil and political rights equally with the citizens of other denominations; and these newcomers, confessing the old Jewish faith, appreciated this and became warmly and sincerely attached to their new country.

A large number, of course, remained at first in the great cities on the Atlantic coast, in New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. But a considerable number soon found their way to the valley of the Ohio and to the prairies of the West.

The first considerable migration of Jews to Chicago, or, to be more exact, to Cook County, Illinois, was in 1843. A certain Mr. William Renau, a young and enthusiastic gentleman of the Jewish faith, then living in New York City, took measures for the establishment of a Jewish Colonization Society, and his labor was not in vain. A number of Jews entered into his plans and intentions and joined his society. After the organization had been sufficiently consummated, the society deputed a Mr. Meyer to go West, to select land for the members upon which they might settle, and to report the results of his investigations and researches to the society. Mr. Meyer accordingly went West, and after looking for several weeks in different parts of the country, selected a piece of land comprising 160 acres, situated in the town of Schaumburg, Cook County, Illinois, which he purchased for himself, and on which he remained. His written report to the society in New York was very encouraging, and urged the members to migrate to this part of the country without hesitation, for -- so he said substantially -- "this is a land in which milk and honey is flowing, particularly for tillers of the soil; and this part of the land, especially the town of Chicago, opens furthermore a vista into a large commercial future." □

Congregation he helped to found in Chicago, his writings and teachings on the retrenchments of the American Reform movement and his efforts to link Zionism to Jewish practice proved to be influential elsewhere.

Felsenthal's life is a reminder of the historic contribution of German Jewry to the foundation and development of modern Zionism. Often eclipsed by the anti-Zionist leaders of the American Reform movement,

Felsenthal's piety and vision have outlived them all. Felsenthal's views and writings after 1881 represent what have become, today, the major ideologies of the American Reform movement. Never afraid to take a difficult stand on his own, Felsenthal wound up leading countless American Jews in a new direction. □

Walter Roth is the President of the Chicago Jewish Historical Society.

Spertus Exhibit Records History of Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society

If you or a member of your family has immigrated to the United States within the past 110 years, chances are you or they were aided in the journey by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS).

A new exhibit at the Spertus Museum tells the story of HIAS from its beginnings on 229 East Broadway in New York City as a provider of shelter for Jewish immigrants fleeing the pogroms of the Pale of Settlement to its role in the recent resettlement of Russian Jews.

The Immigrant Experience: HIAS Chicago 1911 - 1996 celebrates 85 years of service to the immigrant community. Through text panels, photographic displays, objects, art, handouts, and a video, the exhibit chronicles the growth of the community service organization dedicated to assisting immigrants.

In its early years, HIAS provided meals, transportation and jobs for the newly arrived, and helped recent immigrants adjust to life in the United States through citizenship classes. HIAS Chicago was started in 1911 by Adolph and Fannie D. Copeland. Its offices were located on Maxwell Street.

By the 1930s and 1940s, HIAS was able to aid hundreds of thousands of Jews fleeing Nazi Europe. After the horror of the Holocaust, HIAS tried to assist the seven million displaced Europeans.

The problems were staggering: from the difficulty of recovering identities for those who had no papers to the psychological trauma of those who had lost everything. Despite these and many other difficulties, HIAS was able to place 150,000 displaced persons in the United States, another 300,000 in Israel, 36,000 in Canada, and tens of thousand of people in other locations around the globe.

In the 1950s and 1960s, HIAS responded to a range of political crises around the world: the rescue of Jews fleeing the Soviet invasion of Hungary, the assistance to Egypt's Jews after the Sinai campaign in 1956, the removal of Moroccan Jewish refugees to Israel, and help to Jews fleeing Poland.

During the 1970s, HIAS helped Russian Jews hoping for freedom in Israel and America.

Today, HIAS's work continues, resettling immigrants and working to make U.S. immigration policy reflect the ideals of democracy. Despite its important work, there are no fees for services rendered by HIAS Chicago.

Behind the history of HIAS are the individual stories of



One of the countless Immigrants Assisted by HIAS

each immigrant who arrived in a new homeland with the help of HIAS. Mary Angel fled with her family from Egypt to Rome, but did not want her children to grow up in a Catholic country. HIAS helped them obtain visas to come to the United States.

Anna Rotman and her parents were forced to leave her visa-less brother behind in Russia. Through HIAS, Anna's brother joined them in this country. And there is Viennese Ruth Weiner, whose father, a doctor, was enabled by HIAS to study and receive his license to practice as a physician in New York.

The exhibit also tells more contemporary stories. Marina Samovskiy, a professional photographer who came to Chicago from Tashkent in 1980, depicts the life for Russian emigrants in Chicago in a display of photographs of Devon Avenue.

Five drawings by emigrant children from Russia show what these brave youngsters left behind. Most moving is a drawing of Emalia, a doll abandoned in Moscow.

Maynard I. Wishner, the president of the Council of

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Elmer Gertz Talks Before Society

Famed attorney Elmer Gertz spoke before a Society open meeting on February 18 at Temple Shalom.

Best known as the attorney who managed to arrange for the probationary release of Nathan Leopold, Gertz has had many celebrity clients in his colorful and storied career.

He has not only defended well-known author Henry Miller, but also Lee Harvey Oswald assassin Jack Ruby.

His involvement with Nathan Leopold later brought him into conflict with Chicago author Meyer Levin. Levin and Leopold engaged in a long-running legal battle over the rights to Levin's novel *Compulsion*, a battle chronicled in the last issue of *Chicago Jewish History* by Walter Roth and commented on in this issue in a memoir by Society member Morton Skidelsky. [See page 10.]

Gertz has written about his experiences with his different celebrity



Photograph by Norman Schwartz

Elmer Gertz and Society President Walter Roth

clients in his own books and in various periodicals, and he demonstrated in his talk that he remains a first-rate storyteller.

The Society holds at least four open meetings every year at a variety of

locations in the Chicago area. Meetings are generally held on Sunday afternoons and are free to members and their guests.

Members will receive mailings to announce the meetings. □

Society Seeks Gifts of Several Kinds

The Chicago Jewish Historical Society is an all-volunteer organization. We survive on the strengths of our individual members and on the collective ability of our full membership.

We invite you to contribute to our work in any way that you can.

If you have funds you can give us to continue our work of uncovering, recording, and preserving the materials of our communal history, we certainly welcome such donations.

If you have energy to contribute to one or more of our committees or projects, we welcome such donations, too. Our oral history committee, membership committee, program committee, and the editorial board of *Chicago Jewish History* are always in search of new ideas and new energy.

If you have materials that you think might help us in our work, we welcome those donations as well. Look through old family papers for newspapers, fliers, photographs, or other artifacts that might shed light on the history of Chicago's Jews.

If you are interested in donating them

and we find them to be of broad interest to our history, we can accept them and turn them over to the Chicago Jewish Archives for permanent archival preservation.

Finally, if you appreciate the work we do, we welcome your donating that interest. You do not need to contribute material things or energy to help us sustain our work. Every time you tell a friend about our work or share a copy of our newsletter with a friend, you help us to spread the word about what we do.

We thank you as a Society for everything you have already done to carry us this far. □

Spertus Exhibit

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Jewish Federations, commented at the Inaugural Program of *HIAS Chicago: The Immigrant Experience* that HIAS has helped thousands of people "pick themselves up and go to a dream."

This exhibit reminds us of the importance of those dreams and the importance of HIAS.

HIAS Chicago: The Immigrant Experience is at the Spertus Museum of the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies, 618 S. Michigan Avenue, through May 31, 1996. For more information, call (312) 322-1747.

--Paula Chaiken

Advisor to Meyer Levin Recalls the Writer's Love of Chicago and Jews

By Morton Skidelsky

Walter Roth's article in *Chicago Jewish History* on Nathan Leopold's lawsuit against Meyer Levin (Winter, 1996) caused me to reflect on my contacts with Levin during the last five years of his life. I shared my thoughts with Walter and Sid Sorkin, and they encouraged me to write this article.

Levin requested professional assistance from me during 1976. During the course of consulting on some business matters, we had some interesting conversations. I found Levin to be a uniquely fascinating, and complex individual.

Undoubtedly, Levin is best remembered for the controversy surrounding his battles over *The Diary of Anne Frank*. During his last years I observed a continuing sad frustration regarding the *Diary*, if not the continuing bitterness which Walter Roth and his friends observed during his last visit to Chicago in 1980. Levin's desire somehow to affect the perceived injustice to the *Diary* never left him. His hopes in this regard ceased only with his death.

In a 1956 deposition for his lawsuit against Otto Frank (Anne Frank's father), Levin had expressed his belief "that the girl's diary contained the elements by which the world could finally and clearly absorb the enormity of the mass murders perpetrated by the Nazis."

It is worth noting that Levin's fears of attempted historical revision of the Holocaust and minimizing it as a unique Jewish experience have come true. Increasingly, the Holocaust has been viewed as one of many instances of human persecution and oppression.

While the unsuccessful challenge of Nathan Leopold and attorney Elmer Gertz regarding Levin's right to publish *Compulsion* was no quiet matter, it did not remain a significant issue with him during his last years.

Besides the controversy over the *Diary*, Meyer Levin is probably best remembered for his books that focused on Chicago, namely *The Old Bunch* and *Compulsion*. In conversations with him, I sensed that he retained his strongest feeling for *The Old Bunch*, as it recalled his roots in the West Side of Chicago. Levin discussed this book with me on his first visit to my office, then located in Tel Aviv.

As we were completing our meeting, Levin inquired about my home town in the United States. I revealed that I was from Chicago and that my mother was Anne Iglarsh

Skidelsky, born at Halsted and Roosevelt, the daughter of customer-peddler Hyman Iglarsh. We discussed how my grandfather came to be well known as "Murphy," selling men's furnishings in city and county government offices. Levin's father was a tailor.

We developed a kinship that went beyond our professional relationship, probably because of our common Chicago roots. Levin inscribed messages in two of his books which he gave me. Each inscription includes a reference to our common journey from Chicago to Israel.

Levin had an unbounded fascination with American Jewry generally, and specifically the Chicago community from which he derived. He often focused on the evolution of the Jewish experience in World War II, the liberation of the death camps, the *Bricha*, and the independence and development of Israel.

The depth of his experience and writings in these several spheres of Jewish life probably cast him as a unique writer. His lifelong reflections on the Jewish world, often involving his own roots in Chicago and his experiences in Israel, are likely unmatched in the literary world.

Two important facets of Meyer Levin's life are often overlooked. First, he and his wife, French writer Tereska Torres, personally experienced a clandestine voyage on the refugee ship named *The Unafraid*.

They made a film documenting the journey transporting "illegal" Jewish refugees from Europe to British-held Palestine. The film was named *The Illegals*.

Thirty years later he produced a film called *The Unafraid*, which included interviews of persons originally in *The Illegals*, together with flashbacks from the original film.

Short clips from *The Illegals* continue to find their way into documentaries chronicling the Jewish experience of the 1940s.

Second, Levin was one of the early activists to focus attention on the plight of the Jews of Ethiopia and the need to rescue and bring them to Israel. In 1970 Levin produced a film documentary on the Jews of Ethiopia called *The Falashas* and wrote a similarly-titled article for *Hadassah Magazine*. The efforts of a handful of early advocates for the Falashas, including Levin, are largely responsible for the recent mass migrations of most of the remaining Jews of Ethiopia to Israel. By the time of Levin's death in 1981, he had developed a special kinship and bond with the then relatively small Falasha community in Israel.

Levin's funeral in the *Eretz HaHaim* Cemetery near *Beit Shemesh*, in the hills on the approach to Jerusalem, was a rather private and modest ceremony. There were no dignitaries, only a small group of family and friends. A busload of Falashas came to pay their respects, however, and

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seemed to outnumber the other participants.

It is appropriate to correct an apparent misunderstanding in regard to the circumstances of Meyer Levin's death. He did not actually die in Jerusalem while working on a book there.

By way of background, Levin's Israel residence was a unique ranch home in Herzliya Pituach overlooking the Mediterranean Sea on the road which leads to the residence of the American ambassador. His home stood out by virtue of its having a rooftop studio which he used for writing. The studio had the appearance of a ship's bridge overlooking the sea.

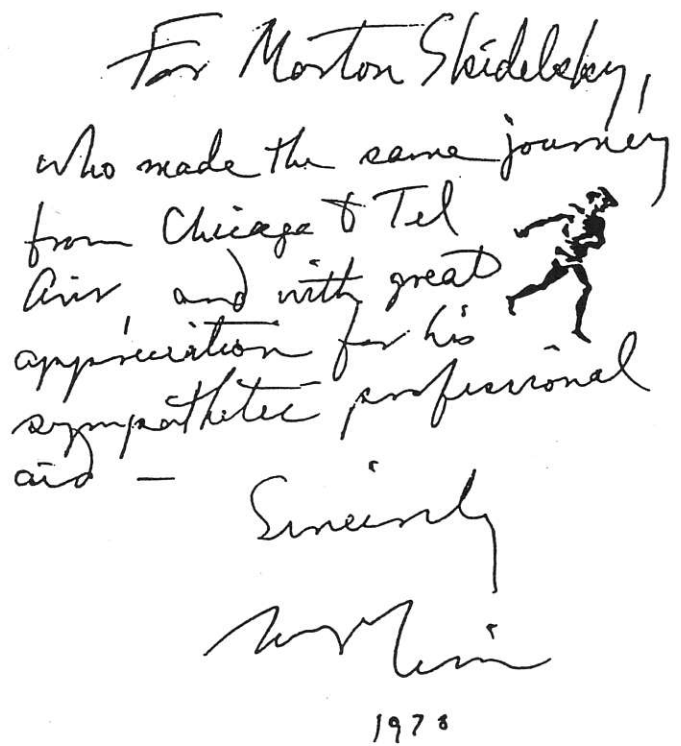
Levin maintained another studio at Beit Yanai, north of Netanya on the sea, where he did much of his writing.

When Levin died, he had already sold his Herzliya Pituach home. Levin and his wife moved into a relatively modest Jerusalem apartment but retained the Beit Yanai studio. At the beginning of July, 1981, he took ill while writing in Beit Yanai and was taken to a hospital in nearby Hadera.

My wife Sharon and I visited Levin at the hospital shortly before his death. A poignant aspect of our visit was our having observed that the attending hospital staff viewed him as an anonymous old man who had suddenly taken ill. They were totally unaware of this man's unique position as a Jewish writer, one of the foremost chroniclers of the events surrounding their life in an independent Israel. Upon leaving the hospital we advised the staff that Levin was a well-known writer.

While reasonable questions as to Meyer Levin's conduct in the matter of the *Diary* remain, most observers probably recognize his activities as having resulted from an uncontrolled idealistic drive. Notwithstanding the merits of Levin's handling of the *Diary* disputes, I observed that he remained with unique senses of justice and principle and total personal integrity. At times, in fact, his naively trusting nature contributed to personal complications.

Several recent unsettling events -- the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin, the trials and tribulations of the Ethiopian Jews in Israel, the violent context of the Israel-PLO peace process, and the increasing polarization of the Jewish people -- inevitably bring Levin to mind. I am certain such



For Morton Skidelsky,
who made the same journey
from Chicago to Tel
Aviv, and with great
appreciation for his
sympathetic professional
aid -
Sincerely
Meyer Levin
1978

From The Harvest, inscribed, "For Morton Skidelsky, Who made the same journey from Chicago to Tel Aviv, and with great appreciation for his sympathetic professional aid -- Sincerely, Meyer Levin"

developments would have troubled him greatly, possibly to the point of anguish.

In a recent interview in the *Jerusalem Post*, Levin's son Gabriel reflected on his father's struggle with the *Diary*. After discussing *The Fanatic*, Meyer Levin's fictionalized account of the *Diary* disputes, Gabriel Levin observed that "If [his] father was a fanatic, he was fanatical about the welfare of the Jewish people." This writer agrees.

Morton Skidelsky, a consulting forensic CPA, is a Society member living in Chicago.

Chicago Jewish History Seeks New Memoirs

History comes in many packages. We must learn to tell our community history through the written record, through oral history, and through the history that artifacts reveal to us.

We must also learn to tell our own histories, the histories we have lived and observed in our families and neighborhoods.

Toward that end, the editor of

Chicago Jewish History is seeking personal memoirs of Society members and their friends. We invite you to submit accounts that recall either a local flavor or a new perspective on some general theme of Chicago Jewish history.

We cannot publish memoirs that concern only individual or family events, but we look forward to seeing memoirs that manage to include a personal response to historical events.

If you have a memoir you believe

would be appropriate for publication, or if you are interested in working on such a memoir, send your article or an inquiry to Joe Kraus, 1416 W. Catalpa, Apt. 2, Chicago, IL 60640.

We hope that your individual story will not only supplement the historical record we have of our community, but that it will also personalize it. We are a community of many thousands, but we are also a small community composed of neighborhoods, extended families, and old, familiar friends. □

Society Welcomes Unprecedented List of New Members to Group

We are pleased to announce that this quarter has proved to be one of the most successful in the Society's history at bringing new members into our organization.

For several years we have tended to register new members at about the rate we have lost old ones; the current surge promises to help us expand our membership to unprecedented size.

The number of new members comes about not by accident but through the work of our membership committee: Elise Ginsparg, Mark Mandel, and Clare Greenberg. Each has worked to promote the Society and each has encouraged friends, relatives, and neighbors to be part of our group.

A larger membership is exciting both because it permits us to share the fruits of our research with a broader base, but also because it promises a larger range of contributors to the things we are already doing.

We are grateful to the following new members both for what they have given and will give to the Society:

- | | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>Gordon Adelman</i> | <i>Mr. & Mrs. Arnold</i> |
| <i>Sarah Arenberg</i> | <i>Levy</i> |
| <i>Mr. & Mrs. Shael</i> | <i>Al & Pauline Lifton</i> |
| <i>Bellows</i> | <i>Shana Lowitz</i> |
| <i>Ethel Boltax</i> | <i>Florence Mayefsky</i> |
| <i>Dr. & Mrs. Edwin</i> | <i>Eve Mayer</i> |
| <i>Cohen</i> | <i>Miriam Mayer</i> |
| <i>Mr. & Mrs. Sam</i> | <i>Rabbi Moses</i> |
| <i>Cohen</i> | <i>Mescheloff</i> |
| <i>Mr. & Mrs. Edward</i> | <i>Sema Chaimovitz</i> |
| <i>Cohon</i> | <i>Menora</i> |
| <i>Estelle Cooper</i> | <i>Jacob Morowitz</i> |
| <i>Mr. & Mrs. Arthur</i> | <i>Rabbi & Mrs.</i> |
| <i>Coren</i> | <i>Bernard Neuman</i> |
| <i>Adam Davidson</i> | <i>Mr. & Mrs. Michael</i> |
| <i>Mr. & Mrs. Moshe</i> | <i>Nussbaum</i> |
| <i>Davidson</i> | <i>Mr. & Mrs. Richard</i> |
| <i>Mr. & Mrs. Arthur</i> | <i>Rhodes</i> |
| <i>DeBofsky</i> | <i>Mr & Mrs. Sheldon</i> |
| <i>Jean DeBofsky</i> | <i>Robinson</i> |
| <i>Mr. & Mrs. Norman</i> | <i>George Rosenbaum</i> |
| <i>Edelstein</i> | <i>Dr. & Mrs. Maurice</i> |
| <i>Bella Ehrenpreis</i> | <i>Rosenthal</i> |
| <i>Gilbert & Irene</i> | <i>Mr. & Mrs. E.</i> |
| <i>Elenbogen</i> | <i>Rothner</i> |
| <i>Terry S. Fagen</i> | <i>Bella Newman Sang</i> |
| <i>Rabbi Reuven</i> | <i>Mr. & Mrs. Sheldon</i> |
| <i>Frankel</i> | <i>Schaffel</i> |
| <i>Elmer Gertz</i> | <i>Rabbi & Mrs. Jack</i> |
| <i>Dr. & Mrs. Harold</i> | <i>Schnell</i> |
| <i>Ginsparg</i> | <i>Susan Sherman</i> |
| <i>Marilyn & Simon</i> | <i>Rose Shure</i> |
| <i>Golden</i> | <i>Mr. & Mrs. Ernest</i> |
| <i>Rosalyn Karas</i> | <i>Smolen</i> |
| <i>Sara Kay</i> | <i>Howard Stein</i> |
| <i>Elaine Koffman</i> | <i>Laurie Sucher</i> |
| <i>Mr. & Mrs. Harvey</i> | <i>Mark & Cheryl Van</i> |
| <i>Kogan</i> | <i>Ausdal</i> |
| <i>Daniel Landes &</i> | <i>Stanley Warsaw</i> |
| <i>Sheryl Robbin</i> | <i>Dr. & Mrs Michael</i> |
| <i>Judith Leithold</i> | <i>Wasserman</i> |

We invite those new members to join us in our many ongoing projects as well as to help us imagine new ones.

We have several permanent committees in the Society, including the Oral History Committee, the Program Committee, the Membership Committee, and the Minsky Award Committee.

In addition, we welcome anyone who is interested in contributing to *Chicago Jewish History* as a writer or in an editorial capacity.

While we are delighted with the recent growth in membership, we hope we can achieve even greater results in the coming years. We invite all of our new and continuing members to spread the word about the work we do.

Please, share copies of *Chicago Jewish History* with others you think might appreciate the stories it tells, and invite friends and neighbors to join you when you attend any of our regular programs.

Unlike many of our peer organizations in other cities, we have no permanent paid staff. We survive as a volunteer organization drawing on the resources of one another. We accomplish what we do solely on the strength of our members.

We thank you for all of the support you have shown us and look forward to the additional support and inspiration you have to share.

Sign Me Up for the Society:

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: (___) _____

Checks should be made out to the Chicago Jewish Historical Society and mailed to 618 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60605. Dues are tax-deductible to the extent permitted by law.

Regular Membership (\$25) _____

Family Membership (\$35) _____

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Synagogue (\$25) _____

Lifetime Membership (\$1000) _____

Gift of: (optional)

Name: _____

Address: _____

Are you a current Society Member? _____

Oral History Excerpt:

Erma Baer Talks of Work with Johanna Lodge and of North Side Jewish Life

The following is an excerpt from an oral history given by Erma Baer to Society Board members Norman Schwartz and Jan Hagerup on July 11, 1991. Baer is a long-time member of Johanna Lodge and a tireless volunteer with the blind. A life-long Chicagoan, Baer recalls what it was like to be Jewish on the North Side of Chicago in the early parts of the century.

Erma Baer: I was born November 16, 1906, in Chicago in the Logan Square district, and I've lived all my life up to now in Chicago. I prefer it to any place else that I've ever seen.

Norman Schwartz: What was your family name?

Baer: My maiden name was Einstein. ...

[My father, Sigmund Einstein] landed [at Castle Garden] in 1882. He came to Chicago. He had a cousin here who had advanced his passage money. His name was Morris Einstein, and he was in the clothing business -- surprise -- with an Italian Jewish man named Longhini. The firm name was Einstein and Longhini.

Schwartz: Kind of like an O'Connor and Goldberg arrangement.

Baer: Well, no, but Longhini was Jewish, too, but he was an Italian Jew. You know the Jews are everywhere. They gave my dad a job and he boarded with a sister of his stepmother who lived on the Near West Side on Carroll Avenue. We were always told to venerate Aunt Sophie Haas. ...

[After business ventures in Washington state and Nebraska] my dad came back to Chicago, and he got a job as a bookkeeper with the Florsheim Shoe Company. He worked there as a bookkeeper for many years and eventually rose through the ranks to be an officer of the company. He was the credit manager and treasurer of the company.

He retired in 1929, and everybody gave him credit for prescience. He retired in September of 1929, and the stock market crashed in October.

Schwartz: I hope he cashed his stock in.

Baer: He did all right. He was a shrewd cookie. ...

Schwartz: So some place along the line your father met your mother. How did he make this connection between New Orleans [where your mother was from] and Chicago?

Baer: Well, my mother and her mother and a brother -- she had several brothers -- had come to Chicago after my

grandfather died in New Orleans. Three of my mother's brothers, my uncles, went into business in a small town called Anniston, Alabama, and the business failed. One of the brothers moved to Montgomery, Alabama; one of the brothers moved to New York City where he had relatives; and the younger brother came to Chicago with his mother and my mother, his sister.

They lived in Chicago. Well, first when they came north, they lived in Aurora. Then he got a job in Chicago because there were more opportunities here -- onward and upward. So they came to live in Chicago, and my mother met my father at a party in the home of mutual friends.

Everybody lived on the Near South Side. Mother and Granny lived on Forrestville Avenue in the forty-hundreds, somewhere around there, where a lot of Jewish people lived.

They met at a party and they began to date and got married on October 5, 1902, here in Chicago. They did have a family, obviously. They lost their first child and then my sister was born in 1904. I was born in 1906, and then there was a long station break. My brother was born in 1916, and both my brother and sister are gone and I'm the survivor. We all lived in Chicago and went to school in Chicago, except Phyllis and I each had a year at Northwestern, which is in Evanston. But Joe went to the University of Chicago.

Schwartz: What high school did you go to?

Baer: I went to Senn.

Schwartz: So you must have been living somewhat on the North Side?

Baer: Yes. When my mother and dad first got married, they lived on the Near West Side, which was the neighborhood that my dad was familiar with.

Schwartz: Maxwell Street area?

Baer: No. Mother always said they lived in St. Mel's Parish. I guess that's a carryover from new Orleans -- locating things by parishes. I really don't know exactly.

Schwartz: Well, we can find out where St. Mel's was. There's still a high school called Providence St. Mel's.

Baer: Oh, yes. Anyway, they moved. They bought a house in the Logan Square neighborhood on Drake Avenue, and that was near Fullerton. ... Drake Avenue was where I was born. I know Phyllis started school at the James Madison School, and then we moved to Edgewater and I started school at Hayt School on Granville Avenue.

[The name has] always been joked about. It was named after some minor politician named Stephen K. Hayt, and it's still the Hayt School and it's still on Granville Avenue, but the student population has changed. That was where I went to school up until the eighth grade, and then I went to Swift School and graduated. My eighth-grade year was at Swift School. I graduated from Swift School, and I went to

Senn. I graduated from Senn in 1923. Later that year in September, I started at Northwestern, and I only went one year.

Schwartz: Were there a lot of Jewish people in Senn at that time?

Baer: No. It really didn't seem to matter. I mean, we weren't aware of -- we were Jewish and we went to Sunday School and all that kind of thing, but we never perceived any anti-Semitism or anything.

Schwartz: When you went to Sunday School, what synagogue was that?

Baer: Temple Sholom.

Schwartz: Well, Temple Sholom was in existence a long time, and at that time Temple Sholom was at ...

Baer: Grace and Pine Grove.

Schwartz: Right. Which is now Anshe Emet.

Baer: That's right. But at that time it was at Grace and Pine Grove. We went on a streetcar.

Schwartz: Who was rabbi at that time?

Baer: Hirschberg. Abraham Hirschberg. We didn't call him "Rabbi." We called him Dr. Hirschberg.

Schwartz: Before that, they had called them ministers and reverends.

Baer: Yes. But we always called him Dr. Hirschberg. All of his terminology changed later, of course.

Schwartz: When you went to Northwestern, we know that, to some extent, there were some kind of informal quotas limiting the number of Jews. Did you run into anything like that?

Baer: No. When I went to Northwestern, and, as I say, that was in September of 1923, there was still compulsory chapel. Everybody had to attend chapel, too. There was a Jewish sorority on campus, A E Phi, and they rushed me, as the expression is. But I was in full adolescent rebellion against a lot of things at that time, and I didn't want any part of any sorority, Jewish or non, so I just declined all their invitations and never had any identification with any Jewish organization.

Schwartz: Well, I don't think there was any Jewish activity, really, at Northwestern until about 1939 when they started a Hillel there.

Baer: Probably. That was a long time after I was thoroughly through with Northwestern. I was most unhappy there -- not because of Jewishness, but because



Erma Baer in 1991

Photograph by Norman Schwartz

most of the other students seemed to me so shallow and superficial that I just had no time for any of them. They didn't know anything that was going on in the wider world. It was a very closed society on a very shallow basis, in my opinion. As I say, I was a rebel, and I was interested in a great many things, and I found absolutely nobody on campus that was interested in the same things that I was interested in. ...

Schwartz: So you found that your interest lay elsewhere and you left college. What did you do then?

Baer: Well, mostly basically I wasn't well. I left college for health reasons. I had a short spell at Augustana Hospital and so on. After I was out of school and

didn't have anything to do, I went to a meeting with my mother at Temple Sholom's Sisterhood. It happened there was a member of temple Sholom Sisterhood by the name of Julia Weil, Mrs. Simon Weil.

She had become interested in Braille transcribing, and she had asked the two women sisters who were heading the Braille committee for Johanna Lodge to speak at the Sisterhood meeting to see if they could gain some recruits. I had always been very fond of reading, and when they made their pitch to the Sisterhood, they said that they were cooperating with the Chicago Public Library, which was giving them space for a classroom and other activities.

They were trying to develop a general-interest library of handcopied Braille books that would be circulated through the library because the only books available at that time in the Chicago Public Library were Bible transcriptions and collections of sermons, and so on that had been contributed, and there was a need for general interest literature.

Mother said to me, "You know, you always liked to read. Maybe that would be something for you to do as a volunteer." So the following Wednesday, I went down to the Chicago Public Library.

Schwartz: That was the one at Randolph and Michigan?

Baer: Now the Cultural Center, right. I told Mrs. Levy, Cecil Levy, who had been one of the speakers at the Sisterhood meeting, that I would like to learn Braille. She said, "Fine." I was eighteen years old, and the wonderful thing was that all of the other people were much older than I and they always thought that I stayed eighteen. They always considered me just a youngster.

Schwartz: Well, I think you have stayed eighteen.

Baer: It was wonderful. The real spark that started the whole thing was a woman who belonged to Johanna Lodge. Her name was Antoinette Harris, Mrs. Joseph Harris. She was a real character, a real peppery person. She had become interested in Braille transcription because, after the First World War, there was a rabbi who had served as chaplain. I don't know his name, I'm sorry. He was blinded, and he needed somebody to read to him. Toni Harris -- we always called her Toni -- read to him, and he said that it was wonderful and he appreciated it, but if she could learn braille, she could transcribe things and he could read them at his leisure and she would be free to do other things if she chose.

At that time the American Red Cross was still teaching Braille, and they had a Braille manual which gave the basics, and, of course, you could learn braille. Antoinette Harris had a cousin named Cecil Levy.

These were all people who had real American roots and Reform roots. I mean, the Jewish thing was really secondary. Toni Harris, for example, was born in Washington, D.C. Cecil Levy was born in Fort Scott, Kansas, and she had spent summers in Chicago with relatives and friends and moved to Chicago after she was married. Toni Harris interested Cecil in learning Braille, and they asked Johanna [Lodge] if Johanna would sponsor a committee and ask some of its members to learn Braille and transcribe books of general interest for the Chicago Public Library.

They recruited a nucleus of maybe half a dozen women, and they began transcribing books. The first book that the group transcribed and completed and had bound and was circulated from the Chicago Public Library was *Stella Dallas*. This is for real. *Stella Dallas* was so popular. You know Braille is a system of embossed dots. Many people don't even know that much. That first book, *Stella Dallas*, was literally worn flat by the fingertips of readers.

Schwartz: Who supplied the equipment?

Baer: Well, I think Johanna did. I'll show you my Braille writer later, but the one that we used then was called the Hall Braille Writer. It was quite a small affair, and the machine has been developed and improved since then. I think Johanna bought the machines. ...

Schwartz: You did the work at the Chicago Public Library?

Baer: No. You were given the use of a machine at home. Johanna, I know, paid for the paper and so on and also paid blind proofreaders who read the work and noted any

corrections that needed to be made. ...

Schwartz: So, you're telling us that before you got into it in 1924, they were already doing Braille at Johanna Lodge?

Baer: Yes.

Schwartz: And, of course, Johanna Lodge was started in 1874.

Baer: That's right.

Schwartz: So they easily could have been doing that for some time. When was Braille invented?

Baer: Braille was invented back in the nineteenth century. It's a very interesting story. The man, Louis Braille, was French, and he was blinded in early childhood by a horrible accident. He was interested in a means of communication.

At that time, there was a system of knotted strings, and that was used by the French military at night to communicate without making any

sound. He investigated that first as he grew, of course, from childhood. What he did first was music, and then only after he had developed a notation system in Braille for music did he go into literary Braille. I really don't know the dates, but I should.

Schwartz: Johanna Lodge, according to the report in Meites' history which was written in 1924 -- which is about the time you started in here -- lists the names of some of these ladies that you mentioned. It also lists other activities that the Lodge had. Now, you can't carry on these activities without money. How did the Johanna Lodge raise their money?

Baer: Well, that is a very interesting story because when I joined Johanna Lodge in 1924, they were very proud of the fact that they didn't have earning funds and that sort of fund-raising activity, because evidently the contributions that people made voluntarily and the dues carried the whole affair. But that didn't last, of course, and eventually Johanna had to go in for fund-raising activities and have fund drives every year and so on, although we've always had generous contributions to the Braille activity and bequests from time to time. Of course, much, much later we had to incorporate the whole Braille activity as a separate entity for tax purposes and contributions -- all that sort of thing -- so we are now incorporated under the laws of the state as an educational activity. ...

Schwartz: How many members do you have in the Chicago chapter?

Baer: Well, unfortunately we're down to about three hundred and fifty. Now, of course, Johanna is an aging lodge, and so we have a great many women who have been members for fifty years and more and they become paid-up

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