

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



chicago jewish historical society

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CHICAGO JEWISH *History*

The Story of Samuel "Nails" Morton: A 20th Century Chicago Golem?

Freak Accident Cuts Short the Life Of A Controversial Character

by Walter Roth

Tales of a mythical clay creature, the "Golem," created in the middle ages by the famous Rabbi Löw (known as the "Maharal"), in part to protect the Jews of Prague against their enemies, have long been part of Jewish folklore. In keeping with that lore, Jews have often romanticized persons who have stepped forth to protect them from their enemies.

Many of these individuals were renowned and esteemed leaders, philanthropists or learned scholars, well known to all. But in the history of the Jews in Chicago there have been a number of persons who were "gallant" defenders of their people, a la the "Golem," but who were suspect as far as some Jews and the secular authorities were concerned. These persons have for the most part been quietly forgotten, but their lives contain bits of history fascinating in their retelling.

A Golem Called "Nails"?

One such person who lived and died in Chicago in the early part of this century was Samuel J. Morton, who went by the nickname "Nails." While some historians say that Samuel was born in the old ghetto of the Maxwell Street area, he was in fact born on July 3, 1893, in New York City. His parents, Sarah Goodman and Frank Morton, were immigrants from Russia. Samuel, the oldest of seven children, came to Chicago at an early age with his father and stepmother and was raised in the Maxwell Street ghetto area at the turn of the century. His mother had died in New York when he was very young, and his father had remarried by the time he came to Chicago.

Samuel grew up in an area of rickety frame houses, one built on top of another, without adequate sanitation, teeming with thousands of poor Eastern European immigrants struggling to make a living. He inevitably became acquainted with and was the product of the area's sweatshops, pushcarts and rag and junk dealers, and also of its vice and crime. Surrounding the Jewish ghetto were other immigrants of every

continued on page 6

November 12 Meeting Looks at Yiddish Theater in Chicago

Society Will Hear

*Danny Newman at
Emanuel Congregation*

A backward look at the Yiddish theater in Chicago will be the highlight of the Society's next meeting on Sunday afternoon, November 12, at Temple Emanuel. The featured speaker will be Danny Newman, public relations guru of culture in Chicago and the U.S.

The meeting will begin with a social hour and refreshments at 1 PM with the speaker's address scheduled for 2 PM. It will be chaired by the Society's current president, Walter Roth. A brief question and answer period will follow. As is the case with most Society events, the meeting

continued on page 2

In his time—the early years of this century—"Nails" Morton was popular, notorious and seemingly always in the news. Some Jews were proud of him; some were not. Society President Walter Roth, a student of unusual Chicago Jews, relates the life and untimely death of this almost forgotten character without trying to answer the old question: Was he really good for the Jews?

President's Message

Looking Back With Gratitude As Well as Ahead

The end of this Jewish year 5749 provides an opportunity to thank our Board members for their endeavors on behalf of the Chicago Jewish Historical Society during the current year. Space does not permit me to single out each director for his or her contribution, so I use this occasion to thank them collectively on behalf of the entire membership of the Society. In addition, I would like to thank a number of our busy chairmen for their special activities during the past year: Burt Robin, Program Chairman; Dr. Irwin Suloway, editor of this quarterly; his wife Elaine, our Secretary and office manager; Past President Norman Schwartz, for his research activities par excellence; and Herman Draznin, our Treasurer.

Our three summer tours were well attended and highly successful. These tours were under the able direction of Leah Axelrod and were led by Dr. Irving Cutler, Norman Schwartz, Mark Mandle and Dr. Jessica Young. My thanks to all of them.

Preparing a Major Exhibit

The Society is now in the process of planning an important exhibit on Landsmanschaften in Chicago. This exhibit is funded in part by a grant by the Illinois Humanities Council and will be held at Spertus Museum, with the opening scheduled for November 15, 1989. Co-Chairpersons of this event Janet Hagerup, Dr. Adele Hast and Sidney Sorkin have spent a busy summer on the exhibit and we are grateful for their persistence and enthusiasm.

Limitations of space prevent mentioning by name the many members who have actively contributed to such ongoing activities as our oral history and archive projects, membership campaign, hospitality activities and the Doris Minsky monograph fund. Our multifaceted achievements in the byways of Chicago Jewish history depend upon the unseen and too often unrecognized labor of scores of individuals.

A Summer of Research

I, myself, spent part of the

President
Walter Roth



summer researching my story on Samuel "Nails" Morton about whom you can read in another part of this periodical. I also had the occasion to become acquainted with a most fascinating person, Albert "Wallpaper" Wolff, a native Chicagoan who is the only member of "The Untouchables" (led by Elliot Ness) who is still alive. He grew up at the same time as "Nails" Morton, but unlike "Nails," "Wallpaper" became an undercover agent in the early days of the FBI. We hope to be able to carry his story in a later issue of *Chicago Jewish History*.

I look forward to seeing each of you at our future programs and sharing with you stories of our past which add so much sparkle to our lives in the present. In the meantime, my best wishes to you for the Rosh Hashanah holiday and a healthy, prosperous and happy New Year to all of you for the year 5750.

Walter Roth, President □

Next Meeting November 12

Continued from first page
will be open to all without charge.

Speaker Has Unusual Qualifications

Although Danny Newman is best known for his work in building a successful subscription base to help finance Lyric Opera and for his popular guide to cultural fundraising, he has had a long and close connection with Yiddish theater in its later years and was the husband of the late Dina Halperin, one of the Yiddish theater's last great stars.

His speech is expected to emphasize the multifaceted role of the Yiddish theater in Chicago during the past century as a vehicle for the entertainment, acculturation and emotional development

of generations of Eastern European immigrants.

Bus Service, Parking Available

Temple Emanuel is located at 5959 North Sheridan Road and can be reached via CTA buses, which stop at the door. Parking is available in an adjoining lot.

The program was arranged by Burt Robin, Society vice-president and program chairman, who will introduce the speaker. Shirley Sorkin, hospitality chairman, is in charge of the social hour. □

CJHS Members Will Get Invitations To Exhibit Opening

Landsmanschaften Display At Spertus Starts Next Month

The largest and most ambitious historical exhibit ever mounted solely by the Society will be on display at Spertus College of Judaica starting November 1. Members in good standing will receive special invitations to attend the reception marking the formal opening on Wednesday evening, November 15, at 5:30 PM at the College.

To be held on the second floor of Spertus College, the opening will include light refreshments and brief informal talks about the mounting of the exhibit.

The exhibit deals with landsmanschaften, the friendly societies formed by Jewish immigrants during the first century of Jewish settlement in Chicago. These societies typically were formed by individuals who had come from the same European region, often a shtetl, and who banded together to provide mutual aid to each other in a strange land. Help for the needy and medical and burial aid were their primary original purposes although later, as some grew and prospered, the landsmanschaften often assumed other roles: social, religious and political. Several founded cemeteries and synagogues, many of which survive today.

On Display Through January

The exhibit, which will be on display through January, 1990, includes a varied display of mementos, maps, photos, rule books, membership lists and audio tapes. It inevitably places major emphasis upon societies formed by the largest

immigrant component, Jews from Eastern Europe. But evidence that such societies were formed also by German Jews as well as by non-Jewish immigrants from all over Europe is also expected to be included.

The display will contain items relating to non-Jewish friendly societies as a result of the participation in the exhibit of the Czechoslovak Heritage Museum of Berwyn. The entire exhibit is made possible in part by a grant provided by the Illinois Humanities Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Meeting Related to Exhibit

In connection with the display, the Society will be holding its January 14 meeting in Bederman Hall, which adjoins the exhibit area at Spertus College. It will feature a panel discussion on the contributions of landsmanschaften to the acculturation of Jewish immigrants to America. Details of the January program will appear in the next issue of Chicago Jewish History.

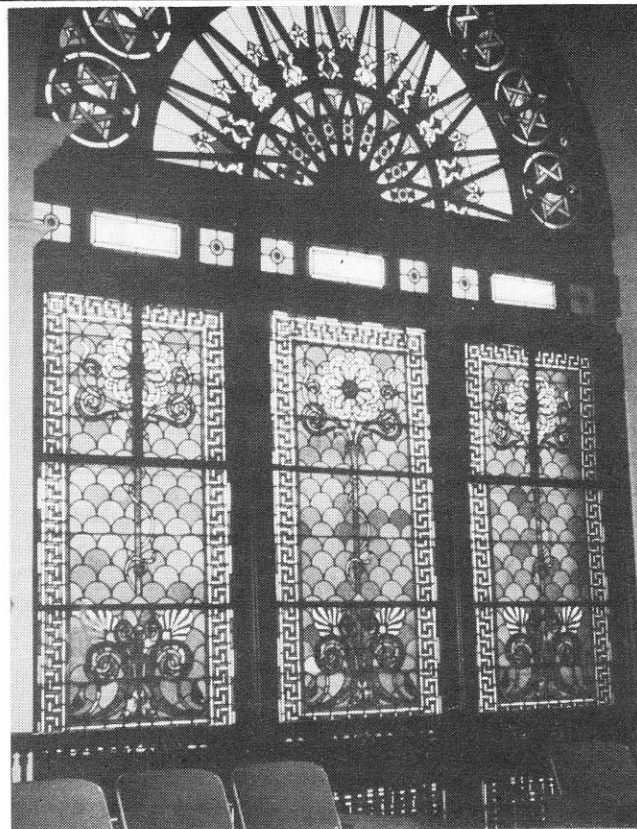
Changing conditions, the proliferation of government-provided social services and the cut-off of Jewish immigration in and after the years between the world wars have resulted in a dramatic decline in the number and activities of landsmanschaften in the Chicago area.

Difficult To Assemble

Consequently, the exhibit committee had to scramble to locate appropriate materials for the project. Aided primarily by Sidney Sorkin, a CJHS boardmember who has been researching Chicago area landsmanschaften for several years and is an authority on the subject, Co-Chairmen Janet Hagerup and Dr. Adele Hast have been assembling materials and technical talent to mount the show for more than a year. Their efforts have been helped by assistance from Cecile Margulies and also by Olga Weiss of Spertus College of Judaica.

"Innumerable details have needed attention," said Ms. Hagerup. "In addition to locating, collecting, selecting and displaying materials, we have had to arrange for such things as leaflets for distribution at the exhibit, publicity, refreshments and printing. Yet I'm certain that the end result will be well worth the immense effort involved."

The exhibit can be visited during weekdays and evenings (except Fridays) and on Sunday afternoons. It will be in the second floor gallery of Spertus College, 618 South Michigan Avenue. There will be no charge for admission. □



A stained glass window at the old Chicago Sinai Congregation building visited on one of the summer tours. The structure at Forty-Sixth Street and King Drive (formerly Grand Blvd.) is now Mt. Pisgah Church
Photo by Moselle Schwartz

Summer Tours Once More Prove To Be Popular Attractions

Members Find Bus Trips Enjoyable and Rewarding

The Chicago Jewish Historical Society ended one of its most successful summer tour seasons on Sunday, August 20 with a new tour of significant South Side synagogue buildings, according to Society Tours Chairman Leah Axelrod. That tour, led by Mark Mandle and Dr. Jessica Young, was one of two new bus tours on this summer's three-tour schedule.

The other new tour, a quick sellout, was an all-day one on July 30 exploring Jewish communities in the far North Shore cities of Waukegan, Kenosha and Racine. It was led by Mrs. Axelrod and Norman Schwartz, included lunch en route and also featured brief talks by local speakers in three cities.

The third bus trip was a repeat on July 9 of Dr. Irving Cutler's perennial "best seller," Chicago Jewish Roots, a tour of the old Jewish neighborhoods on the West Side, the Northwest Side and Rogers Park.

It too was a quick sell-out.

Unable To Accommodate All

"We are sorry that we are not able to accommodate all who would like to go on our tours," said Mrs. Axelrod, "but we are limited by bus capacity and the availability of our tour leaders, all of whom donate their services." She promised to consider repeating the most popular tours in future summers and to continue to give members first notice as tours are scheduled. Members also get lower rates.

During the dozen years that Mrs. Axelrod has directed summer Sunday tours for the Society, over thirty-five departures on half- and whole-day excursions have been made. While most of the tours have been to various parts of Chicago and its nearby suburbs, highly successful trips have been made to places as far afield as Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Ligonier, Indiana.

"We are most fortunate to have Leah directing our tour program," said CJHS President Walter Roth. "Any member who has ever been on a Society tour will attest to that. As both a professional tour guide and a local Jewish historian, Leah provides our members and their friends with truly memorable experiences."

Suggestions for possible tours next year will be welcomed by Mrs. Axelrod, who can be reached at 432-7003.

I.J.S. □

A Grandson Recollects: An Inter-Generational Memoir

Conflict Not Inevitable

Between Young and Old

by Mike Hecht

In 1840, Abe Lincoln was a Congressman from the State of Illinois. The City of Chicago was three years old. Texas was still a part of Mexico. American Indians still roamed the western plains, chasing the plentiful buffalo and the wagon trains of the white trespassers who had come to steal their lands and put the buffalo on the nickel. The California gold rush and the national revolutions of 1848 in Europe were eight years away. The British Empire was growing wider still and wider, unmindful of the White Man's Burden it was to create. Louis Pasteur had not yet made his great immunization discoveries, and Ignaz Semmelweis had not yet been hounded to madness and death by the doctors of Vienna for informing them that they were killing mothers and babies in childbirth by not washing their hands. And my father's father, Aaron Echt, was born to Velvel Garber of Marinke and his wife Chaya Rachel in that portion of Eastern Europe which periodically wandered back and forth between Russia and Poland even though the land itself never moved. Except terrestrially, that is. How does a man whose father's last name is Garber wind up an Echt? Or a Hecht?

In those days of Czarist Russia, there was universal military conscription...except, that is, for only sons or for sons with no trigger finger. Mindful of the admonition, "If you're gonna fight, fight for something worthwhile," cognizant of the fact that the Czar of all the Russias had no use for Jews except to kill them when it became expedient to divert the attention of the Russian populace from their hunger and rotten living conditions; and aware of the fact that being Jewish was not permitted in the Czar's army (a soldier had to eat treyf, he couldn't say his prayers, they wouldn't let him study the Hebrew religious texts—a Jewish boy could leave the army, if alive, a goy), Jewish families with multiple sons took advantage of one or both of the exemptions.

Sons were farmed out, in name that is, to families

While this article by Mike Hecht is more a personal memoir than our usual pieces on local Jewish history, the editors feel that the incidents and relationships recounted will recall for many a way of Jewish family living in Chicago which was once quite common but is now, alas, quite vanished. We defy you to read it and not be moved. Mr. Hecht, though now a senior citizen, is still active in chemical engineering as a consultant and writes for trade publications. He is a longtime resident of Deerfield.

that had no sons; or if no family without a son could be found in their shtetl or in neighboring shtetls, some time before call-up a son put his right forefinger on a butcher block and—wham!, just below the knuckle he had no more trigger finger. (Southpaws had not been invented yet. It took American baseball to create them. Well, all right, maybe they were invented, but they weren't recognized.) My father's cousin, Abe Kagan, had a missing forefinger like that. It chilled—and thrilled—me when I noticed it at age nine or ten and my father explained it to me.

Well, my grandfather was one of nine children, four of them boys. The last-born boy, he was borrowed or "adopted" by a childless family named Echt or Hecht. What was a Germanic Echt (noble) or Hecht (pike) doing in eastern Europe? Who knows? Probably farblonget.

Some time after the turn of the present century—when the War To End All Wars was to be fought, and the world made safe for democracy, and hunger and want and maybe pain too were to disappear from the earth, and man was to become brother to man the universe around—as part of the Great Exodus from Russia that began after the Kishinev massacre of the Jews in the early 1880s, my grandfather emigrated to America and settled in Chicago. South Chicago, to be exact. He ran a kosher butcher shop on Commercial Avenue. Plucked chickens. Cut meat. Gave honest measure. Kept his thumb off the scale. All this, mind you, when he wasn't in schul, the Bikur Cholim Synagogue on Houston Avenue, davenning or studying. The building still stands at 8927 South Houston, the oldest building in continuous use as a synagogue in Chicago and known as "the congregation that would not die."

My first memory of him was at our family club (Rivke Family Verbang) party on a Sunday evening in 1923 at the old Jewish People's Institute, then on Taylor Street on Chicago's Near West side, around the corner from Jane Addams' Hull House on Halsted, to celebrate his and my grandmother Sarah Malkah's sixtieth wedding anniversary. You understand, in those days people who got married tended to stay that way. He was eighty-three. My grandmother, who was also his niece, was eighty-four. I was four.

I see him still: not tall, five feet six, maybe seven, but proud and erect. Dignified. Full beard streaked with gray. Black yarmulke on his head. Twinkling eyes. A cheerful expression, and lief as not, a smile on his face. A thoroughly pleasant man. Outgoing. A man who embraced humankind.

All us kids got some kind of present for being at that celebration. Mine was a flaming red hook-and-ladder fire engine. That present also became my introduction to one of the sad truths of life: that pleasure can get mixed up with pain; that loss can follow hard upon gain.

We lived, my father Chayim and my mother Rivke, in the first floor rear apartment of a wooden, cold water four-flat on Maplewood Avenue, a half block south of North Avenue, on Chicago's Near Northwest side. Living with us was one of my father's nephews, Henry, then in his



The grandfather and his protege: 1933
Note the Yiddish "Forward" in his pocket at age ninety-three.



early twenties, who peddled ties for a living and who sang the most marvelous songs, like "Oh! It Ain't Gonna Rain No More No More" and "You Can't Get to Heaven in an Old Ford Car." We had moved to Maplewood Avenue earlier that year from Watseka, a little country town of five or six thousand in east central Illinois, my parents and I and my favorite possession, a low-slung tricycle with a flat, broad wooden seat. The tricycle was stored outside our back door under the porch of the second floor.

I'd slept on my father's lap on the streetcars going home from my grandfather's gala, hugging my new fire engine treasure to my bosom. I woke as we got off the North Avenue trolley, and the block and a half walk to our house had me all awake. When we got to the back door, I saw my beloved tricycle was gone. Somebody—obviously an anti-Semite, may he rot in hell—had stolen it while we were celebrating Zadie's simcha. I never saw it again. The fire engine was nice, in fact a *darb*, but it didn't compare to my tricycle. How could it? No possession in my whole life ever was so dear to me. I cried myself to sleep.

Eight or nine years later, at age ninety-two, and now a widower and retired, Zadie moved from South Chicago to Albany Park, on Chicago's Northwest side, to live with his son, my Uncle Max, and his wife, my Aunt Libby, who if she were Catholic would be enshrined as a saint, in a big brick apartment building on Lawndale and Leland. I was now twelve, a second semester freshman at Roosevelt (Theodore, that is) High School. My maternal grandfather, who had been living with us, had died some months before, and we had then moved to another apartment in the neighborhood on Sawyer and Wilson, precisely a mile from where Zadie was now living. In May I was to be bar mitzvah.

Of course, I was cheder bocher at Beth Yitzchok, The Drake Avenue Synagogue (Orthodox, what else!), fortuitously positioned between Zadie and me, and easy for

him to be there the three times a day Orthodox Jews assemble in a minyan to pray, and between time to study Chumash and "lerrn a blatt" Gemorrah. Of course my father, my Uncle Max and Zadie were all members.

By this time I had come to know my zadie, and I respected him and liked him—and loved him. He was cheerful, always had a smile, a quip, a hearty greeting, a hug, a kiss—he was alive and vibrant and aware of the world around him. The truth is, however shameful it may be, that I loved him even more than I loved my parents. He was the first person in my life—and I am among the blessed of mankind: there have been others;—had he said, "Walk on water!", I would have attempted it without asking how deep, how far, how cold, will I make it to the other side.

My last cheder teacher, "Doc" Levy, was a very capable pedagogue. What am I talking, capable: I learned more in my one year with him and was inspired to more learning than in all my seven cheder years before. And of course Zadie was also in the neighborhood. But my parents decided I should be prepared for my bar mitzvah by my mother's brother-in-law, Uncle Henry Crystal, in South Shore. And oh! did he prepare me! But that's another story.

Anyhow, at my bar mitzvah that Shabbos in the Drake Schul, Rabbi Siegel was unable to locate the bar mitzvah pin and cursed up a blue streak under his breath—I'd never heard such purple prose in my life before and seldom after. The famed chazan Tevele Cohen sang up a storm and was he good! The Monday morning after, Zadie showed up at my home, at seven a.m. mind you, with a pair of tfillim and announced that since I was now officially a man, in the Judaic sense of course, I could start behaving like one. That is to say, before going off to school I could put on my tallis, "leg" tfillim and daven Schachriss.

This I needed like a hole in the head. But I so

"Nails" Morton Story

continued from first page

kind—Italians, Irish, Germans, Poles and Greeks—quite as poor as the Jews and often engaged in gang warfare with them.

A Product of the Maxwell Street Area

The Twentieth Ward district, which included the Jewish ghetto and its thoroughfare Maxwell Street, was often referred to as the "Bloody Twentieth." As one writer described the Twentieth Ward in 1906, "Murderers, robbers and thieves of the worst kind were born, reared and grew to maturity in numbers that far excel the record of any similar district anywhere in the world....From Maxwell came some of the worst murderers, if not actually the worst, that Chicago has ever seen." Certainly an exaggeration, but one containing some elements of truth.

Samuel's father, Frank, was a tailor; and the original family abode was on Johnson Street, a few blocks from Maxwell Street. They were apparently Yiddish-speaking Orthodox Jews like most of their neighbors. Samuel and his brother, Paul, appear to have worked at an early age for a local whiskey distributor, Hannah and Hogg, and one of their bosses was a man named Morton. Whatever the reason, sometime in these early years the father changed the family name from Marcovitz to Morton.

How He Got His Nickname

It was at this time that Samuel as a young lad won his nickname of "Nails" in gang fights. How he ran afoul of the law in this early part of his life is not clear, but according to police reports he was in frequent trouble. Bill Reilly, a Chicago writer who has made the life of Nails Morton one of his specialties, suggests that he rose to the leadership of local Jewish gangs and became part of the West Side gambling and sports crowd, in which prize-fighting was an activity greatly admired.

These Jewish gangs protected their neighborhoods against incursions by non-Jewish gangs. Nails was arrested during one engagement when he and some friends took on some Poles after a Jewish boy was attacked in Humboldt Park. When he was brought up for sentencing, legend has it that a local judge offered Morton the option of going to jail or joining the American Army. Morton enlisted in the U.S. Army, the 132nd Infantry, the "Dandy First" Illinois regiment which became part of the famous Rainbow Division after America entered World War I in 1917.

Nails rose to the rank of sergeant and became a war hero. The *Chicago Herald Examiner* tells it this way:

In France he won a French war cross when he begged for the privilege of rejoining his company after he had been twice wounded in leading a party of comrades "over the top." He had gone out at the head of a small raiding squad. He was the only one of the party to return.

He was rushed to a field hospital, where a bullet wound in an arm and a shrapnel wound in a leg were dressed. As the surgeons completed their work

on him he begged for the privilege of returning at once to his command. This was refused. The incident later brought his official recognition by the French government.

When discharged from a base hospital, Sergeant Morton was sent to an officers' training school in France and there won his commission as a second lieutenant. Later he was promoted and returned to Chicago a first lieutenant.

His fame as a war hero won him wide acclaim in the Jewish community. Meites' *History of the Jews of Chicago*, published in 1924, contains a paragraph about Samuel Morton, his war medals and his status as a war hero and lists him on an Honor Page of Chicago Jewish heroes of World War I.

After the war ended, the victorious 132nd Infantry returned to Chicago and paraded through Chicago streets to the Coliseum, with First Lieutenant Samuel J. Morton leading one group as his parents and siblings proudly looked on.

From Gambling to Bootlegging

Nails now returned to his old haunts and went to work as a gambler and the operator of a "hot car" garage. One reporter wrote: "His willingness to accept almost any kind of odds offered quickly won for him a start of his fortune. He became proprietor of several well-known gambling houses, and his fortune mounted rapidly." By 1920, with the onset of Prohibition, Nails had become involved in the bootleg whiskey trade "which honeycombed the city and state."

He also became a familiar ringside figure at the principal boxing matches in Chicago and elsewhere where his "Bet five grand on the man in my corner" made him a celebrity. Bets of \$5,000 to \$10,000 each were "matters of common occurrence with him." He owned a number of prizefighters.

He was a fancy dresser and a favorite at the nightclubs and was said to be a "cultured gentleman" who fronted for the mob.

Women fought for his attention and "frequent clashes" between these entertainers over the attentions of Nails were recorded. He was frequently seen in South Haven, Michigan, where his family owned a cottage and where many of his Chicago buddies went to relax and watch their fighters train for the boxing matches to be held in Chicago.

Underworld Connections

Nails also became involved with some legendary Jewish underworld characters of the Twentieth Ward, such as Benjamin "Buddy" and Samuel "the Greenie" Jacobson, Hershie and Max Miller, Maxie Eisen, Isadore "Nigger" Goldberg and David Elman. Hershie and Max Miller were brothers of Davey Miller, a friend of Nails who owned a West Side restaurant and pool hall and later became a famous fight referee and "protector" of Jews in his own right.

But Nails and his friends could not compete with



"Nails" Morton on his horse, possibly the fatal one

From an old photograph

the gangs of non-Jews that surrounded the Twentieth Ward. On the one side were the forces of Dion O'Banion, Bugs Moran and Hymie Weiss (who was Polish, not Jewish); on the other side were the gangs of Johnny Torrio and a newcomer, Al Capone. Caught between these mobs, the Jews picked sides. Nails chose an old friend, the mobster Dion O'Banion, an Irishman who, in addition to his bootlegging, labor racketeering and bank robbery activities ran Schofield's florist shop opposite Holy Name Cathedral at 738 North State Street. Morton was said also to have had an interest in the shop.

On the family side, Nails seems to have been a paragon of virtue. He bought a two-flat building at 3105 Augusta Boulevard for his parents and his siblings, and was generally known as a generous man who gave many gifts to friends and family members.

Charged with Killing

Nails hit the big Chicago headlines in August, 1920, when he was arrested with Hershie Miller and accused of having shot and killed two detectives in a gun

battle in the notorious Pekin Beaux Arts Cafe at 2700 South State Street. Bill Reilly claims that his research indicates that the two detectives had tried to "shake Nails and Hershie down," and when they refused the detectives made anti-Semitic remarks, causing Nails and Hershie to reach for their guns.

Nails claimed he was innocent, and in two trials both Hershie and Nails were acquitted by juries, amidst allegations of bribery and threats to witnesses. A Chicago historian put it this way: "By spreading a little money around, and by virtue of the fact that his gang regularly delivered the vote for the Jewish politicians of the West Side, he [Nails] got off on a plea of self-defense."

Becomes a Public Figure

The Chicago papers wrote a great deal about Morton's popularity, his power and his friends. They also reveal that he was arrested on numerous occasions and questioned concerning various liquor hijackings and killings. He obviously was an elegant and glamorous personality, living high in the razzle-dazzle of the early Prohibition years. At the same time, stories spread of how his gangs also protected Jews whenever Polish and other gangs threatened Jewish neighborhoods.

In his classic work, *The Gang—A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago*, Dr. Frederic M. Thrasher of the University of Chicago writes that in the winter of 1920-21 great tension arose in Chicago over Russian-Jewish massacres then occurring in Europe.

The Poles proposed a parade down Division Street through Jewish neighborhoods. A gang of young Jews, seventeen to twenty-three years of age, then took the matter into their own hands. They armed themselves with guns and barred the way of the parade, which then chose a Milwaukee Avenue route instead. A few months later, Thatcher writes, it was rumored that Jewish boys had been assaulted when passing through a Polish community:

Thereupon a gang of young Jews (considered sluggers in the neighborhood) assembled and, led by "Nails," made for the Polish district to seek apologies. They went to the street corners indicated by the boys who had been attacked and started a free-for-all fight. After a sufficient amount of physical punishment had been administered, they withdrew.

The clashes continued frequently during this time. One Saturday a gang of Jewish boys playing baseball in Douglas Park was attacked by about thirty Polish boys. The news of the attack reached the Jewish poolrooms. Thatcher writes:

A man like "Nails" went into the fight for revenge. A good many others, including high-school boys, amateur prize fighters and hangers-on of the poolrooms were eager for the fun of "helping the Hebes hide the Pollocks." Their slogan was "Wallop the Pollocks" and they rushed fifty strong to the scene of the battle. Finally, policemen dispersed what was left of the Polish gang.

Reputation as Defender of Jews

It was along the frontiers of Humboldt and Douglas Parks that Nails Morton's reputation grew as defender of the Jews. Thatcher's research indicated that there were about twenty Jewish gangs in Chicago in the early 1920's, about two percent of all the gangs that he counted in Chicago. Another gang to which Morton was said to belong, the WWW's, had Jewish and non-Jewish members who excelled in pugilism.

Thatcher writes that the WWW's "successfully stemmed an invasion of Lawndale from the southwest by Polish gangs intent on following the example of their countrymen across the seas and holding a pogrom in the Jewish residential area."

His Sudden Death

On the morning of May 13, 1923, Morton, by now an experienced horseman, went horseback riding with his friend Dion O'Banion and Dion's wife in Lincoln Park. He was dressed in an "immaculate green sports coat, cream colored riding trousers and riding boots." The horse, which Morton had recently purchased, bolted when the stirrup strap broke. Morton lost his balance and fell. The horse became frightened and kicked Morton, cracking his skull and killing him. He was not yet thirty years old.

Morton's body was taken to Piser's at 4936 Broadway, though the actual funeral was held the next day at Piser's Roosevelt Road Chapel, with interment at Waldheim cemetery. His death certificate lists his occupation as a florist.

Tribute at Funeral

The funeral was reported by the *Chicago Herald Examiner* as follows:

Tribute to "Nails" Morton. Five Thousand Jewish People Attend the Funeral Acclaiming Him Protector

Funeral services this afternoon brought dramatically to light a phase of the gang chieftain's character that few outsiders knew while he was alive. Five thousand Jews paid tribute to Morton as the man who made the west side safe for his race. As a young man he had organized a defense society to drive 'Jew baiters' from the west side. Speakers at the brief services extolled Morton for his work for his race and for his gallantry in the World War. The other side of the career that ended was not mentioned.

There were religious, fraternal, and military services, with Rabbi Julius Levi, the Elks, and Morton's former "buddies" of the One Hundred Twenty-third [sic] Infantry officiating. Officials of

the city, state and federal government attended. Hundreds of dollars worth of flowers were sent to the chapel by friends.

Records show that Rabbi Felix Levy of Temple Emanuel officiated at the services held at Piser's and not Julius Levi, as the above article indicated.

The Chicago *Sentinel* carried a simple obituary announcing Morton's death with no mention of heroic or criminal fame. The Chicago *Jewish Courier* (Yiddish) carried Nails' death announcement under the headline, "Nails Morton Killed From Horse While Riding." The *Courier* reported that Nails had amassed a fortune, especially since Prohibition. It noted that he was one of the first in Chicago to enlist when the United States entered World War I and that he had distinguished himself by his heroism in battle.

The "Fortune" Vanishes

Nails left a will dated December 31, 1921, which was duly probated in the Probate Court of Cook County with then Judge Henry Horner presiding. It left bequests of \$2,500 to \$3,000 to his brothers and sisters and \$5,000 to charities to be chosen by the Executor (his brother Paul), a trust fund of \$20,000 for the benefit of his father and any residue outright to his father. His stepmother, Bessie, was not mentioned in the will.

The inventory of his estate listed only two accounts receivable, valued at approximately \$15,000. The estate was closed in 1927, an unusually long time for the probate of a small estate, by which time, the court records indicate, Nails' father had died.

If Nails died a rich man, no part of it ever came to the attention of the Probate Court. A total of \$12,000 in assets was located, meaning that only prorated sums could be distributed to the legatees. No record has yet been found of the "fortune" which Nails was said to have amassed. In fact, the court records contain a recitation that his brother Paul had to donate \$2,500 out of his own funds to Congregation Anshe Kanesses Israel, then located at 3411-19 Douglas Boulevard, in discharge of the charitable bequest contained in Samuel Morton's will.

Jewish Establishment Not Happy

There was a great deal of unhappiness on the part of certain Jewish communal leaders over the emotional response of the Jewish masses to Nails' death. One year after his death, an anniversary memorial service was apparently cancelled at the behest of General Abel Davis, who had been Morton's commanding officer in France. The *Chicago Daily News* wrote:

Davis said that he thought "they are making a mistake in flaunting a man's record in the faces of decent citizens". The incongruous associations in the membership list of the proposed association suggest the life that Morton lived. To one set of acquaintances he was a gallant soldier, to another set a dauntless defender of Jewry, and to the police a notorious gangster with the slaying of two policemen charged against him.

(Davis, a Lithuanian-born Jew, was a lawyer and former Cook County Recorder. He was active in military circles and had received the Distinguished Service Cross. Morton was one of six Chicago Jewish soldiers who had received awards for valor while serving under Davis in France. After World War I, Davis was very active in Jewish communal affairs, including the local War Relief effort. In private life, he became an officer at the Chicago Title and Trust Company.)

Few people remember Samuel "Nails" Morton today. His "Golem" activities referred to by the newspapers at the time of his funeral are nowhere memorialized. But oral histories indicate that he and his gangs were often on hand to protect the Jews of the West Side when non-Jewish gangs threatened to invade Jewish turf. He was their defender against the incursions of enemies. A few years after Nails' death his friend, Davey Miller, succeeded to this role.

Whether Morton's feats as the Chicago "Golem" merit continuing remembrance by the Jewish community, like the homage paid to him at the time of his death, is, of course, an interesting question worthy of additional study and debate. The opinion of Abel Davis one year after the death of Nails was not necessarily the prevailing view of the average Chicago Jew living on Chicago's West Side in the early 1920's.

Revenge — of a Sort

Other details might be mentioned to complete the saga of Nails Morton. His friend Dion O'Banion was gunned down in his florist shop in 1924, some say by Al Capone; and Dion's funeral was even more noted for its splendor and flowers.

As far as the horse that killed Nails is concerned, oldtime historians tell the story that Dion O'Banion and his fellow gangsters, "at a loss to express their feelings except through revenge, kidnapped the horse and solemnly 'bumped him off'." The actual assassin of the horse was said to be "Two Gun" Alterie, a friend of Nails, who owned a ranch in Colorado where Nails had learned to ride horses.

The story of the horse that killed Nails become one of Chicago's great "Roaring Twenties" legends, later depicted in the movie "Public Enemy" starring James Cagney. So far that is Nails' only (direct or indirect) appearance in Hollywood. Perhaps in the future there will be a movie about this young Golem from Chicago coming to the rescue of his brethren on Chicago's old West Side. □

A Grandson Recollects

continued from page 5

loved my zadie—so deeply and so without question or reserve—that despite the ignorant adolescent I was, somehow, albeit dimly, I perceived that this man was not going to live forever; that perhaps his years were numbered; and I understood, however vaguely, that I was my zadie's last hope: dead though he would be, I, Mayer Hersch, his einickle, would carry on the Judaic tradition as

it had come down to him from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and maybe, maybe even pass it on to my children and, who knows, if I lived long enough, to theirs.

So it was no contest. Without an argument or a protest or even a demurrer from me, we sat down at the dining room table, Zadie and I, and began: "Mah Tovu, Ohalechah Yacov, mishcanosechaw Yisroel...." (How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, thy dwelling places, O Israel....)

And that afternoon, when I got home from school, eager to change clothes and get outside to play ball, imagine my surprise, what am I talking about, my total astonishment, my consternation, there was my zadie at the dining room table, siddur open to the first page of Musaf.

From May, 1932 through June, 1935 when I graduated from Roosevelt High (we pronounced it Roozevelt to rhyme with Jewsvelt, not Rosevelt as it became fashionable to do when Franklin D. came upon the scene) six mornings a week at seven and six afternoons a week at one or two or three or whenever it was that I got home from school—mind you, he learned my school schedule and timed his arrival to coincide with it—every day but Shabbos and Jewish holidays, whatever the Chicago weather, ninety-five in the broiling sun of summer or twenty below and blizzardy in winter, there was my zadie at age ninety-three, ninety-four, ninety-five, with his cane, walking those two miles to and from my home twice a day. Like the U.S. mailman making his appointed rounds, undeterred by the weather, the social scene, the economic situation, the political climate, the sports standings. Mussolini, Hitler, Hirohito, Depression, Babe Ruth, Bronco Nagurski, there was my zadie.

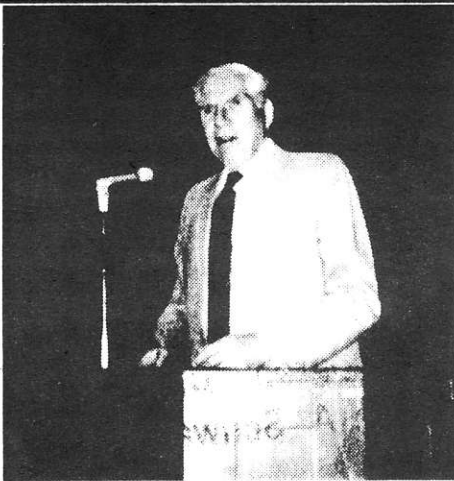
In spring and during summer vacation and early fall, when my sixteen-inch softball teammates were outside, and the fever of bat and ball and bases and diamond ran through my blood, so eager to join them that I couldn't delay another moment, not another moment, I'd begin to abandon the traditional chanting of the prayers and start to race through them. My abiding image of him—he always sat on my right—is his left hand, full palm face down across the siddur page (as if I didn't know it all by heart anyhow!), right hand on my right forearm, saying in Yiddish (friendly like), "Don't rush, Mike. The ballgame won't run away from you." (Commanding), "Chant it! Chant it!!"

And slow down I would and chant it I did. And there were times, occasions, when I was in good voice and making like a chazan, he'd be so taken with my chanting, so moved, so stirred, he would pick up my right hand, bring it to his lips and kiss my fingers.

Are there, have there been any lover's kisses sweeter, more fervent, more passionate on my lips than my zadie's on my fingers?

He died that summer of '35 a few months after my sixteenth birthday, at age ninety-five, a few months after my mother.

"Mah tovu, ohalechaw Yacov, mishcanosechaw Yisroel...." □



Justice Seymour Simon addressing the September meeting at Temple Shalom
Photo by Moselle Schwartz

Justice Simon Tells Of Political Career At Fall Meeting

Justice Seymour Simon recounted memories of his years as an elected public official at the September 10 meeting of the Chicago Jewish Historical Society. A large crowd of members and friends were present for the talk at Temple Shalom.

The now retired justice discussed his career as a Chicago alderman, a member and president of the Cook County Board, Appellate Court Judge and Justice of the Illinois Supreme Court. During those many years, he continuously served as a gadfly, opposing the excesses of entrenched political power while earning the respect if not the love of political bosses.

A social hour and refreshments preceded the speaker, who was introduced by CJHS Board Member Daniel Beederman. President Walter Roth chaired the meeting. The program was arranged, as usual, by Vice President Burt Robin and refreshments were provided by Hospitality Chairman Shirley Sorkin. □

Seeks Information On Jewish Farmers

Dr. J. Sanford Rikoon of the University of Missouri-Columbia is trying to establish contact with individuals whose families have ever lived on farms in the Midwest or Great Plains regions. He is researching this topic in order to write a book about this overlooked chapter in Jewish-American history. The area covered includes farming efforts in Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Indiana, Illinois, North and South Dakota, Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri and Minnesota.

Dr. Rikoon would like to hear from anyone who either lived on a farm or whose parents or grandparents became farmers in those states, even if only for a few years. If appropriate, he would like to interview or correspond with you in order to learn more of your family's history and experiences. This is a scholarly project and all requests for confidentiality will be honored. Also, he would like you to send the names and addresses (if possible) of other family members, friends or acquaintances you think he should contact.

Please write to him at the Department of Rural Sociology, Sociology Building Room 108, University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri 65211; his phone number is (314) 882-0861. □

20 New Members Aid Society's Work

The Society welcomes yet another sizable group of new members. The individuals listed below have chosen, like so many before them, to help insure that the discovery, preservation and dissemination of information concerning Chicago's Jewish past will continue unabated.

Mrs. Leslie Bezark
Mrs. Elsie Braverman
Sarah Cohen
Gene Davis
Mrs. Anne Friedman
Stewart Hill
Donna W. Kahan
Laurie Kaplan
Susan Kessler
Rae Kushner

Helen Menches
Deborah J. Mills
Ruth H. Mills
Adele Mishkin
Jerry Noble
Mrs. Arthur Robinson
Michael & Eta Sanders
Barbara Schenkel
Elaine & Richard Snow
John N. Stern

Do you know the names (and addresses) of persons who ought to become Society members? Mail them to us and we will send them an attractive brochure which should encourage them to join in our efforts. Your name will be mentioned if you wish. Or better yet, bring those persons to our November 12 meeting as your and our guests,

—Marian Cutler
Membership Chairman □

The Society's Board members and spouses mix business with pleasure at its August meeting at the Michigan summer home of President Walter Roth and his wife Chaya (second and third from left in front row). Others include: front row (l. to r.), Ruth Brandzel and Moselle Schwartz; back row (l. to r.), Marian and Irving Cutler, Sol Brandzel, Daniel Beederman, Ethel and Milton Shulman, Janet Hagerup, Leslie and Leah Axelrod, Norman Schwartz, Myrna Mazur, Florence and Herman Draznin. Present but missing (he took the picture) was Edward Mazur.



Society Plans Re-Publication of Rare Jewish History Book

Family Makes New Edition Of Meites Volume Possible

With the generous cooperation and financial assistance of the Meites family, the Society has embarked upon the project of publishing and distributing a new edition of H. L. Meites' monumental *History of the Jews of Chicago*. Originally published in 1924 and long out of print, copies in any condition are currently virtually unobtainable.

The oversized, lavishly illustrated volume of many hundred pages is both a running history of the Jewish experience in Chicago and an important collection of several hundred brief biographies of Jewish community leaders and those who made their marks in various businesses and professions during the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the present century.

Copies Command High Prices

A copy of the original edition, basically a labor of love by Meites, himself a printer of note, sells for \$150 on the rare occasion when one appears in the used book market.

"Details concerning the marketing of the new edition and its sales price to Society members and others have yet to be worked out," said President Walter Roth; "however, we are indeed grateful to Board member Tom Meites who with his family has made republication of this invaluable resource possible. Jerry Meites has also been helpful in this project."

New Interest in Book

Since its original publication in 1924 by the Jewish Historical Society of Illinois, a CJHS predecessor which became a victim of the Great Depression of 1929, Meites' work has become a standard sourcebook for information on local Jewish history during its first seventy-five years. Recent interest in family "roots" and in genealogy has renewed the appeal of its biographies, unequalled by any other collection. It is, in effect, the record of hundreds of local Jewish families from their earliest Chicago beginnings.



Pianist Jerry Preskill and Singer Eileen Berman entertained at the Society's annual members' brunch in June
Photo by Moselle Schwartz

Further information concerning this major publishing venture by the Society will appear in future issues of *Chicago Jewish History*.

I.J.S. □

Several Events Mark Hull House Centennial

Hull House Museum at the University of Chicago will join citizens nationwide in 1989-90 in a year-long celebration of the founding of the world-renowned social settlement, Hull House.

Because of the unique role played by Hull House in the education and acculturation of immigrant Jews during its first forty years, Society members will be particularly interested in many of the literally dozens of free activities to take place on the campus in or near the Hull-House Museum. Among the activities are talks, panels, films, concerts and exhibits.

Started in Jewish Area.

Inasmuch as the available location for a settlement house in 1889 happened to be smack in the middle of the area of major immigrant Jewish settlement near Maxwell Street, Jews were perhaps the group which made the most initial use of the facility founded by Jane Addams although Italians, Slavs and, later, many other immigrants acquired educational,

other immigrants acquired educational, vocational, social and cultural training through its varied programs. Everyone knows that musician Benny Goodman, for example, learned to play at Hull House.

Of particular interest to CJHS members will be a large photographic exhibit currently on display in which some member have already found pictures of their ancestors and films about immigrants, the growth of local unions, the Chicago Maternity Center and the early women's rights movement. The observance continues through May of 1990. A complete schedule of centennial programs can be obtained by phoning 413-5354.

Part of Jewish History

Founded on September 18, 1889, Hull House led and participated in a staggering variety of programs and activities affecting the development of many areas of American life. Influencing the course of both Chicago and national history, Hull House developed pioneer programs in social welfare, education, recreation, public health, social and industrial reform, labor relations, immigration, the status of women, international peace and the arts.

In the years following World War I, a changing neighborhood and the cut-off of mass immigration to the U.S. reduced tremendously the number of Jews reached directly by the settlement house. Yet the impact of Hull House on Chicago's Jews remains an important element of local Jewish history. □