



CHICAGO JEWISH HISTORY

Report: CJHS Open Meeting, Sunday, March 20

Professor M. Alison Kibler: “Are the Hebrews to Have a Censor?”

Jewish Motion Picture Censorship in Chicago in the Early Twentieth Century



M. Alison Kibler.
Photo by Melissa Hess.

The attendees enjoyed a nourishing afternoon at the Society’s open meeting on Sunday afternoon, March 20, 2016, at Kehilat Chovevei Tzion, 9220 North Crawford Avenue, Skokie. Guest speaker M. Alison Kibler offered food for thought, and the hamentashen at our social hour satisfied any sweet tooth.

Dr. Kibler is Professor of American Studies and Chair of Women’s, Gender & Sexuality Studies at Franklin & Marshall College, Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Her latest book is *Censoring Racial Ridicule: Irish, Jewish, and African American Struggles Over Race and Representation, 1890-1930* (University of North Carolina Press, 2015). Kibler studies the history of American popular culture, with particular focus on how social groups struggle for



Adolf Kraus (1850-1928).
History of the Jews of Chicago, 1924.

favorable representations on stage and screen and for equal access to public amusements. One of the central stories in the study is the emergence of Jewish censorship of motion pictures in Chicago.

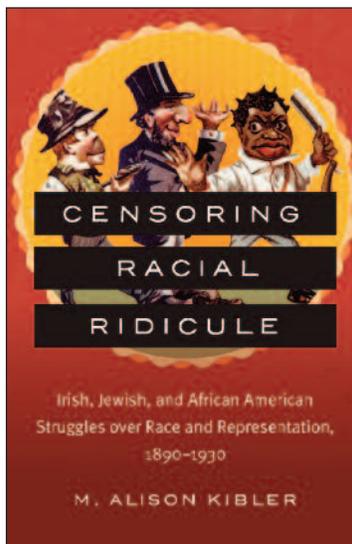
Adolf Kraus wrote Chicago’s (and the nation’s) first movie censorship law in 1907. Kraus was a Jewish attorney and civic leader. He was elected president of Isaiah Congregation in 1899 and president of the Independent Order of B’nai B’rith in 1905. He would go on to head each entity for twenty years.

Kraus’s ordinance gave Chicago police the power to ban any film that was “obscene, or portrays depravity, criminality or lack of virtue of a class of citizens of any race, color, creed or religion and exposes them to contempt, derision or obloquy...” His founding vision of Chicago’s race-based censorship was meant to be inclusive, but in practice, Chicago censorship did not protect all races equally. In fact, Jews gained more power than other minority groups in the

censorship process, but only as experts on anti-Semitism. Critics of Chicago censorship charged that the system of minority groups regulating their own image was unfair and impractical. Did every racial minority deserve representation as a censor?

Then, in 1913, Major Metellus Lucullus Cicero Funkhouser was chosen as a second deputy superintendent of police, in effect, a “censor of public morals.” In response to civil liberties protests he began to seek out groups of citizens to review plays and movies instead of the police, and prominent Jews stepped forward as citizen-censors. A close relationship developed between Funkhouser and the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith.

Over time, race-based censorship laws (what we refer to as hate speech codes today) have failed judicial challenges. Prof. Kibler cited the Skokie example in our own time. To further explore this fascinating subject, we recommend her excellent historical study to our readers.



PRESIDENT'S COLUMN



Edward H. Mazur.

Since the publication of our last journal, the Chicago Jewish Historical Society President, Board of Directors, and Editor have been engaged in new and exciting projects.

We are in the process of applying to the JUF Breakthrough Fund for a grant to enable the gathering and digitization of historical materials from the collections of Chicago area Jewish institutions in a centralized, accessible archive based at Spertus. What a valuable, much-needed resource that would be. It would bring our Society's mission—the discovery, collection, and

dissemination of information about the Jewish experience in Metropolitan Chicago—to the widest possible audience.

A long-planned project is underway: the publication of a second edition of the Society's most popular book, *A Walk to Shul: Chicago Synagogues of Lawndale and Stops on the Way*, by Bea Kraus and Norman D. Schwartz, published in 2003. Author Bea Kraus was a CJHS Board member at the time. She was the 1996 winner of our Doris Minsky Memorial Fund prize for her monograph *The Cantors: Great Voices Remembered*. Kraus gave her blessing to Editor Bev Chubatz and her professional collaborators to create the new edition of *A Walk to Shul*. Our beloved Past President Norman Schwartz Z"L, who photographed the shuls, left the Society a generous bequest which will be used to cover the costs of editing and publishing.

Open Meetings: The Society's upcoming Sunday afternoon presentations are previewed elsewhere in this issue. Mark your calendars!

Summer Sunday Tours: As soon as Tour Chairman Leah Axelrod sets the dates for our popular outings, flyers will be mailed to our members, and the details will be posted on our website—www.chicagojewishhistory.org.

A thrilling prospect: the Society just received a generous grant from the estate of former CJHS Board member Seymour H. Persky Z"L. The grant will be used to fund future Seymour H. Persky Memorial Programs on the themes closest to him: Chicago Jewish art, architecture, and music.

THE ROMANIAN SHUL

Our most popular summer tour—always sold out—is “Chicago Jewish Roots” guided by one of our founding members, the eminent historian and geographer of Chicago Jewry, Dr. Irving Cutler. The summer 2015 tour included a visit to the impressive Stone Temple Baptist Church, formerly The First Romanian Congregation Shaari Shomayim at 3622 West Douglas Boulevard. The Romanian Shul was originally located in the Maxwell Street area at 14th Street and Union Avenue. When the Jewish population migrated to Lawndale, and after generous donations were made, the congregation erected this magnificent house of worship. It served the Jewish community until the Lawndale neighborhood changed from Jewish to African-American. The Stone Temple Baptist Church was founded in 1954. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke there in 1966.

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2016

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CJHS members... YASHER KOACH

To all our activists, achievers, and honorees... the Hebrew phrase means "More Power to You"

The sixth book by **CJHS President Emeritus Walter Roth** is now available. *Everyday Heroic Lives: Portraits from Chicago's Jewish Past* is a collection of profiles of people worth knowing—some famous, some unsung. Many are distinguished by their contributions to the institutions of the city that Roth claimed as his home upon his arrival as a refugee in 1938. There are portraits of Jews who were prominent in the development of the Chicago stockyards and the city's mighty meatpacking industry. There are admiring vignettes of legal scholars and participants in significant constitutional law cases, some encountered by Walter Roth in his long and successful career as a lawyer and activist in the American Jewish Congress. His heroes include congressman and federal judge Abner Mikva, alderman Leon Despres, meatpacking moguls Nelson Morris and Walter Mander, and pacifist Rosika Schwimmer. There are book and theater reviews first published in our quarterly journal. Finally, there is an account of Roth's family coping as refugees in Chicago, in the form of a sensitive interview the author conducted with his aged mother.

Everyday Heroic Lives is available in paperback at

<http://www.amazon.com/Everyday-Heroic-Lives-Portraits-Chicagos/dp/1497382238>

Seduva (Yiddish: Shadova or Shadeve) Lithuania, a central Lithuanian town, was home to one of the oldest Jewish communities in the country, dating to the 1400s, until its destruction by the Nazis in 1941. Over the last three years a Seduva heritage project called "Lost Shtetl" (see loststetl.com) has been implemented through the efforts of the Seduva Jewish Memorial Fund. The project team consists of historians and Holocaust specialists from prominent Vilnius, Lithuania institutions, including Vilnius University and the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum. Among other initiatives, there are plans for a Museum of the Lost Shtetl, adjacent to the Jewish cemetery restored by the Fund in 2013-2014, that will feature the history of Seduva as well as other Lithuanian shtetls and Litvak life. In preparing the exhibition for the planned opening of the museum in 2018, the project team is seeking help in collecting information from descendants of Seduva—family stories, documents, artifacts and related material. If you can help, please contact the exhibition curator, Milda Jakulyte-Vasil at info@loststetl.com.

Yasher koach to **Board Member Dr. Rachelle Gold**, whose online post about her grandfather's Seduvan roots was found by Milda Jakulyte-Vasil in her outreach for "Lost Shtetl." AN article by Milda about Seduva and the Lost Shtetl project will be published in the upcoming issue of *Morasha*, the journal of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Illinois.

CORRECTIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

- In the Fall 2015 issue, on page 22, in the report on our "Chicago's Historic North Side Jewish Cemeteries" tour, we erroneously referred to the **New Light Cemetery** as New Life. We corrected the error in the digital edition of the quarterly posted on our website. We apologize for the error.
- **Anticipating a comment:** in this issue, on page 8, on the Queen Esther stick puppet, her name is misspelled as עסטער. It should be אסתר.

"The 1847 Illinois Constitutional Convention and Persons of Color" by **Life Member Jerome B. Meites** appears in the latest issue of the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (Volume 108, Numbers 3-4, Fall/Winter 2015). Jerry Meites has practiced civil rights law for many years. He is now also a later in life doctoral student in History at UIC.

Board Member Herbert Eiseman is at an IDF base somewhere in Israel at work as a volunteer with Sar-El, the National Project for Volunteers for Israel. He is once again donating his "elbow grease" to free an Israeli soldier from a mundane task. Herb has volunteered in this way annually for some years. This year Herb arrived a week early and brought along one of his daughters so they could tour the land together before he began his work. Herb also brought along some deluxe teal blue CJHS logo tote bags as gifts for his Israeli friends. (The totes make great gifts. Order at our website.)

WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS OF THE SOCIETY

Raymond Asher
Skokie, IL

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Sheldon Hayer
Raleigh, NC

Ryck Lent
Waltham, MA

Behind the Laughter: The Purim Shpiel Comes to America (and Chicago)

BY ZEV ELEFF

In 1940, Rabbi Mordecai Waxman declared, “the Purim-spiel is now a thing of the past.” To Waxman, these satirical plays were “crude and primitive,” hardly a “form of art.”¹ No doubt, the rabbi’s evaluation was the result of informed observation. Throughout the United States, rabbinic and lay leaders labored mightily to improve decorum in their synagogues. These Purim plays, Waxman and others feared, encouraged a sort of “European” slapstick that was incongruous with New World refinement. What is more, concerned second and third generation American Jews worried about the cultural baggage that millions of Eastern European immigrants brought with them as they resettled in the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century. Waxman was correct that many congregations viewed the Purim shpiel as far too lowbrow for their American sensibilities.²

Still, the Purim shpiel was far from an endangered comedic species. For instance, a March 1979 Hebrew Theological College (HTC) newsletter reported on the success of the school’s recent shpiel, describing it as “an annual event as old as the Yeshiva.”³ Unfortunately, the sources do not confirm that a band of students organized a revue on Douglas Boulevard in the 1920s. Yet it is certainly the case that the Purim shpiel was a longtime staple within the HTC culture and within other enclaves. Its perennial presence in the HTC calendar represents an oft-overlooked aspect of Jewish life in the United States. Moreover, its place within the rabbinic milieu served as a precious moment in which students and teachers could, with a modicum of irreverence, reverse the current of rabbi-pupil dialogue to flow in the opposite direction. In a word, the shpiel empowered students to speak relatively freely in a time-bound space without upsetting the larger and more rigid yeshiva culture.

The shpiel’s successful transplantation to the United States was due in large measure to the influence of American rabbinical seminaries. In Europe, most of the leading yeshivot hosted these jolly shpiels.⁴ In Volozhin, faculty and students looked forward to the annual one-man-routine of the so-called “Purim Rav.”⁵ In fact, one memoirist from Kovno

recalled that the leading scholars of his community eagerly anticipated the return of young men for the Passover vacation who would recount the musings and humor of the Purim performance that took place several weeks earlier in Volozhin.⁶ The tradition spread to Slobodka, Kamenitz, and other famed yeshivot. In most instances, the sharp and witty criticisms of teachers that were invariably imbedded within the shpiels were tolerated—if not celebrated—by the schools’ administrations as keeping within the jovial spirit of Purim.⁷ It was understood that after the holiday the “Purim Rav” would return to his student status and that the sagacious rabbis would once again regain control of the form and content of their yeshivot. Accordingly, the most astute rabbinic leaders utilized the satires as once-a-year

opportunities to gain insight into the opinions of their all-too-reticent students and improve their organizations.⁸

In time, the “custom migrated to America.” One observer noted that “in major yeshivot, like the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary [RIETS] and the Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood, these ‘rabbis’ [i.e., the Purim Rav] rule with force on Purim.”⁹ The students enrolled at RIETS, Yeshiva University’s rabbinical school in New York, took particular delight in



Audience at HTC Purim shpiel, 1971.
Hebrew Theological College Archives.

expanding the “Purim Rav” tradition into a more elaborate play—with a company of actors and props—that frequently aimed its humor at leading scholars such as Rabbis Yaakov Moshe Lessin, Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Menachem Mendel Zaks. Here is the student report of the 1950 shpiel:

Rabbi Lessin spoke, followed by Rabbi Joseph William B. Soloveifrank, who delivered a “sheur” of Purim Torah. Willie Frank had a “J.B.ish” beard, and makeup that had even me, a Bostonian and chasid of J.B., fooled at first glance. During the spiel, we were all startled by a trumpet blast announcing the arrival of Reb Mendel of Radun. Armed with a “shtreimel,” a satin “kappote,” white socks and a gray wig and beard, this pseudo-Rebbe later turned out to be (as if I couldn’t guess) Yisrael Wohlgelernter, ’52. The wisecracks that followed were the highlights of the Chagiga.¹⁰

The Purim shpiel also remained a fixture in the Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland and Chicago, though it was resisted by the leaders of several Brooklyn schools like Chaim Berlin and Torah Vodaath.¹¹ Beyond Orthodox circles, students and faculty at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati routinely laughed aloud as its young men performed Purim satires that lampooned noted figures such as Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus, and President Julian Morgenstern.¹² Rabbi Isaac Klein also kept a notebook that he labeled “Purim Thora” [*sic*] that preserved many witty lines—mostly in Yiddish and Hebrew—that he employed in his years at the Jewish Theological Seminary.¹³

Nevertheless, Orthodox Jews embraced “shpiel culture” more than other sectors of the American Jewish community. In 1954, the Orthodox Union included a Purim shpiel script composed by the comedians of the Young Israel of Flatbush—replete with generic barbs and jabs at rabbis and lay officers—in its “monthly program manual for synagogue activity.”¹⁴ Likewise, it is unsurprising to find that the Orthodox students at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1970s were the

ones who advertised their upcoming Purim play in the local press.¹⁵

In Chicago, Jews of all stripes were well-accustomed to shpiel culture. In March 1968, the Zionist Organization of Chicago held a Purim feast at the Palmer House. The local press reported that the “highlight” of the event was the “Purim Shpiel, under the direction of Renee Eisenstadt.”¹⁶ For the few uninitiated readers, *The Sentinel* later published an elaborate explanation of the Purim play phenomenon in its “Ask the Rabbi” column.¹⁷ Owing to all this, it is more than sensible that the annual HTC Purim shpiel was a celebrated event among Chicago’s Orthodox Jews, particularly in the 1960s. In fact, it was a community affair. Here is the text of a circular for the 1966 shpiel that appeared in the Jewish press:

Members of the Student Council of the Hebrew Theological College, 7135 N. Carpenter Rd., Skokie, will hold their annual Purim shpiel on the campus on Sunday, March 6, 7:30 p.m.

The public is invited (admission, 50 cents [today, \$3.69]) to witness the skit, entitled “Wizard of Odd.”¹⁸

The heyday of the HTC shpiel did not emerge in a vacuum. In the 1960s, popular culture and television talk shows served as important forums for “youth rebellion” and a counterculture that featured a flair for the irreverent, much more so than the good-natured *Howdy Doody* disposition of the prior decade.¹⁹ Moreover, Jewish youngsters had an assortment of well-known comedians to emulate: Woody Allen, Mel Brooks, Shecky Greene, Buddy Hackett, and Jackie Mason.²⁰ To be sure, the HTC students did not reach

the high level of insubordination that was then in vogue, but the impact of the ’60s counterculture mixed with the cheeky Purim folkway that had long ago migrated from Eastern Europe was apparent on the Carpenter Road campus.

The 1960s was a crucial decade for HTC. Several factors impelled its leaders, students, and community members to reconsider the school’s



HTC “Hamasmid Brick Company” Purim shpiel, 1971.
Hebrew Theological College Archives.

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Purim Shpiel *Continued from page 5*

uniqueness among other Orthodox institutions, including the newly established Chicago branch of the Telshe Yeshiva. The concern manifested itself in the Purim plays. Take the 1965 shpiel, for example. That year, the students performed “How to Succeed in the Yeshiva Without Really Trying.” The second scene depicted HTC students preparing some sort of theatrical production featuring life at Hebrew Theological College. In it, several students debated a suitable outfit to represent Skokie men. “We could wear our Tzitzis out,” recommended one student. Another concurred, saying that a young man with “ritual fringes” popping out just above his belt was an appropriate and pious image of an Orthodox rabbinical student. The suggestion, though, was misleading to others in the group who were quick to acknowledge that most HTC students in this period preferred to conceal their fringes beneath their clothing in order to “fit in” among non-Jewish Chicagoans. “But people might think we’re from Telshe,” jested a third student, as if to place the new yeshiva to the religious right of HTC.²¹

This and a number of later shpiels offered amusing comparisons between the Chicago students and their counterparts at Yeshiva University, Chabad, and other Orthodox schools. It was not that the HTC men were struck with an “inferiority complex;” to the contrary, hyperbolic and vivid contrasts between different institutions and Orthodox Jews helped concretize the HTC brand.

The HTC Purim humor was appreciated. The students who wrote and performed the shpiels garnered large audiences that numbered in the hundreds and typically filled the capacious Lavin Dining Hall. The crowds arrived eager to learn how the clever rabbinical students would blend contemporary theater and musical culture with “yeshiva wit” to lampoon their school. In 1963, the thespians produced “North Side Story.” Instead of *West Side Story*’s Sharks and Jets, HTC’s musical featured the Shtarks and the Shtaats. And, in lieu of Tony’s and Maria’s celebrated duet, the students portrayed two star-crossed study partners:

Tonight, tonight
We’ll learn downstairs tonight!
Just meet me there
And we’ll shteig away!

Tonight, tonight
Our seder starts tonight
And all night in the tunnel we’ll stay

Be sure to bring down your Gemara,
I’ll bring my Mishna Brurah
And also a flashlight
So meet me there
Right after Azose puts us to bed
Tonight!²²

Subsequent productions also took clever creative license with popular Broadway musicals. The 1964 group performed “Bye Bye Beardie.” In this rendition, the shpiel confronted the students’ absence from the rage and carnage of Vietnam. On the whole, HTC students—like many other clergy-in-training—claimed exemption as “ministers and divinity students” and could not be conscripted into the Vietnam War. In self-mockery, the students parodied Dick Van Dyke and “Put on a Happy Face.” Here is the introductory verse:

So you might be conscripted
But put on a happy face.
All my chavrusas skipped it,
And I will feel out of place.
Will I be able to go to minyan there?
Keep kosher as well?
Just don’t be disappointed when you’re there,
It’s not a hotel!²³

Vietnam was a recurring theme within the HTC Purim theater culture, as students, with certain degrees of subtlety, voiced antiwar protest, and reflections on accusations of “draft dodging.” Moreover, they used the opportunity to list student complaints about the dormitory facilities and the cafeteria cuisine. The dormitory and other facilities were constantly subjected to humorous scrutiny. Of course, though, the HTC comedians reserved the lion’s share of Purim commentary for their rabbinic teachers. In those years, the Chicago school was home to a number of outstanding scholars: luminaries such as Rabbis Eliezer Berkovits, Hertzfel and Mendel Kaplan, Yaakov Perlow, Zelig Starr, Chaim Regensberg, Ahron Soloveichik, and Chaim Zimmerman. Hundreds of students eagerly enrolled in HTC to study with them. It was the task of the Purim shpiel writers and actors to express admiration with a touch of informed satire.

The 1966 shpiel was perhaps the most elaborate Purim production. The costume designs and stage production exceeded the usual high standard. “The Wizard of Odd” offered a narrative that followed the basic outlines of L. Frank Baum’s classic tale. In the HTC iteration, though, it turned out that the “wonderful wizard” was none other than the recently appointed and renowned Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik—

“the only man in the world fit for the job of Rosh Hayeshiva of the Bais Hamedrash L’Wizards”²⁴ The happy commotion over HTC’s new rabbinic leader was considerable, a point that the students made sure to satirize. Their message was one of dutiful appreciation, but also a playful call, in their minds anyway, to gain a better handle on perspective.

Then, as always, Purim ended and matters returned to normal. The administration and faculty resumed their prominent places within and without the institution while the students reclaimed their seats as well as their senses. Just as in Europe, the Purim shpiel phenomenon suited yeshivot in Chicago and elsewhere in the United States. It served as a healthy dose of subversive wit and cautious criticism. Most important, its effectiveness was a credit to the students’ pledge to halt the humor after Purim and the school’s promise to schedule another shpiel for the following year. ❖



HTC “Wizard of Odd” Purim shpiel, 1966. Hebrew Theological College Archives.

I offer my warmest thanks to Shulamith Z. Berger, Menachem Butler, Rabbi Etan Ehrenfeld, Rabbi Daniel Feldman, Moshe Goldish, Rabbi Jerold Isenberg, Helen Krim, Yosef “Yogi” Rimel, Rabbi Alan Rosenbaum, and Rabbi Yehoshua Wechsler for their help in identifying important sources for this essay.

¹ Mordecai Waxman, “The Old-Fashioned Purim Spiel,” *Jewish Advocate* (March 22, 1940): 13.

² See Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), 245.

³ “Annual Purim Shpiel Spoofs Yeshiva Life,” *Hebrew Theological College News* 1 (March 1979): 7.

⁴ In fact, the Purim shpiel is a centuries-old custom. On this, see Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael*, vol. VI (Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 1998), 201-202.

⁵ See Shaul Stampfer, *Lithuanian Yeshivas of the Nineteenth Century: Creating a Tradition of Learning* (Oxford: Littman, 2012), 150-53.

⁶ Yaakov Lifshitz, *Zikhron Yaakov*, vol. III (Kaunas, 1930), 153

⁷ See Noson Kamenetsky, *Making of a Godol: A Study of Episodes in the Lives of Great Torah Personalities* (Jerusalem: Hamesorah, 2002), 1057-64; and Mordechai Leib Deutch, *Ish Halakhah* (Brooklyn, 2015), 84-85.

⁸ See M. Eisenshtat, “Purim-Rav,” *Ha-Tzefirah* (March 19, 1916): 2.

⁹ A. Ben-Ezra, “Malkhei Purim,” *Ha-Do’ar* (March 20, 1959): 344.

¹⁰ “Salami-Satiated Students Get Purim Torah, Grammen,” *The Commentator* (March 12, 1950): 2.

¹¹ See Daniel Z. Feldman, “The Lomdus of Laughter: Toward a Jewish Ethic of Humor,” in *Developing a Jewish Perspective on Culture*, ed. Yehuda Sarna (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2014), 419. For prominent and fierce opposition to this tradition within Torah Vodaath, see Avraham Pam, *Atarah Le-Melekh*

(Brooklyn, 1993), 193-94.

¹² See, for example, “HUC Purim Play 1939,” SC-4772, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH.

¹³ See “Purim Materials & Sermons,” Box 6, Folder 16, MS-149, University at Buffalo, State University of New York, Buffalo, NY.

¹⁴ See “Minstrel Show,” *Prakim* 6 (February 1954): 13-27.

¹⁵ “University of Pennsylvania,” *Jewish Exponent* (March 2, 1979): 8.

¹⁶ “Plan Purim Shpiel for ZOC Seudah,” *The Sentinel* (March 14, 1968): 20.

¹⁷ See Samuel J. Fox, “What is a ‘Purim Rabbi’ and How did Hamantashen Really Get Their Name?,” *The Sentinel* (February 17, 1969): 30.

¹⁸ “HTC Purim Spiel Sun.,” *The Sentinel* (March 3, 1966): 26.

¹⁹ See Aniko Bodroghkozy, *Sixties Television and the Youth Rebellion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 98-122.

²⁰ See David E. Kaufman, *Jewhooping in the Sixties: American Celebrity and Jewish Identity* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2012), 104.

²¹ “How to Succeed in the Yeshiva Without Really Trying,” HTC Purim Spiel, 1965, 4, Hebrew Theological College Archives, Skokie, IL.

²² “North Side Story,” HTC Purim Shpiel, 1963, 15, Hebrew Theological College Archives, Skokie, IL.

“Bye Bye Beardie,” HTC Purim Shpiel, 1964, 4, Hebrew Theological College Archives, Skokie, IL.

“The Wizard of Odd,” HTC Purim Shpiel, 1966, 20, Hebrew Theological College Archives, Skokie, IL.

RABBI DR. ZEV ELEFF is Chief Academic Officer of Hebrew Theological College and a scholar of American Jewish history. He is a Board member of the CJHS.

Rabbi Mendel

BY RICHARD REEDER

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Rabbi Mendel, a man in his mid-forties with unforgettable cerulean blue eyes, opened the small black trunk and took out three stick puppets. The evil Haman was wearing a tiny, felt three-cornered hat affixed to his head. Brave Mordecai looked august in a diminutive corduroy robe. Beautiful Queen Esther looked stunning, with orange hair made with knitting yarn, topped by a cardboard diadem.

Our Hebrew class Purim party was about to begin. Rabbi Mendel skillfully manipulated the stick puppets as he related to us the Purim story in his heavily Yiddish-inflected English. We all cheered and rattled our groggers in glee when Mordecai knocked down Haman and dragged him across Rabbi Mendel's desk to the toy gallows to be hanged. Good was once again triumphing over evil in a story retold by Jews for more than two thousand years.



Rabbi Mendel had stared evil straight in the eye a few years before, in Poland. The Nazis spared him from immediate execution because he was a master tailor, and they needed him to make uniforms for the German Army. He survived Auschwitz because of his needle skills, but his wife, two daughters, and parents were all put to death in the gas chambers there. Underneath his cot in the concentration camp barracks he hid the Purim sticks that he had made for his daughters in better times.

After Auschwitz was liberated, Rabbi Mendel lived in a displaced persons' camp in Germany where he taught tailoring at an ORT school. He came to Chicago in 1949, sponsored by a second cousin. He got a job as a tailor in a men's clothing store on Roosevelt Road, and to make a little extra money, he was hired by Congregation Bnei Ruven to teach Hebrew to young Jewish boys twice a week after their public school courses.

Bnei Ruven was an Orthodox Lubavitcher shul, and although no one in our family was observant, this synagogue at 13th and Kedvale was the only one left to serve the dwindling Lawndale Jewish community. My parents wanted me to have a sound foundation in Judaism and the Hebrew language, so I was enrolled in the Hebrew school at Bnei Ruven. Rabbi Mendel was my teacher, and although he was not officially a rabbi, he was steeped in the knowledge of Torah and Talmud. Everyone called him Rabbi Mendel out of respect.

I enjoyed Rabbi Mendel's class and learned much from him, but two months after the Purim party, in May 1955, my family moved to West Rogers Park. I often thought fondly about Rabbi Mendel and his puppets, especially at Purim time.

Many years later, in 1978, I was attending a book-signing of Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Shosha* at the old Barbara's Bookstore on Clark Street, when I glanced at a man of perhaps seventy who looked somewhat familiar. As I approached him, I knew by those cerulean eyes that it was Rabbi Mendel. He remembered me, and after the book-signing we went out for a cup of coffee. He told me his life story, inspired by the storytelling of his literary hero, Singer, with whom he had been conversing animatedly in Yiddish earlier that evening. I learned that Rabbi Mendel now had a nice career as a tailor with one of the major downtown department stores. He had remarried and had a son and daughter, both of whom, as children, delighted each Purim in watching their father perform his stick puppet show. ❖

RICHARD REEDER is the facilitator of the Cliff Dwellers book club. He teaches courses on Chicago authors at the Oakton Community College Emeritus Program. The illustration, from *Chicago Sketches*, is by **LEONID OSSENY**.

INQUIRIES AND COMMENTS

Do you have information about the Ben Aronin pageant at the Chicago Stadium in April 1955?

I'm currently working on an American Jewish pageantry project, and I'm on the hunt for any materials I can find related to Ben Aronin's pageant, "A Call to Freedom," performed in April 1955 at the Stadium, as part of the Jewish Tercentenary celebration (and produced by Isaac Van Grove). Might the Chicago Jewish History Society have any articles pertaining to that production? Any assistance would be greatly appreciated!

Rachel Merrill Moss
Interdisciplinary PhD in Theatre and Drama
Northwestern University
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Do you have information about a Masonic Lodge: Ancient Craft Lodge No. 907 AF and AM?

This Masonic Lodge must have been on the South Side, probably in Hyde Park. My father was an active member prior to moving to Highland Park. I think he then dropped all affiliation with the Masons, probably because the lodge was too far away, and I assume, the lodge [in Highland Park] was or is all Christian. The one I seek was definitely a Jewish lodge. Have you any information on it? Dad [Frederic Greenebaum] was a member in the 1920s and a Master Mason in 1922.

Jim Greenebaum, Northbrook, IL
sunnyside55@juno.com

The South Side Masonic Temple, 6400 South Green Street (architect, Clarence Hatzfeld, 1921), still stands, but is abandoned. Perhaps Jim's father's lodge met there.

More Jewish Connections to Chicago Sports

Following Dr. Preston Wolin's talk at the CJHS open meeting on November 8, 2015, our readers submitted other memorable names. Basketball: Mickey Rottner (Tuley High 1936, Loyola University, and Chicago's pre-NBA pro teams); Irv Bemoras (Marshall High city champs 1948, Fighting Illini Big Ten champs 1951-52); Isadore "Spin" Salario (coach of Marshall's 1958 Illinois state champions, and later, coach at NEIU).

The fame of Ira Berkow (Sullivan High 1957) rests on his career as an award-winning sports reporter and columnist for the *New York Times* from 1981 to 2007. He is the author of 18 books, including *Maxwell Street: Life in a Bazaar*. In 2006, Ira Berkow was inducted into the International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame.

Who was Chicago's first Jewish alderman?

Was Burton Natarus the first Jewish alderman in Chicago (knowing his election to the City Council came two years before Bernard Stone)?

Eric Hopp, Skokie, IL
erichopp66@gmail.com

CJHS President Edward H. Mazur replies: Over the years many Jews, Republicans and Democrats, have been elected to terms in the Chicago City Council. The first was Henry Greenebaum (6th Ward) in 1856. Currently, there are two Jewish aldermen in the City Council and both of them are women—Michele Smith of the 43rd Ward (Lincoln Park) and Debra Silverstein of the 50th Ward (West Rogers Park).

Following are the names of some others who served.

Jacob Arvey	Julius Jonas
Abe Ballenberg	Louis London
Lawrence Bloom	Martin Oberman
Leon Despres	Jacob Rosenberg
Sidney Deutsch	Thomas S. Rosenberg
Milton J. Foreman	Seymour Simon
Leonard Grossman	William Singer
David Horner	Jack Sperling

Correction to our text on "Concordia Guards"

I found your website while researching Company C of the 82nd Illinois Infantry, the "Concordia Guards." I was interested to note that you referred to it as the "only all-Jewish unit to fight in the Civil War." Unfortunately, this is inaccurate. While Company C was mostly Jewish, and recruited from the Jewish community in Chicago, there were some non-Jewish members as well. I was told by an expert on the 82nd that some non-Jews were added to the roster to bring the unit up to full force.

My great-grandfather, Joseph A. Hagemann, was a Roman Catholic who served with Company C. I imagine he was glad to serve in a non-Protestant unit, since I understand that anti-Catholic prejudice was rampant in the 82nd Illinois (it is said that Colonel Heckert, the commander, hated Catholics). Joseph A. Hagemann remained with Company C from its initial muster in 1862 until it was disbanded in June, 1865.

Therese Hagemann Green, Mobile, AL
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Thank you. We will correct the text.

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Continued from Page 2

Currently the external appearance of the building is largely unchanged from the way it appeared in June 1926 at the building's dedication. Though the metal Star of David and menorahs that stood atop the building are missing, those beautiful Jewish symbols are still present, carved in the stone facade.

The City of Chicago is considering awarding landmark status to the building. We strongly support such a move by Mayor Emanuel and his administration. We have witnessed the destruction of too many of the structures that comprised Jewish Lawndale as well as its African American heritage. We must preserve historical structures and artifacts so that they can be used to illuminate the future.

TIKKUN OLAM—REPAIRING THE WORLD

Recently I had three experiences that proved to be personal mitzvahs for my family and myself.

First, in January I conducted a workshop for the Illinois Women's Institute for Leadership (IWIL), an organization led by Loretta Durbin, the wife of U.S. Senator Richard Durbin, and Executive Director Gillian Rosenberg Armour. IWIL was founded after discussions at the 2000 Democratic National Convention. In 2002 IWIL graduated the first class of fellows. Thereafter, each year, a fellowship of ten to fifteen women, selected through a competitive process, has participated in a series of seminars, workshops, and programs designed to prepare and propel them to take on elected and appointed positions.

For the last decade IWIL has invited me to direct an intense weekend of self-assessment and team building exercises and sessions for the participants. The women are intelligent, curious, and highly motivated. Alumnae include a U.S. congresswoman, members of the judiciary, state senators and representatives, county board members, mayors of cities and towns (including Highland Park, Illinois), and directors of municipal, county, and state agencies. I refer to myself as the "male pinata" for IWIL.

Although IWIL has a Democratic Party orientation, there is a Republican counterpart, the Lincoln Fellows. Both groups have asked for my participation. I see my involvement as a form of Tikkun Olam.

The second mitzvah was reconnecting with long estranged family members. My wife Myrna and I have been married for over fifty years (and that is definitely a

blessing). For almost forty years we had not seen or spoken to our nephews Alan and Scottie Mazur, the children of my late brother, until recently when our daughter, Amanda, informed me that she had established contact with her cousins via Facebook. Then, through emails, Skype, and even a land line telephone, a new chapter in our relationship began.

Originally a resident of Wheeling, Alan now lives in Clearwater, Florida, where he manages a BMW dealership. He was recently married, and we had the pleasure of meeting his wife, Emery. Alan is a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps, and he served in both Iraq and Afghanistan. He enlisted to serve his country. My late father left his native Bialystok partially to avoid service in the Polish military. Alan's brother, Scottie, is a renowned chef and operates a catering service on a mountaintop in Kittredge, Colorado.

In Bradenton, Florida, Myrna and I attended the bar mitzvah of Ben Hadesman, a relative on Myrna's side of our family. This branch of Myrna's family started out in Chicago at 15th and Tripp, relocated to Detroit and its environs, and now resides in Florida. We attended Friday evening and Saturday morning services at Temple Beth El, in which the Jews share space with various Christian denominations. This Reform congregation is rather small in size and comprised primarily of senior citizens who are former residents of northern states and several foreign countries. The temple has no Hebrew school, but for new congregants with young children they offer instruction in Jewish traditions, Hebrew language, and bar and bat mitzvah preparation. A member of the congregation, a retired cantor from the Philadelphia area in his 80's, who can chant with those many years younger, serves as the moreh. Since there are so few young people in the congregation, the members kvell over the involvement of young people who are continuing our Jewish traditions. The services, the haftorah, the traditional speech, and the family gathering made for a most memorable weekend.

I have two other nephews: Myles Hankin, an attorney, a Harvard Law School graduate, who practices in Thailand, Singapore, and Ulan Bator, Mongolia. I often wonder if there is a minyan in Mongolia and if services are held in a traditional local dwelling, a yurt? Morgan Hankin, also an attorney and also a Harvard Law graduate, is the chief clerk in the United States District Court of Eastern Louisiana, in New Orleans.

As with many Jewish mishpochas, my relatives can be found in places far and near, but with today's technology (and the Tikkun Olam of daughter Amanda) even great emotional distances can be crossed.

Finally, there is my mother's mitzvah. I am an opera buff and longtime ticket holder at Chicago's Lyric Opera. This I owe to my mother, who, every Saturday afternoon, would tune the family's Philco radio to the Metropolitan Opera broadcast, and over reheated chicken soup and boiled chicken, we would listen to the dulcet tones of announcer Milton Cross and the magnificent operatic voices. Only after the curtain fell was I allowed to put on my play clothes and go to the Lafayette Grammar School lot or to Humboldt Park to participate in seasonal sports. In those days I imagined that *all* my friends who attended the Yavneh Talmud Torah at Hirsch and Rockwell Streets returned from Saturday morning services to lunch with the opera.

This February I attended the Lyric's production of Giuseppe Verdi's *Nabucco* (Nebuchadnezzar). The opera, first performed at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan on March 9, 1842, is set in 586 BCE, and takes place in Jerusalem and Babylon. *Nabucco* made Verdi an international star before the age of 30, largely because of the noble Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves. It was new to opera to have the chorus do more than set the scene. When the chorus sang "Va, pensiero," a powerful expression of longing for their lost homeland, based on Psalm 137, the crowds went wild. "Va, pensiero" quickly became the anthem for the Risorgimento political movement that culminated in the unification of Italy from what had been a collection of city states and fiefdoms.

Though critics have described *Nabucco* as a biblically-inspired potboiler—the main story concerns struggles over power and love—Verdi's treatment of Nebuchadnezzar and the Hebrews is always intriguing, moving, and impactful.

At a World Trade Center Benefit at the Metropolitan Opera House on September 22, 2001, the Metropolitan Opera Chorus sang "Va, pensiero" on a bare stage in front of a huge American flag. There were solemn patriotic performances of the chorus by other opera companies in the weeks following the attacks.

Nabucco was memorably performed at Lyric Opera of Chicago on October 4, 1963, the opening night of the season. The audience found a rose pinned to every theater seat. The performance was dedicated to the memory of the great Jewish soprano Rosa Raisa who had died on September 28, and the house was decorated with some 3,700 roses. She was born Raisa Burchstein in Bialystok, Poland on May 23, 1893. Even at a young age her voice attracted attention, and she traveled through Poland as a child singer. She fled the Bialystok pogroms of 1907 to settle in Italy where her operatic studies and career began. Raisa became a mainstay of opera in Chicago, singing *Aida* at the opening night of the Civic Opera House. She was called "undzer reyzele" (our Rosie) by her Yiddish-speaking devotees. There is an article about her in the Spring 1999 issue of *CJH*.

The audience always demands and is given an encore of "Va, pensiero" that can become a sing-along. Ever since the third grade at Lafayette Grammar School when Mrs. Kimball would ask me and several of my friends to "just mouth the words" to the songs we were taught, I take delight in "singing" in my off-key fashion the words that mean so much to Jews, to Italians, and freedom-loving peoples: "Go, thought, on wings of gold; Go settle upon the slopes and hills... Oh, my country so beautiful and lost! Oh memories, so dear and with despair." ❖

UPCOMING CJHS OPEN MEETINGS

Save the Dates!

Rabbi Dr. Zev Eleff

*Chief Academic Officer of HTC
and a Scholar of American Jewish History*

"A Realistic Rendezvous?"

***Chicago's Rabbi Oscar Fasman
and New York Orthodox Judaism"***

Sunday, May 22, 2 p.m.

**Hebrew Theological College
7135 North Carpenter Road, Skokie**

***"Von Steuben High School:
The Jewish Glory Years"***

Moderator: Prof. Paul Green (VS '60)

*Director of the Institute for Politics and Arthur Rubloff
Professor of Policy Studies at Roosevelt University*

Participation by Alumni

Sunday, August 28, 2 p.m.

(venue to be announced)

Look to the rock from which you were born
הביטו אל-צור חצבתכם



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Our History and Mission

The Chicago Jewish Historical Society was founded in 1977, and is in part an outgrowth of local Jewish participation in the United States Bicentennial Celebration of 1976 at an exhibition mounted at the Museum of Science and Industry by the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago and the American Jewish Congress. Two years after celebrating our “double *chai*,” the Society’s

Tribute Cards for Celebrations or Memorials The card design features the Society’s handsome logo. Inside, our mission statement and space for your personal message. Pack of five cards & envelopes \$18.00. Individual cards can be mailed for you from our office at \$5.00 per card, postage included. Mail your order and check to the CJHS office, 610 South Michigan Avenue, Room 803. Chicago IL 60605-1901. You may also order online at our website.

Visit our website — www.chicagojewishhistory.org

Pay your membership dues online via PayPal or credit card, or use the printable membership application.

Inquiries: info@chicagojewishhistory.org

All issues of our Society periodical from 1977 to the present have been digitized and posted on our website in pdf format. Simply click on “Publications” and scroll down through the years. There is an Index to the issues from 1977 to 2012.

ABOUT THE SOCIETY

unique mission continues to be the discovery, collection, and dissemination of information about the Jewish experience in the Chicago area through publications, open meetings, tours, and outreach to youth. The Society does not maintain its own archives, but seeks out written, spoken, and photographic records and artifacts, and responsibly arranges for their donation to Jewish archives.

Membership in the Society is open to all interested persons and organizations, and includes:

- A subscription to *Chicago Jewish History*.
- Free admission to Society public programs. General admission is \$10 per person.
- Discounts on Society tours.
- 10% discount on purchases at the elegant Spertus Shop.
- Membership runs on a calendar year, from January through December. New members joining after July 1st are given an initial membership through December of the following year.

Life Membership	\$1,000
Annual Dues	
Historian	500
Scholar	250
Sponsor	100
Patron	65
Member	40
Student (with i.d.)	10



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