



CHICAGO JEWISH HISTORY

“In literature, we find the human experience in all its complexity and beauty”
— Bernard Malamud

Under Stress and Strain: Oak Park’s Jewish Community 1916-1945

By Michael Zmora

The history of the Jewish community of Oak Park begins with the story of the founding of the West Suburban Jewish Community Center (the “Center”).¹ In the 1930s and 40s, the Center functioned as a linchpin for this Jewish community, providing a community hall, a clubhouse, a religious school, and a synagogue, all in the space of a small, converted dance studio. The story cannot be told, however, without the painful history of the pervasive antisemitism of the Center’s Gentile neighbors. Part I of this two-part series recounts the founding of the congregation through its failed attempts to build a permanent synagogue in 1940 and 1941. Oak Park’s leaders repeatedly thwarted the Center’s efforts to build a house of worship in the village while a strain of virulent antisemitism raged in the years leading to America’s entry into World War II.



Downtown Oak Park, circa late 1930s. Courtesy of Oak Park River Forest History Museum

After World War I, Oak Park experienced rapid growth as a suburb, expanding from 39,000 in 1920 to 64,000 in 1930. The Jewish community that flocked to there was middle-class, drawn from small businessmen, including furriers, dry cleaners, and jewelers, as well as a professional class of dentists, doctors, and lawyers. Many moved from Chicago’s more heavily concentrated Jewish neighborhoods on its West Side. Geographically, Oak Park was the first suburb directly west of Chicago. Philosophically, it was the polar opposite of its big city neighbor. Dubbed the “biggest village in the world” by its boosters, its politics were decidedly Republican, albeit tempered with progressivism. Oak Park became a dry town in 1871, 50 years before Prohibition. The village strictly enforced Sunday Blue Laws and would later employ its own local movie censor.²

The first organized Jewish congregation of Oak Park dates to 1916, when 40 to 60 families lived there. A group of them formed the Hosea Community Center which held High Holidays services in local rented halls, led by visiting Reform clergy. By 1921, Hosea hosted a 40-person religious school that also performed plays at Chanukah celebrations and put on Purim parties. The renowned Joseph Stoltz from Temple Isaiah served as Hosea’s rabbi in 1921. However, by 1927, Hosea, competing for members with Reform and Conservative congregations in West Garfield Park and Austin, shuttered.³ While Hosea Community Center was finished, its Sisterhood group survived, renamed the West Suburban Jewish Women’s Club. It helped form the West Suburban Sunday School in 1927. The Sunday School provided instruction under the “most modern method of education,”⁴ including classes in Jewish history, customs, ceremonies, current events, and music. Meeting in a Madison Avenue storefront, the school prepared boys for Bar Mitzvot and “children [were] organized in clubs so that the school function[ed] for them in the nature of a community center.”⁵

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CO-PRESIDENT'S COLUMN



Dr. Rachelle Gold

Autumn is a propitious time to think about Jews and books, in both symbolic and concrete terms. We just observed the Jewish High Holidays, when we asked to be inscribed and sealed for the good in the “Book of Life.” This fall issue of *Chicago Jewish History* is annually devoted to books, and November is Jewish Book month. I want to share with you my recent reflections and discoveries about Jewish books.

My latest thoughts emerged from my Jewish study sessions with my friend Enid Myers. For several years, we have met weekly to explore a range of Jewish texts and topics. Our present interest is the place of Midrashic writings in the corpus of Jewish religious and rabbinic works. (According to descriptions on Sefaria, the online library of Jewish texts, Midrash is “a genre of Jewish literature that interprets and elaborates upon biblical texts.” Most Midrashim were composed between 200 BCE and 500 CE; some, as late as 1300. The written rabbinic collections date from the 3rd century.)

There is a vast literature about Midrash. For our study, we followed the book recommendation of CJHS board member Rabbi Moshe Simkovich, a master Jewish educator and font of Jewish knowledge. Enid and I are reading “*Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature*” (Harvard University, 1991) by David Stern, Professor of Classical and Modern Jewish and Hebrew Literature and Professor of Comparative Literature at Harvard University.

An added incentive for reading Stern’s book is that he is a native Chicagoan and a graduate of the Chicago Jewish Academy (now the Ida Crown Jewish Academy). What’s more, I was excited to discover that his interests extend to “History of the book, with special interest in the Jewish book...from antiquity to the present day” (from his Harvard University online bio). Then, I found a video he produced, “A Tour of the Jewish Book” (2011, University of Pennsylvania Library), tracing Jewish written texts from early manuscripts to the present day. (I urge you to take his illuminating and enjoyable video tour, available for free on YouTube).

Stern asks the question, “What is a Jewish book?” For the purpose of his tour, his answer is “any book written in Hebrew or in one of the Jewish languages written in the Hebrew script.” For many centuries, this meant the Tanach (the Hebrew acronym for the Torah, Prophets, and Writings), Talmud, rabbinic discourses, prayers, and other religious texts (such as Passover haggadot). In later centuries, Jewish books encompassed poetry, philosophy, science, and other subjects.

Do Jewish books have a distinct look? Stern stated that “Jewish books mirror books produced by the host culture where Jews lived in the diaspora throughout the world.” He explained this further, as he gave us up-close views of the precious items (shown on site in various rare book collections in Philadelphia). Stern demonstrated that the earliest writings were not books as we know them today, but manuscripts (hand writing) on sheets of parchment or rolled into scrolls (the Hebrew word *sefer* means “book,” but a *Sefer Torah* meant, and still means, a scroll of the Torah). Later, a handwritten book (a “codex”) was created by folding and sewing together many sheets to form leaves, or pages, and binding them.

The invention of printing in 1455 transformed the world of Jewish books, as it did more generally. Jewish publishing houses started up in the early years of printing, and following the expulsion of Jews from Spain, they spread to the countries of Jewish migration. Printed books produced with metal type before 1500 are called “incunabula” (Latin for cradle) or “incunables” (in English). These earliest printed books are greatly valued by book collectors and historians of the book.

Stern’s Jewish book tour led me to think about rare book collectors and collections here in Chicago. What first came to mind was the Caxton Club, a unique 129-year-old organization “... of people united by the love of books in all their forms... interested in the study and promotion of the arts and technologies pertaining to the production, distribution, and reception of handwritten and printed books and related textual objects...” (caxtonclub.org).



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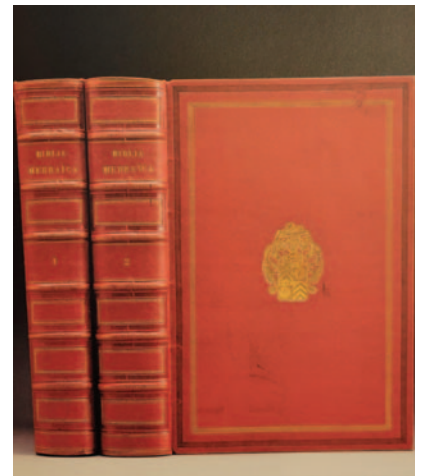
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The Caxton Club has shared its resources with CJHS. We have co-sponsored programs, with the help of CJHS member and former Caxton Club president Jackie Vossler. (Go to our website chicagojewishhistory.org to view the video of the January 2022 presentation by Stephen Durschlag of his magnificent private Haggadah collection, the largest in the world.)

Our connection to the Caxton Club has been a personal delight as well. Ms. Vossler sent me a gift of "The Library of Abel E. Berland, Volume II" (Christie's, 2001). Berland (1915–2010), a prominent member of the Caxton Club, was a lawyer, business executive, community leader, strongly committed Jew – and one of the world's greatest collectors. (It so happens that Berland grew up on Chicago's West Side and was an acquaintance of my mother Harriet in their young adulthood). Berland's prized collection was wide-ranging in age and subject – from Shakespeare (the finest copy in private hands of the 1623 edition of the Four Folios), whose writing he revered second only to the Bible, to the Bible itself. Pictured here (from page 223) is "*BIBLIA HERBRAICA (Biblia Rabbinnica-Mikra'ot Gedolot)*," printed by Daniel Bomberg in Venice, 1524–1525; first edition of the Massoretic Bible edited by Jacob ben Hayyim; and the second edition of Bomberg's Rabbinic Bible. As noted in the catalog, and by Stern in his book tour, this Bomberg edition became the standard for all editions of this work to the present day. I learned the surprising history that Bomberg was a Christian who came from Antwerp to Venice to set up what Stern said was "the most important single publishing house in the history of Jewish books."



The *BIBLIA HEBRAICA*, from the collection of Abel E. Berland. Image courtesy of Bridgeman Images

In institutions around the world, there are major collections of historic Judaica manuscripts and books, with many holdings that are digitized and accessible online. I will mention just a few of these collections. One of the largest and most important is at the National Library of Israel, in Jerusalem (nli.org.il/en/discover/judaism/jewish-people-treasures). In New York, there are significant collections at the Jewish Theological Seminary (www.jtsa.edu/library-special-collections/) and in the Dorot Jewish Division of the New York Public Library (nypl.org/locations/schwarzman/jewish-division). Many Philadelphia libraries, visited in Stern's tour, including the Free Library of Philadelphia, have special collections.

In Chicago, we are fortunate to have the resources of the University of Chicago Library (lib.uchicago.edu/src/rarebooks/) and the Newberry Library (newberry.org/collection). In the 2000s, our board member and former president Dr. Adele Hast z"l, a Newberry Scholar in Residence, arranged for Society board members to attend a private viewing of selected historical Judaica manuscripts and books at the Newberry. It was an awesome and unforgettable experience.

As I study Jewish texts and traditions, I realize that there is so much more to know, and I feel more appreciation for the great minds and leaders of the past. This awareness is one of the privileges and challenges of belonging to the Jewish people.

THE BOOK SECTION

“The only way to truly understand someone is to listen to their story.”

—Tillie Olsen

Books by CJHS Members and Friends

The Midwestern Native Garden: Native Alternatives to Nonnative Flowers and Plants, an Illustrated Guide. By Charlotte Adelman and Bernard L. Schwartz. Ohio University Press/Swallow Press, 2001.

Prairie Directory of North America: U.S. & Canada.

By Charlotte Adelman and Bernard L. Schwartz. Lawndale Enterprises, 2002.

The City in a Garden: A History of Chicago's Parks, Second Edition. By Julia S. Bachrach. The University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Inspired by Nature: The Garfield Park Conservatory and Chicago's West Side. By Julia S. Bachrach and Jo Ann Nathan. University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Downtown Naperville. By Jodi Hirsch Blackman. Arcadia Publishing, 2009.

This Used to Be Chicago. By Jodi Hirsch Blackman. Reedy Press, 2017.

The Chicago Jewish Source Book. By Rachel Heimovics Braun. Follette Publishers, 1980.

The Florida Jewish Heritage Trail. Co-authored by Rachel Heimovics Braun. State of Florida, 1990.

Chicago's Jewish West Side. By Irving Cutler. Arcadia Publishing, 2009.

The Jews of Chicago: From Shtetl to Suburb. By Irving Cutler. University of Illinois Press, 1996.

Synagogues of Chicago. Edited by Irving Cutler, Norman D. Schwartz, and Sidney Sorkin. Project supervised by Clare Greenberg, 1991.

The Argentine Right: Its History and Intellectual Origins, 1910 to the Present. Co-edited by Sandra McGee Deutsch. Scholarly Presses, 1993.

Counterrevolution in Argentina, 1900–1932: The Argentine Patriotic League. By Sandra McGee Deutsch. University of Nebraska Press, 1986.

Crossing Borders, Claiming a Nation: A History of Argentine Jewish Women, 1880–1955. By Sandra McGee Deutsch. Duke University Press, 2010.

Gendering Antifascism: Women's Activism in Argentina and the World, 1918–1947. By Sandra McGee Deutsch. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023.

Las Derechas: The Extreme Right in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, 1890–1939. By Sandra McGee Deutsch. Stanford University Press, 1999.

Women of the Right: Comparisons and Interplay Across Borders. Co-edited by Sandra McGee Deutsch. Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012.

Clear It with Sid! Sidney R. Yates and Fifty Years of Presidents, Pragmatism, and Public Service. By Michael C. Dorf and George Van Dusen. University of Illinois Press, 2019.

Creating Chicago's North Shore: A Suburban History. By Michael H. Ebner. University of Chicago Press, 1988.

The Ma and Pa Story: A Novel. By Anne H. Edwards. Amazon, 2019.

Remembering Chicago's Jews. By James Finn. Creative Space, 2015.

Out of Chaos: Hidden Children Remember the Holocaust. Edited by Elaine Fox. Preface by Phyllis Lassner. Northwestern University Press, 2013.

Corporate War: Poison Pills and Golden Parachutes. A Novel. By Werner L. Frank. Amazon, 2010.

The Curse of Gurs: Way Station to Auschwitz. By Werner L. Frank. Amazon, 2012.

Judenhaus: Small Ghetto at Grosse Merzelstrasse 7. By Werner L. Frank. Amazon, 2016.

Legacy: The Saga of a German–Jewish Family Across Time and Circumstance. By Werner L. Frank. Avoteynu Foundation, 2003.

A Feathered River Across the Sky: The Passenger Pigeon's Flight to Extinction. By Joel Greenberg. Bloomsbury USA, 2014.

A Natural History of the Chicago Region. By Joel Greenberg. University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Of Prairie, Woods, & Water: Two Centuries of Chicago Nature Writing. Edited by Joel Greenberg. University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Tables Turned on Them. By Michael Greenberg. Page Publishing, 2019.

Red Star, Blue Star: The Lives and Times of Jewish Students in Communist Hungary, 1948–1956. By Andrew Handler and Susan V. Meschel. 1997.

Young People Speak: Surviving the Holocaust in Hungary. Andrew Handler and Susan V. Meschel. 1993.

Women Building Chicago, 1790–1990. Edited by Adele Hast and Rima Lunin Schultz. Indiana University Press, 2001.

The Alexandria Letter. A Novel. By George Honig. Synergy Books, 2010.

Avondale and Chicago's Polish Village. By Jacob Kaplan et al. Arcadia Publishing, 2014.

Logan Square. By Jacob Kaplan et al. Arcadia Publishing, 2018.

A Walk to Shul: Chicago Synagogues of Lawndale and Stops Along the Way. By Bea Kraus and Norman D. Schwartz. Chicago Jewish Historical Society, 2003.

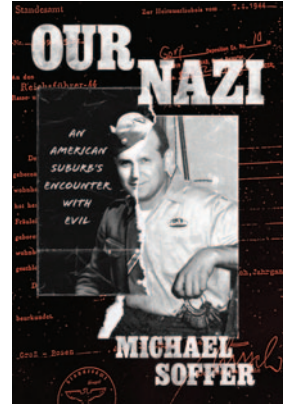
- The Koshers Capones: A History of Chicago's Jewish Gangsters.** By Joe Kraus. Cornell University Press, 2019.
- Chicago's Only Castle: The History of Givins' Irish Castle and Its Keepers.** By Errol Magidson. Magidson LLC, 2017.
- Minyans for a Prairie City: The Politics of Chicago Jewry 1850–1914.** By Edward H. Mazur. Garland Publishing, 1990.
- Transplanted Lives: The Adventures of Young Jewish Immigrants from Post-Fascist and Communist Hungary to the Free World Following the 1956 Uprising.** By Susan V. Meschel and Peter Tarjan. CreateSpace, 2016.
- East Lakeview.** By Matt Nickerson. Arcadia Publishing, 2017.
- Lakeview.** By Matt Nickerson. Arcadia Publishing, 2014.
- Doors of Redemption: The Forgotten Synagogues of Chicago and Other Communal Buildings.** Photographed and edited by Robert A. Packer. Booksurge, 2006.
- Chicago's Forgotten Synagogues.** By Robert A. Packer. Arcadia Publishing, 2007.
- 1001 Train Rides in Chicago.** By Richard Reeder. Eckhartz Press, 2018.
- Chicago Sketches.** By Richard Reeder. AMIKA Press, 2012.
- The Curious Odyssey of Rudolph Bloom.** By Richard Reeder. Propertius Press, 2022.
- Monuments Man: The Mission to Save Vermeers, Rembrandts, and Da Vincis from the Nazis' Grasp.** By Anne Rorimer (co-author). Rizzoli, 2022.
- New Art in the 60s and 70s: Redefining Reality.** By Anne Rorimer. Thames & Hudson, 2004.
- America at the Fair: Chicago's 1893 Columbian Exposition.** By Chaim Rosenberg. Arcadia, 2008.
- Child Labor in America: A History.** By Chaim Rosenberg. McFarland, 2013.
- Goods for Sale: Products and Advertising in the Massachusetts Industrial Age.** By Chaim Rosenberg. University of Massachusetts Press, 2007.
- The Great Workshop. Boston's Victorian Age.** By Chaim Rosenberg. Arcadia Publishing, 2004.
- John Lowell Jr. and His Institute: The Power of Knowledge.** By Chaim Rosenberg. Lexington Books, 2021.
- The International Harvester Company: A History of the Founding Families and Their Machines.** By Chaim Rosenberg. McFarland, 2019.
- The Life and Times of Francis Cabot Lowell, 1775–1817.** By Chaim Rosenberg. Lexington Books, 2011.
- Losing America, Conquering India: Lord Cornwallis and the Remaking of the British Empire.** By Chaim Rosenberg. McFarland & Company, 2017.
- The Loyalist Conscience: Principled Opposition to the American Revolution.** By Chaim Rosenberg. McFarland, 2018.
- Shields of David: A History of Jewish Servicemen in the Armed Forces.** By Chaim Rosenberg. Wicked Son, 2022.
- Yankee Colonies Across America: Cities Upon the Hill.** By Chaim Rosenberg. Lexington Books, 2015.
- The Fate of Holocaust Memories: Transmission and Family Dialogues,** By Chaya Roth, with the voices of Hannah Diller and Gitta Fajerstein. Amazon Kindle, 2013.
- An Accidental Anarchist: How the Killing of a Humble Jewish Immigrant by Chicago's Chief of Police Exposed the Conflict Between Law & Order and Civil Rights in Early 20th Century America.** By Walter Roth and Joe Kraus. Academy Chicago Publishers, 1998.
- Avengers and Defenders: Glimpses of Chicago's Jewish Past.** By Walter Roth. Academy Chicago Publishers, 2008.
- Looking Backward: True Stories from Chicago's Jewish Past.** By Walter Roth. Academy Chicago Publishers, 2002.
- She Said What? (A Life on the Air).** By Turi Ryder. Tortoise Books, 2019.
- Memories of Growing Up in Chicago: Recalling Life in the 20th Century.** By Neal Samors. Chicago Books Press, 2024.
- Mollie's War: The Letters of a World War II WAC in Europe.** By Mollie Weinstein Schaffer and Cyndee Schaffer. McFarland Publishing, 2010.
- A Bicentennial Commemoration of the Prairie State: Readings from the Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society.** Edited by David W. Scott. Foreword by Leah Joy Axelrod. Southern Illinois University Press, 2018.
- African Americans in Glencoe: The Little Migration.** By Robert A. Sideman. The History Press, 2009.
- Discovering Second Temple Jerusalem: The Scriptures and Stories That Shaped Early Judaism.** By Malka Z. Simkovich. Jewish Publication Society, 2018.
- The Making of Jewish Universalism: From Exile to Alexandria.** By Malka Z. Simkovich. Lexington Press, 2016.
- Beyond the Scent of Olives.** By Alice Solovy. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012.
- A Jewish Colonel in the Civil War: Marcus M. Spiegel of the Ohio Volunteers.** Edited by Jean Powers Soman and Frank L. Byrne. University of Nebraska Press, 1995.
- Irma: A Chicago Woman's Story, 1871–1966.** By Ellen F. Steinberg. University of Iowa, 2004.
- Learning to Cook in 1898: A Chicago Culinary Manual.** By Ellen F. Steinberg. Wayne State University, 2007.
- From the Jewish Heartland: Two Centuries of Midwest Foodways.** By Ellen F. Steinberg and Jack H. Prost. University of Illinois, 2011.
- Blossom Winters Is Driving on the Los Angeles Freeways.** By Albert Zimbler. CreateSpace, 2012.

THE BOOK SECTION

An Interview with Michael Soffer, Author of *Our Nazi: An American Suburb's Encounter with Evil*

Michael Soffer, a CJHS member, is a longtime educator who developed the Chicago Jewish history curriculum for the Society several years ago. The curriculum is available for use in both public and private schools.

Soffer is also, most recently, the author of *Our Nazi: An American Suburb's Encounter with Evil* (University of Chicago Press, 2024), a book in which he examines a tempestuous period in the 1980s, when his alma mater, Oak Park River Forest (OPRF) High School, where he also taught for 17 years, became a battleground between those who defended the right of a former Nazi to maintain his job at the school as head janitor and those who called for his dismissal. While the local battle played out in the newspapers, school board meetings, and classrooms, the former Nazi himself, Reinhold Kulle, was facing deportation hearings in downtown Chicago, where Department of Justice (DOJ) attorneys sought to extradite him for lying on his visa application about his past. The OPRF School District eventually gave Kulle a “terminal dismissal,” without the possibility of a contract renewal, and the DOJ succeeded in deporting him to his home country, Germany.



The DOJ case was somewhat of a mixed victory: Kulle never served any time for his wartime crimes in his home country, and he left the OPRF community bruised and shaken.

CJH Editor Robert Nagler Miller recently spoke to Soffer, who now teaches at Lake Forest High School, about his book, the foundation of which was laid in two articles about the Kulle episode that he wrote for *Chicago Jewish History* several years ago (“The Kulle Affair: A Nazi Hiding in Plain Sight,” spring and summer 2021).

RNM: When you discovered the information about Kulle, you did not initially say to yourself, “Gee, there’s a book here,” did you?

MS: No, I wasn’t writing a book. I was developing curriculum. I’m a high school teacher in the middle of the country. In 2020, I was putting together a Holocaust studies course in response to a spate of hate crimes that occurred at the school a year or two earlier, including swastika graffiti, messaging that included “Death to the Jews,” and the Airdropping of swastikas to about 1,000 phones. During the course, my students and I discovered the story of Kulle from the early 1980s. They were like, “How could this be?” So I began looking into it, reading digitized versions of newspaper accounts, reading school board notes, interviewing people.

RNM: What changed?

MS: My wife said, “This is bigger than a lesson plan.” I talked to a number of people I know, including Kevin Schultz, an historian at the University of Chicago, and Dave Revsine, a sports journalist, and they both helped me put together a book proposal.

RNM: You had a full-time job already. How did you balance teaching with writing?

MS: I didn’t sleep a lot for two and half years. When my kids went to sleep, I’d work for two to three hours a night, as well as on Sunday.

RNM: Although Kulle is at the center of the book, your account includes a cast of hundreds. Did anyone stand out to you as the main character or characters?

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Oak Park's Jewish Community 1916-1945

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Around this time, a downtown Chicago Jewish lawyer named Joseph Schachner moved to Oak Park to establish his own office. Within a few weeks of his arrival, Schachner awoke to find a cross burning on his lawn.⁶ There was an active local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan in the early 1920s, but it concerned itself primarily with Catholic population growth.⁷ Undeterred, Schachner became a prominent attorney in town, heading a local businessman's district. He was featured in a pictorial spread in the Oak Park newspaper as an important local leader. Finding no organized shul, Schachner organized a minyan with the other local Jewish businessmen; he hosted it in the lower floor of his law office. By May 1933, this minyan combined with the West Suburban Jewish Women's Club, along with two clubs representing Jewish teens and college students, to form a "community house." The combined group invited all interested "Jews of the West Towns" to a mass meeting in the main ballroom of Oak Park's Carleton Hotel. A local newspaper charged: "Everyone interested in having Jewish contact, is urged to attend this meeting."⁸ The same account estimated that by this point, conservatively, there were "over one thousand" Jewish families in Oak Park.⁹ The group decided to form the new West Suburban Jewish Community Center and elected Schachner its first president. In March 1935, the Center applied for a Charter from the State of Illinois, signed by 56 members of the community. In 1936, the Center hired a permanent Hebrew school teacher, Roy Brener, and in August, it purchased its first permanent home in a shuttered dance studio at 414 W. Lake Street.



A 1947 image of downtown Oak Park. The building on the left is the storefront that housed the America First office. Courtesy of Oak Park River Forest History Museum



Good-Will Affair—Rabbi Israel H. Weisfeld of the West Suburban Jewish Community Center, will participate in a symposium on religion in a Democracy," at a Fellowship dinner at the Cuyler Avenue Methodist Church, Oak Park, Wed. night, March 15.

In May 1938, after a months-long search, the Center hired its first rabbi, Israel Weisfeld. Thirty-two years old and born in Poland, Weisfeld previously served as rabbi for the Agudath Achim congregation on the North Side. While Rabbi Weisfeld trained as an Orthodox rabbi at Yeshiva University, he also received a BA from the University of Miami and worked toward a PhD in divinity studies at the University of Chicago. The congregation at the Center was not strictly observant, and many members previously belonged to Reform congregations, including Hosea, while others like Schachner had come from more Orthodox or Conservative traditions. There may have been some confusion as to which religious movement the Center affiliated, but *The Sentinel* described it as "modern Conservative."¹⁰ Under Weisfeld's direction, the Center opened a four-day-a-week Hebrew school. Weisfeld led Bible study classes, lectured on current events, and instituted regular congregational Friday night services. An ardent Zionist, Weisfeld soon became the head of the Austin and West Suburban Zionist District and a leader in the Chicago Rabbinical Council. He was also outspoken against fascism and the threat posed by Hitler. Lectures in 1939 and 1940 entitled "America's Fascist Number One - Charlie Coughlin," "The New European Diplomacy and Jews," and "Crisis in Palestine" demonstrate his political engagement. Socially, the Center hosted nightly youth groups, Hadassah meetings, the Temple Sisterhood, and a Men's Club. By 1939, the membership doubled from 75 to 150 families. It was a bustling center of Jewish communal life serving a growing middle-class community.

Located in the heart of Oak Park's busiest street, the Center would have been well known to its Gentile neighbors. The Pilgrim Congregational Church, the second oldest congregation in the so-called "Village of Churches," dating to 1874, stood one block west in its picturesque Queen Anne-style building housing a sanctuary with a capacity of 700. Nextdoor to Pilgrim was the imposing Oak Park and River Forest High School, which had been recently remodeled in 1928 with "the largest and most complete high school athletic layout in the world."¹¹

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Oak Park's Jewish Community 1916-1945

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Rabbi Weisfeld walked to shul, as did some of the Center's members on High Holidays, Friday night services, and other religious occasions, making the growing presence of the Jewish community within Oak Park newly visible. From the moment they purchased the property at 414 W. Lake Street, the synagogue's leadership knew that the small dance studio with one hall and three administrative offices could not accommodate the congregation's needs. The Center held fundraisers in 1939 and 1940 for a building fund and hired an architect to design plans for a larger shul. Amidst this activity, Oak Park's elites became aware that the Center planned to expand or acquire a suitable building to serve as its synagogue.

Antisemitism was not new to Oak Park, dating back to residential antisemitism in the 1910s and 20s, when the south side of Oak Park, the last section of the village, was being settled. Walter James, a real estate developer and agent, recalled a house sale in 1919 to a Jewish family. When his builder learned of the sale, he "wanted the earnest money back because he didn't want any Jews in Oak Park." James stuck to the bargain with the Jewish family but lost the builder.¹² Local country clubs were restricted for Jews, some of which also barred Catholics.¹³ With the onset of the Great Depression, American antisemitism grew, with Jews scapegoated as loathsome bankers, Communists, or paradoxically, both. In the spring of 1939, a former Congregational Church in northeast Oak Park was put up for sale. While there is no evidence that the Center sought this property, it was well-suited for its purposes. After a short time on the market, Andrew Dole, one of the wealthiest magnates in town, bought the property and immediately donated it to the village to be developed for "cultural or recreational purposes" only. It was turned into a library, and it remains so to this day. The local newspaper expressed its gratitude: "Had it not been for Mr. and Mrs. Dole the building would have fallen into decay or been used for purposes not kindred to ideals of those who had worked so hard and diligently to establish a church there."¹⁴ A publication written 50 years later, in 1989, noted that "[t]here had been rumors that some undesirable organization was trying to buy the property."¹⁵ No other religious or community organization in Oak Park was seeking a building at this time, so it is quite conceivable that this purchase and donation was intended to block the Center from buying it.¹⁶

Shortly after, in late 1939, the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC), a federal agency that refinanced distressed mortgages, conducted its periodic review of real estate in Oak Park. HOLC's real estate maps divided the village into distinct areas coded by color – the infamous red-lining maps – that identified the quality of the investment by judgment of a number of factors, including the ethnic makeup of these areas. Reviewing the northeast area of Oak Park, which included the Center, the HOLC report warned:

"It is a changing area due to Jewish infiltration, and many owners are more anxious to sell now than they were in 1937. A small synagogue is located in the southwest corner of the area, and it is not unlikely that a larger structure will eventually be built. In view of the Hebrew custom of walking to religious service, this proximity has, and will result in further infiltration. Racial transition and rather slow demand have been considered."

The report, published in February 1940, graded this area a C– and marked it in yellow, the lowest rating above the dreaded red reserved for African-American neighborhoods and those considered blighted. HOLC reports relied on information gathered from local real estate appraisers.¹⁷ The Oak Park Village Board of Trustees who governed the town, along with the Village President, were deeply connected to this real estate business community. The Village President had only recently served as the president of the Oak Park Real Estate Board five years prior, and the entire zoning commission was drawn from the local real estate industry. The HOLC entry for Oak Park even remarked, "Village affairs are well administered by a local government comprised of real estate men."¹⁸ Immediately after the finalization of the HOLC maps, on February 5, 1940, the village voted on a "Frontage Consent" ordinance that had not previously been presented or debated. The ordinance mandated



Rabbi Weisfeld and a confirmation class

that the construction of any hospital, religious institution, sanitarium, or funeral home required the consent of 51 percent of all property owners within a 400-foot radius of the proposed site prior to the issuance of a building permit. Local newspapers for the year leading up to this ordinance do not mention any plan for a sanitarium or funeral home in Oak Park, and by 1939, the village already had two hospitals, including one a few blocks from the Center. It became clear then that the ordinance was targeted narrowly at the Center and its plans for growth. The ordinance passed unanimously without comment.¹⁹

The Center’s leadership was wholly unaware that behind the scenes, the village moved to snuff out its building plans. In the summer of 1940, the Center submitted its architectural plans for a new synagogue to the village. At this meeting, the Center’s president, Sam Schmetterer, a real estate attorney, learned of the Frontage Consent ordinance for the first time. He was outraged. The synagogue board meeting that followed erupted into a raucous debate: Should the Center sue the Village of Oak Park over the ordinance targeted at the only Jewish house of worship in the community? Schmetterer recalled that the Center’s attorneys “advised us that the ordinance could not legally affect our rights and that we could by court proceedings compel the Village to grant us a building permit.²⁰ We were rather hesitant and reluctant to force the issue through our courts.” Instead, the members tried to obtain the consents from their neighbors but were unsuccessful in reaching the needed 51 percent.

Schmetterer bitterly recalled, “This was during the Adolf Hitler period of world unrest and its effect on our country was at that time rather disheartening. There was always talk of hush-hush and leave well enough alone – don’t do anything to antagonize our neighbors.”

Befitting the Republican Party politics favored locally, Oak Parkers largely accepted the view that America needed to stay out of military conflicts abroad.²¹ The attitude began to change with the rise of Hitler. The first indications came in late 1933, when local Jewish philanthropist Salmon Levinson founded the Chicago Committee for the Defense of Human Rights Against Nazism, an organization that identified Nazism as a threat to world peace. Its secretary, Professor James N. Yard, spoke in Oak Park frequently. The organization’s West Suburban Division included Jews and non-Jews alike. While the Chicago Committee was not a Jewish organization per se, it was heavily supported by Jews. In September 1934, 85 Orthodox and Conservative synagogues of Chicago and the Midwest held an appeal for the Chicago Committee at their services, coinciding with the Yom Kippur Appeal that year.

Rabbi Weisfeld’s first year at the Center coincided with the Anschluss, followed by the Sudetenland crisis, then Hitler’s annexation of Czechoslovakia. Through the spring of 1939, Weisfeld partnered with Rev. C. Wesley Israel of the neighborhood Cuyler Methodist Church, along with Dr. Yard, for a series of joint lectures warning of the dangers of Hitlerism. When war broke out in September 1939, Oak Park was forced to address America’s role.

The western suburbs’ earliest record of a debate on American intervention in the war took place in November 1939 at the Methodist Church in neighboring River Forest.²² The event was structured such that an isolationist speaker would have the first speaking slot, followed by Rabbi Weisfeld presenting the case for American intervention in the form of aid to England and France. Local news coverage of the debate sympathized with the isolationist position, with scant attention paid to Rabbi Weisfeld’s “No Tolerance for Intolerance” speech. Nonetheless, the reporter captured the hopeful conclusion of Weisfeld’s remarks: “The arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Weisfeld’s words would be echoed nearly verbatim by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. nearly a generation later, in 1958, at the cusp of the Civil Rights movement. The phrase originated from abolitionist and Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, who used a longer version of it in an 1853 sermon.²³ The only usages of it found in published accounts between 1853 and 1958 were in those reporting Weisfeld’s speech. The call for the “long” arc of the universe to “bend toward justice” was made all the more profound by his prophesying a long road ahead in what became a grueling six-year global war against fascism.

Oak Park's Jewish Community 1916-1945

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Isolationism soon gained momentum in Oak Park. In May 1940, the Oak Park branch of an organization calling itself "Keep America Out of War" was hosted at the First Congregational Church to call for implementation of a "peace program."



The facade of the West Suburban Jewish Community Center

Its activities would continue throughout the year around the village. Subsequently, in his December 29, 1940 Fireside Chat, President Roosevelt proclaimed the United States would be the "Arsenal of Democracy" and proposed selling munitions to Britain and Canada. These events reinvigorated the isolationist movement across the country, particularly in Oak Park.

On January 2, 1941, the local newspaper quickly organized a well-advertised "town meeting" at Oak Park and River Forest High School with speakers from the isolationist America First Committee and the Committee for the Defense of Democracies, which advocated arming Britain.²⁴ The "lively" audience of 1,000 was unable to "restrain themselves from derisive laughter, involuntary answers to questions, or loud applause at what pleased them."²⁵ By month's end, Oak Park had its own branch of the America First Committee, with an office on downtown Lake Street. By July 1941, the chapter claimed 6,000 members at a time when the population of Oak Park numbered about 65,000. The *Chicago Tribune* profiled the branch. A Chicago America First gathering honored the Oak Park branch's leader, Connie Howe, for her accomplishments on the organization's behalf as assistant to the national vice-chairman. The branch sent a large delegation to the national America First conference in Washington, D.C. The local newspaper covered the activities of the local branch weekly with front-page stories, ads, and summaries of the arguments raised by its speakers. The paper's editorial columnist slammed Jews, coded as "quick-triggered foreigners," for "promoting Uncle Sam as a sort of a combination nurse, night club bouncer, banker, hired man and good Samaritan for quick-triggered foreigners who are 'foreign' in their own countries as well as not being

"The antisemitic attitudes were not limited to the placement of the synagogue. They extended to fear of Jewish migration into Oak Park and its neighboring village, River Forest."

able to get along with other folks."²⁶ America First attitudes prevailed at the high school, according to Jewish resident Zita Broyde Holden, who recalled that her Gentile classmates vilified President Roosevelt, referred to derisively as "Rosenfeld." In sharp contrast, the 20 to 25 Jewish students in the high school supported FDR's Arsenal of Democracy.²⁷ Their classmates also informally excluded Jews from certain school extracurricular clubs. As a result, for Holden and her Jewish classmates, the Center "was the saving grace... that was our social life; that was our - everything life."²⁸

In early 1941, America First speakers argued that equal blame for the war lay with "Imperial" England, while minimizing the Nazis' crimes as they marched through Europe. By July 1941, the speakers' remarks took on more menacing, antisemitic tones. That month, the America First speaker in Oak Park warned of "the old invasion bogey (which is a good scare used by international bankers for many years) all dressed up again, parading in new clothes, trying to sell an unpopular war to the U.S."²⁹ The following week, another speaker thundered, "As long as I know the truth about international bankers I will not be silenced, but I'll use my constitutional rights and keep right on talking. Why should a small group of private individuals have the power to create money?"

These antisemitic tropes were not subtly expressed. Later, the weekly newspaper's editorial columnist expounded in defense of America First, maligning youngsters from the "Old Country":

"There being no cows left in town or barns to put them on some of our bright young men about town thought it would be a good Halloween prank to hoist a Nazi flag over our local America First headquarters, which was done in the dark without difficulty except the flag hoisters felt pretty insignificant when the night marshal ordered them to climb down and get in the paddy wagon. We sometimes wonder what some of these bold young fellows would do if a general handed them an American flag and told them to march right over to the old country and nail it on Hitler's headquarters."³⁰

Rabbi Weisfeld's daughter recalled that her father received threatening phone calls in the night because of his active role in speaking out against Nazism and for American intervention in the war against Hitler.³¹ Rabbi Weisfeld himself preached from the bimah at the Center against America First, giving an October 1941 talk entitled "What Shall Be Our Reply to Lindbergh, Wheeler and Nye?"³²

Given these attitudes, Oak Park's Jewish community continued to experience overt antisemitism in its efforts to build a synagogue. On January 11, 1941, Oak Park's Board of Village Trustees received a letter from Gilbert Volke, the secretary of the Northwest Community Club of Oak Park, a civic organization dedicated to improving and "maintaining said section as a highly restricted residence section,"³³ who wrote, "Rumors have been brought to the attention of the members of the Northwest Community Club of Oak Park that a Jewish Synagogue is to be established at Augusta and Belleforte Avenue. At the last regular meeting on January 9, 1941, the secretary was instructed to express the disapproval of the [club] as to any permit regarding the establishing of a Jewish Synagogue at the above mentioned location, or any other location in Northwest Oak Park."³⁴ The location in question was a former Lutheran Church closed since 1931. Mr. Volke, a Justice of the Peace of Oak Park a year prior, was a respected resident and deacon of the local First Evangelical church. Earlier, he had given lectures at his church with such titles as "How Propagandists Put It Over on Us."³⁵



A Jewish Community Center party in the late 1940s

These antisemitic attitudes were not limited to the placement of the synagogue. They extended to fear of Jewish migration into Oak Park and its neighboring village, River Forest. On May 22, 1941, the Oak Park Real Estate Board heard from realtor Clare Cusack that "something should be done to discourage the sale of property in Oak Park and River Forest to Italians, Jews and others whose undesirability in the neighborhood would tend to lower property values and cause a downward trend in the real estate business of this section." Cusack proposed to bring about an "unwritten 'gentleman's' agreement" not to sell to "such undesirables."³⁶ The membership debated the point and arrived at the conclusion that no formal action could be taken but that "this practice might be reduced to a minimum if the subject could be mentioned verbally to individuals in the offices holding membership." Further, the Real Estate Board instructed its president to contact any office found to be "deliberately trying to bring Jewish people into this territory by advertising in Hebrew newspapers, etc." and "point out the general feeling about such action." Indeed, an exhaustive search of the two major Jewish newspapers in the Chicago area yielded only one real estate listing, from 1937, for property in Oak Park during these decades. Zita Broyde Holden, a teenager then,

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Oak Park's Jewish Community 1916-1945

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recalled that it was known among the Jewish community in Oak Park that certain apartment buildings would not rent to Jews, a source of anxiety for Jews seeking housing.³⁷

With the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the Oak Park branch of the America First Committee closed, as did all chapters nationwide. The Center abandoned its plans for a new synagogue until the close of the war, as building materials and construction were limited to war needs.³⁸ Oak Park was quick to mobilize for war; so was its Jewish community. Fifty-seven young men from the Center enlisted. The Center itself became a local Red Cross blood donation unit, setting local records for number of repeat donations throughout the War.³⁹ Weisfeld presided over the burial of at least one fallen soldier from his Kehila. When asked 10 years later to remark on "what if anything was outstanding in the history of our Congregation?" Sam Schmetterer recalled:

"To my mind it was the fact that under stress and strain, that our people do pray, want to pray, and have a need for prayer to our Almighty. During World War II, I was deeply moved, when our entire congregants were telephoned, on the early morning of our invasion of Europe, and all appeared for an early morning prayer, for our victory and the safe return of our beloved ones."

With the close of the Second World War in 1945, the Center would prepare again to build a synagogue worthy of its congregation. Part II will tell that story.



About the Author: Michael Zmora is an attorney living in Oak Park. He is also a member of West Suburban Temple Har Zion, which will celebrate its 75th anniversary in its building in River Forest in 2025.

Endnotes

¹The West Suburban Jewish Community Center renamed itself the West Suburban Temple in 1947. It affiliated officially with Conservative Judaism in 1948, when Rabbi Moshe Babin came aboard. In 1956, West Suburban Temple became West Suburban Temple Har Zion, its name to this day. In 1951, a group of 30 families seeking a more Reform synagogue, left West Suburban Temple to join with the re-locating Washington Boulevard Temple. These groups came together in 1956 to found Oak Park Temple, a Reform congregation, Oak Park's first permanent synagogue.

²Sokol, David M., *Oak Park: The Evolution of a Village*, pp. 80, 98–100 (The History Press, 2011).

³Notably, the Washington Boulevard Temple, a Reform congregation, built its synagogue in 1920 and drew adherents from Oak Park. Then, in 1927, B'nai Israel of Austin, constructed a synagogue in Austin on West Jackson Boulevard and marketed itself to the Jews of Oak Park.

⁴"Promoting a Hebrew School," *The Oak Leaves*, (Apr. 9, 1927), p. 104.

⁵"New Registration at West Suburban Sunday School" *The Reform Advocate* p. 763 (Jan. 5, 1929).

⁶The story comes from Joseph Schachner's son Julian, who described it as his father's "Welcome to Oak Park" moment. (Author interview with J. Schachner, June 2024).

⁷See Doherty, Sarah Elizabeth, "Aliens Found in Waiting: Women of the Ku Klux Klan in Suburban Chicago, 1870–1930" (2012). Dissertations. 345, available at: "Aliens Found in Waiting: Women of the Ku Klux Klan in Suburban Chicago" by Sarah Elizabeth Doherty (luc.edu)

⁸"Oak Park to Have Jewish Community House," *The Oak Parker*, p. 14 (May 12, 1933).

⁹*Id.* This number may be slightly exaggerated, but the American Jewish Yearbook of 1937 puts the number at 950 people.

¹⁰"Oak Park Community Center Seeks Rabbi." *The Sentinel*, p. 20 (Jan. 20, 1938). But see Yale Roe, *I Followed My Heart to Jerusalem*, p.14 (Barricade Books 2005) (who describes the synagogue of his youth as a "Reform temple"). The tension as to the Center's religious affiliation resulted in a congregational splinter in 1951. See n.1 *supra*.

¹¹"OAK PARK HIGH BOYS AND GIRLS TO HAVE GYMS: To Be Comparable to Most Colleges". *Chicago Daily Tribune*. (Nov. 6 192). pp. b1.

¹²See Interview with Walter R. James (circa 1988) from Lee Brooke, *Yesterday When I Was Younger... Oak Park, River Forest Oral History* (1989). See also Interview with Kathryn Gunderson Ratcliff (circa 1988) (remarking that her father, a prominent real estate developer of standardized "Gunderson" Homes in the 1910s and 20s, only sold to "good church-going people, he didn't care which church they went to, but they had to go to church").

¹³Oak Park Country Club maintained such a policy well into the 1970s. Doherty, Sarah Elizabeth, "Aliens Found in Waiting: Women of the Ku Klux Klan in Suburban Chicago, 1870–1930" (2012). Dissertations. 345, p. 190. Further, the 1932 Oak Park and River Forest Social Register contains no members of the local Jewish community.

¹⁴Gift of Old Church Home to Village, *Oak Leaves*, p. 5 (Nov. 9, 1939).

¹⁵Sokol, *Oak Park*, p. 98 (the publication was a 50-year retrospective on Oak Park Junior College which occupied the space from 1933–1938).

¹⁶*Id.* The author has reviewed the limited remaining papers of Andrew Dole but found no mention of the purchase and donation. The Fourth Congregational Church's correspondence records were not kept when the church closed.

¹⁷See Description of C138, 1940 HOLC Map, available at Mapping Inequality Mapping Inequality (richmond.edu). The description was provided by Homer Bundy, VP of the George Hemingway Realty Co. in Oak Park. Mr. Bundy was President of the Oak Park Real Estate Board in 1937, and in 1939 and 1940 was a VP of the Illinois Real Estate Board. At this same time, he was president of the Oak Park Rotary Club.

¹⁸HOLC Archives, Box 134 – Chicago, Folder 1 – Metropolitan Chicago IL Community Descriptions Master at p. 95.

¹⁹February 5, 1940 Village of Oak Park Board Meeting Minutes, available on microfiche at Oak Park Public Library.

²⁰Sam Schmetterer, "History of Our Congregation" (West Suburban Temple Har Zion, 1954) (Oak Park River Forest History Museum).

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THE BOOK SECTION

An Interview with Michael Soffer, Author of *Our Nazi*

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MS: There were two people in Oak Park–River Forest, Rima Lunin Schultz and RaeLynne Toperoff who were central to the story. They took it upon themselves to remove a Nazi from his job. They were vilified in the local papers, and they and others faced a tremendous amount of pushback. I hope that my book sets the record straight about these two women. They are the real heroes.

RNM: In your research, were you able to glean what it was like to be part of the OPRF community in the early 1980s?

MS: It was really a bifurcated place. Oak Park is now known as a fairly progressive community, but at that time, 40 years ago or so, it was still transforming. It had a pretty troubling history with antisemitism. The former students I talked to were of two minds. Some reported warm feelings toward Kulle, like a theater student who used to stay late at school. She said he used to keep an eye on her to make sure that she would leave the school safely. And then there were other students who said that he scared the living daylights out of them—that he was stern and strict, that he looked like Frankenstein. He had a lot of support among the faculty. But Kulle’s past and sternness were never too far beneath the surface. One colleague even recommended that the school move him from the custodial staff to security, writing, “There is no one more capable.” Faculty held a fundraiser for him during his DOJ trials, and when he was leaving the school, they threw a retirement party for him. During the festivities, ironically, they played the music from “The Sound of Music” [an anti-Nazi-themed play written by two Jews, Rodgers and Hammerstein].

RNM: There has been a Jewish community in Oak Park–River Forest for many decades. How did they respond?

MS: The Jewish community was pretty much in lockstep against Kulle, but, as with Rima and RaeLynne (who are also Jewish), they were faced with a barrage of antisemitic tropes. They did get support from local clergy and civic leaders, of course.

RNM: How does this episode compare to similar incidents around the country?

MS: Unfortunately, what happened at OPRF is among the most prototypical cases you can find.

Soffer will be speaking about his book at a Wednesday, November 13, CJHS–sponsored event at Bookends & Beginnings bookstore, where he will be in conversation with CJHS board member Joel Rubin. The free program commences at 6 p.m. Registration is required. Go to the bookstore’s website, www.bookendsandbeginnings.com, and RSVP in the Events pages section.

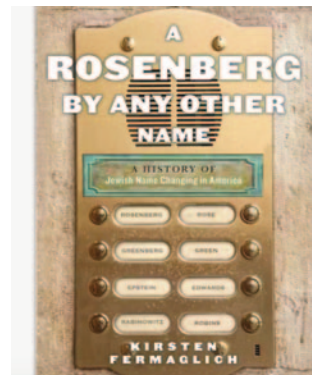
Book Review: *A Rosenberg by Any Other Name: A History of Jewish Name Changing in America*

By Dr. Edward Mazur

A Jewish immigrant entered America at Ellis Island. The procedures were confusing to him; he was overwhelmed by the commotion. When one of the officials asked him, “What is your name?” he replied, “*Shayn fergessen*” (in Yiddish, “I’ve already forgotten”). The official then recorded his name as Sean Ferguson (*A Treasury of American Jewish Folklore*, 1996).

Many of us have members in our family, circle of close friends, and professional associates who have changed their names for a multiplicity of reasons. I certainly have. The Editor of *CJH* told me, for instance, that Miller started out as Smolinsky in the Ukraine. He’s far from the only Miller who’s Jewish. Think playwright Arthur Miller, bandleader Mitch Miller, and theater director Jonathan Miller. And many of us have also known plenty of Jewish Smiths, Browns, Joneses, and Davises—other highly common American surnames.

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Chicago's First Jewish Hospital

By Elyse Malamud

The warm air of late summer enveloped LaSalle Street the morning of August 10, 1868, heating the red bricks of a homelike building and rustling the colorful flowers by its front door. Inside, a gentleman sat in his office riffling through papers. His suit was neat, and his wavy, long beard and hair were finely combed. At the call of "Dr. Schmidt!" he promptly dropped the papers and went into the lobby, which was furnished with plush chairs and boasted fine woodworking.



ERNST SCHMIDT

"Yes, Mr. Levy?" he asked.

"The first patient is here, sir."

Thus, Dr. Ernst Schmidt began this important day, one nearly 10 years in the making. As head physician of Chicago's new Jewish Hospital, he was about to treat its first patient.

Though this anecdote is partly fictional, Chicago's first Jewish hospital really did open its doors on that day. The story of this hospital is rich and complex; its impact transcends the Jewish community. We may ask, why was the hospital built? Or why was Dr. Schmidt, a German man with Catholic roots and a Jesuit education, volunteering to lead a Jewish hospital? Were there other non-Jewish volunteers who chose to take part in this enterprise?

Establishment of the Jewish Hospital

The Jewish Hospital's story began in 1859 with the establishment of the United Hebrew Relief Association (UHRA), an organization that brought together the diverse array of Jewish charitable groups in the city.¹ The hospital was the UHRA's "final object,"² and the association's leaders were so dedicated to the institution that they deemed the "failure of this final object" to be "the failure of our association."³ With the UHRA's commitment, the hospital became part of a growing national trend. At the time, in the U.S. alone, there were already Jewish hospitals in New York City and Cincinnati, and plans for Jewish hospitals in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New Orleans.⁴ These American Jewish hospitals, built for Jews, were primarily financed and managed by Jewish communities. However, their doors were generally open to patients of all races and religions.⁵

The UHRA had several reasons for building the hospital. On one hand, the UHRA was concerned about incidents during which Jews could not access proper religious care at existing area hospitals and had to travel to other cities to receive treatment at a Jewish hospital.⁶ These issues were also factors in the development of other American Jewish hospitals.⁷ However, the hospital was also a way for Chicago's Jewish community to show its strength, connect to similar Jewish philanthropic ventures around the world, and fulfill the goal of tikkun olam, the Judaic ideal of helping the world. This is elucidated by the words of Henry Greenebaum, a prominent leader in the Jewish community and in the hospital effort. His speech at a fundraising event was summarized as follows: "When this benevolent work was completed, charity and benevolence would radiate from this centre on all around. The Divine word was committed to the Jews; let the Jews prove that the foundation stone of their religion was charity to neighbors. He wanted the Jews of Chicago to show their strength. There might have been divisions, but the time had come when they must be united."⁸ On the day the hospital's cornerstone was laid, Greenebaum said, "Our mission is not yet ended. Continuing to stand upon the broad platform of faith in God and charity to all mankind, we must contribute our share in the great struggle to realize that happy time when all mankind shall regard one another as belonging to the same great human family, all men, constituting one universal brotherhood of man."⁹

During the period of 1862 to 1867,¹⁰ fundraising efforts yielded the necessary \$39,000 (equivalent to over \$800,000 today) to build the hospital. Several major fundraisers held in 1864, 1866, and 1867 supplied most of the money.¹¹ Donors were primarily men and women in the Jewish community, whose donations ranged from \$10 (nearly \$200 today) to \$1,000 (nearly \$20,000 today).¹² The UHRA also received contributions from its subsidiary groups.¹³ The hospital's cornerstone was laid in 1867, and it opened in August 1868 on LaSalle Street between Schiller and Goethe streets.¹⁴ It had 26 beds and room for up to 50 patients.¹⁵ Henry Greenebaum

stated, “Its charity shall be as broad and expansive as the firmament of Heaven.”¹⁶ The hospital was open to all, regardless of race and religion.¹⁷

Interfaith Collaboration and Hospital’s Volunteer Doctors

The UHRA had a large team of volunteer doctors during these early years, some who aided the UHRA’s sick before the hospital’s establishment, some who helped with the hospital, and some who did both. Many of these doctors were among the most prominent medical men in Chicago and America at the time.¹⁸ The doctors came from a variety of backgrounds, although the majority were from Germany and had extensive medical education and training from German universities. Of the more than 20 doctors who had volunteered for the hospital and the UHRA (a full list is provided in Table 1), at least six¹⁹ were definitely not Jewish and six others were most likely not Jewish.²⁰ Only one doctor, Dr. Michael Mannheimer, was definitely Jewish per historical records,²¹ and three others were possibly Jewish.²² As likely over half of the UHRA’s doctors were not Jewish, the UHRA’s medical philanthropy and hospital were truly an exemplary display of unity and interfaith collaboration in the city’s early years. In fact, two prominent non-Jewish doctors, Dr. Schmidt and Dr. Ralph Nelson Isham, were known as the “first professional sponsors”²³ of the hospital, as they emphasized its necessity and called for donations in speeches given alongside Jewish community leaders at the fundraisers.

There may be several reasons why the interfaith collaboration occurred. Firstly, this interfaith collaboration was not uncommon in early Chicago; in fact, it oftentimes went both ways. Jewish community leaders encouraged Jews to donate to the Christian charitable hospitals, and Jewish doctors treated patients at Christian hospitals. (Dr. Mannheimer was chief attending physician at the Alexian Brothers Hospital.)²⁴ Secondly, many of the doctors had progressive beliefs and were thus very public-minded. For example, Dr. Schmidt, Dr. William Wagner, and Dr. Anton Hottinger were all involved in Germany’s 1848 revolution, which had a goal to establish more rights for people and unite the German states.²⁵ They continued their civic engagement in Chicago.²⁶ Dr. Gerhard Christian Paoli’s and Dr. William Heath Byford’s strong support of women’s medical education and Chicago’s first women’s medical school²⁷ is another example of the kinds of progressive beliefs many of the UHRA’s volunteer doctors shared. The socially progressive Jewish Hospital may have aligned with their values. Thirdly, many doctors also saw their service for the hospital and the UHRA as the natural duties of any good doctor. Dr. Isham wrote in a letter to the UHRA, “I hereby offer my gratuitous services in any deserving cases of charity which may fall under your notice requiring medical aid—feeling that in any work of this nature I may render you, I shall but be discharging to myself in a manner most gratifying—the debt which every man owes to his profession and the common cause of humanity.”²⁸ The interfaith collaboration on the UHRA’s medical philanthropy was very strong, as a number of these doctors later volunteered for Michael Reese Hospital in its early years.



Impact of the Jewish Hospital

As many of Chicago’s leading doctors volunteered for the Jewish Hospital, it provided good care, and it was highly respected by the city. According to an 1868 *Chicago Tribune* article, “The medical gentlemen were loud in their praise, and one of them, acquainted with nearly all of the more prominent hospitals in the country, remarked that, for the size, this institution is unexcelled in the land.”²⁹ This praise was echoed by many, including Chicago’s mayor, John Blake Rice. At the cornerstone-laying ceremony, Rice said, “The names of its [the hospital’s] founders shall remain ever...in the records of Chicago, to be read with admiration by generations yet unborn.”³⁰ The hospital had excellent accommodations and equipment with the capacity for surgery.³¹ It appears that the hospital often took in difficult cases, such as spinal fracture and “a very great proportional number of most serious diseases, like typhoid fevers,”³² possibly more so than the surrounding hospitals. This admissions trend is particularly notable as the hospital’s successor, Michael Reese Hospital, also managed difficult ailments like tuberculosis when other hospitals wouldn’t.³³ Perhaps this reveals the hospital’s moral compass: It aimed to welcome all people and was not afraid of having a higher death rate—if that meant it could comfort more patients.

The hospital was considered to be successful,³⁴ and building expansions were planned early on.³⁵ It treated 78 patients in its first year or so, many of whom were not Jewish.³⁶ Unfortunately, the hospital succumbed to the 1871 Chicago Fire after only three years of operation. The loss, though great, was only material, as Dr. Wagner and the hospital’s steward, Mr. Abraham Levy, evacuated all the patients.³⁷

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Chicago's First Jewish Hospital

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What the story of this somewhat forgotten first Jewish Hospital reveals is that Jewish medical philanthropy in Chicago transcended the demarcations of faith; it encouraged unification in pursuit of bettering the city. Though the hospital burned down in the Chicago Fire, its spirit lived on. The community leaders and doctors grouped together once more to rebuild. Ten years later, Michael Reese Hospital opened its doors. During its long life, the hospital made an indelible mark on American medicine and Chicago. Though Michael Reese closed in 2009, its legacy—and thereby the legacy of the city's first Jewish Hospital—lives on through a foundation that provides grants for medical research and education in the area. Therefore, Chicago's first Jewish Hospital paved the way for future institutions and is an important component in the broader history of Chicago and its Jewish community.

Acknowledgments

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About the Author:

Elyse Malamud was born and raised on Chicago's North Shore. Malamud loves her community and is passionate about bringing people together by sharing stories about local history. She is currently a sophomore at Northwestern University.



Endnotes

- ¹Irving Cutler, *The Jews of Chicago: From Shtetl to Suburb* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 19.
- ²*First Annual Report to the Directors of the United Hebrew Relief Association, of Chicago*, by the Executive Board (Chicago: Daily Democrat Print, 1860), 13; *Fourth Annual Report to the Directors of the United Hebrew Relief Association, of Chicago*, by the Executive Board (Chicago: "The Chicago Post" Print, 1863), 15.
- ³*Fourth Annual Report*, 11.
- ⁴Daniel E. Bridge, "The Rise and Development of the Jewish Hospital in America 1850–1984" (rabbinic thesis, Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, 1985), 70–80.
- ⁵Bridge, "The Rise and Development," 51–52, 54.
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- ⁷Bridge, "The Rise and Development," 21.
- ⁸"Jewish Hospital," *Chicago Tribune*, October 25, 1866, 4.
- ⁹"The Jewish Hospital. Laying the Corner-Stone Yesterday. An Imposing Procession—The Ceremonies. Addresses by the Mayor, and Messrs, Snyder and Greenebaum," *Chicago Tribune*, September 3, 1867, 3.
- ¹⁰*Fourth Annual Report*, 11.; Hyman L. Meites, ed., *History of the Jews of Chicago* (Chicago: Jewish Historical Society of Illinois, 1924; Chicago: Chicago Jewish Historical Society and Wellington Publishing, Inc., 1990), 106. Citations refer to the Chicago Jewish Historical Society edition.
- ¹¹Meites, *History*, 101–104, 106–107.
- ¹²"Jewish Hospital," *Chicago Tribune*, October 23, 1866, 4.; "Jewish Hospital," October 25, 1866, 4.; Meites, *History*, 103–104.
- ¹³"The Jewish Hospital. Arrangements for a Fair in Aid of the Fund," *Chicago Tribune*, November 1, 1867, 4.; Meites, *History*, 104, 106–107.
- ¹⁴"The Jewish Hospital. Laying," 3.; "The New Jewish Hospital. Inspection of the Institution by the Doctors," *Chicago Tribune*, August 9, 1868, 4.
- ¹⁵"Our Hositals [sic]: The Jewish Institution on La Salle Street. Hospital of the Protestant Deaconesses. Providence Hospital—Small-Pox Hospital—Rules and Regulations," *Chicago Tribune*, January 18, 1870, 4.
- ¹⁶"The Jewish Hospital. Laying," 3.
- ¹⁷"The Jewish Hospital. Laying," 3.; "The New Jewish Hospital," 4.; "Our Hositals [sic]," 4.
- ¹⁸Council of the Chicago Medical Society, *History of Medicine and Surgery and Physicians and Surgeons of Chicago*, 45, 47–51, 53, 69, 85, 87–88, 97–98, 126, 129.
- ¹⁹Walter Struve, "Review of Schmidt, Axel W.–O., Der Rothe Doktor von Chicago: Ein Deutsch–Amerikanisches Auswandererschicksal: Biographie des Doktor Ernst Schmidt, 1830–1900, Arzt und Sozialrevolutionaer," H–German, H–Net Reviews, October 2004, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/35008/reviews/43962/struve-schmidt-der-rothe-doktor-von-chicago-ein-deutsch-amerikanisches>.; Megan McKinney, "The Ishams of Chicago: The Medical Branch," *Classic Chicago Magazine*, April 3, 2021, <https://classicchicagomagazine.com/the-ishams-of-chicago/>.; Sindre Aarsbog, ed., "Gerhard Styhr Christian Hjort Paoli," *Geni*, January 20, 2020, <https://www.geni.com/people/Gerhard-Paoli/6000000078214897034>.; Thomas N. Bonner, "Dr. Nathan Smith Davis and the Growth of Chicago Medicine 1850–1900," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 26, no. 4 (July–August 1952): 373–374, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44433638>.; "Lincoln Park' Founder Dead. Anton Hottinger, Oldest Former City Alderman, Expires. Refugee from Germany. Fled with Carl Schurz and Other Revolutionists to America," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 23, 1911, 2.; "Funeral of Dr. Rudolph Seiffert. Had Been Identified with Alexian Brothers' Hospital Twenty-five Years," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 8, 1894, 8.
- ²⁰*Album of Genealogy and Biography Cook County, Illinois* (Chicago: Calumet Book & Engraving Co., 1896), 627–628.; G. Leonard Apfelbach, *The Ferdinand Hotz Legacy: A Door County Family History* (Ellis Bay: Newport Wilderness Society, 1998), 8.
- ²¹Alfred Theodore Andreas, *History of Chicago. From the Earliest Period to the Present Time. In Three Volumes.: Volume III. -- From the Fire of 1871 until 1885*. (Chicago: The A.T. Andreas Company, Publishers, 1886), 547.
- ²¹"Dr. Mannheimer's Funeral," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 2, 1891, 9.

²²This is just speculation, as their last names are known to be tied to Jewish ancestry.

²³Council of the Chicago Medical Society, *History of Medicine*, 85.

²⁴Meites, *History*, 103.; "The Jewish Hospital. Laying," 3.

²⁵Eric H. Limbach, "March 1848: The German Revolutions," *Origins*, Ohio State University, March 2023, <https://origins.osu.edu/read/march-1848-german-revolutions>.

²⁶"Lincoln Park' Founder," 2.; Council of the Chicago Medical Society, *History of Medicine*, 69, 85, 87.

²⁷Council of the Chicago Medical Society, *History of Medicine*, 45, 47, 50–51.

²⁸*First Annual Report*, 9.

²⁹"The New Jewish Hospital," 4.

³⁰"The Jewish Hospital. Laying," 3.

³¹"The New Jewish Hospital," 4.; *Annual Reports of the Executive Board of the United Hebrew Relief Association for the Years 1870–1871 and 1871–1872* (Chicago: Max Stern, Steam Book and Job Printer, 1872), 9.

³²"Our Hositals [sic]," 4.

³³Lucy Freeman, *Hospital in Action: The Story of the Michael Reese Medical Center* (New York: Rand McNally & Company, 1956), 41.

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³⁵"The New Jewish Hospital," 4.

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³⁷*Annual Reports*, 8–9.

THE BOOK SECTION

Book Review: *A Rosenberg by Any Other Name*

continued from page 13

Our thinking about Jewish name-changing tends to focus on Hollywood legends who adopted glamorous, new names, such as Edward G. Robinson, who started out as Emanuel Goldenberg; Lauren Bacall, as Betty Persky; Shelley Winters, as Shirley Schrift; and Jack Benny, as Benjamin Kubelsky. Or, it repeats urban legends about insensitive immigration officials who changed immigrants' names for them.

In "*A Rosenberg by Any Other Name*," Kirsten Fermaglich, an Associate Professor of History and Jewish Studies at Michigan State University, presents us with a new appreciation for the levels of complexity that Jewish identity was forced to assume in America. Her work is a powerful narrative about antisemitism, adaptation, markers of identity, and the kinds of choices and sacrifices that many Jews felt they had to make to gain access and privilege, particularly during a time—think before the 1960s—when universities, neighborhoods, and occupations either kept its doors closed to Jews or highly restricted their access.

The author demonstrates that name-changing was a broad-based voluntary behavior. Rather than trying to escape their heritage, most name-changers remained active members of their Jewish communities. But while name-changing allowed Jewish families to avoid antisemitism and achieve middle-class status, it also divided families and became a stigmatized part of American Jewish culture.

Fermaglich offers compelling personal details and heartbreaking stories from Jewish men, women, and children who sought to abandon their names and find new ones. While those who changed their names were a minority of the Jewish community in New York, Chicago and elsewhere, they had a powerful impact on American Jewish communal life. Their neighbors, friends and relatives had to confront the practice and its implications: Should they too change their names? Would a less ethnic-sounding surname improve their lives? Did changing names mean deserting their religion or their family? For the most part, fears of abandonment were unfounded. Name-changers did not typically convert, leave the Jewish community, or abandon their families.

American Jewish communal leaders struggled with the name-changing. Name-changers complicated the efforts of Jewish agencies in Chicago and elsewhere to count Jews and provide them services, and some leaders were convinced that name-changers betrayed their community.

As Fermaglich points out, it wasn't only American Jews who sought name-changing. During the War of Independence in 1947, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) released a pamphlet, "Choose a Hebrew Name for Yourself," encouraging new immigrants to Hebraize their names. After its establishment, Israel strongly encouraged political leaders and party officials to change their names. In 1955, President David Ben-Gurion issued a memorandum insisting that military personnel representing the IDF abroad change their European names to Hebrew ones. Some individuals defied his pronouncement with impunity, but there is no question that the Israeli state actively encouraged, and even at times required, name-changing as a means of shaping its citizens' Jewish identities.

A Rosenberg by Any Other Name: a History of Jewish Name Changing in America. Kirsten Fermaglich, New York University Press, 2018; 243 pages. Available also as an Ebook.

My Daughter, the Policewoman: More Tales from the Shomrim Society

CJH Editor Robert Nagler Miller continues the series in which he interviews local Jewish law enforcement officers—members of the Shomrim Society of Illinois—about their experiences in a profession not known to attract a large number of Jews. Founded in 1959, the Shomrim is a professional organization for Jewish first responders, including police, sheriffs, firefighters, emergency medical technicians, and paramedics. The Illinois chapter is part of the National Conference of Shomrim Societies. In this issue, Nagler Miller speaks to Joanna Benjamin, who is a sergeant with Chicago Police Department

RNM: How did you decide on a career in law enforcement?

JB: I always wanted to be a police officer because I saw my father doing the job my entire life. I felt like I had the temperament and personality for the job, and I thought it would be a good fit for me because I knew how the job was. I studied law and urban planning, which encompassed a lot of community development issues, and felt like law enforcement was a way to marry my two interests.

RNM: Did your family support your decision, or was there any pushback--or both?

JB: Originally, my family wanted me to pursue the legal field and become an attorney. I agreed to this life goal, despite it not being my passion. I became an attorney, but it didn't arouse in me the pride that being a police officer does. I eventually found my way to law enforcement after trying many other jobs. My mom was originally hesitant because she gets so worried, so the last time I applied, I didn't tell her. I had to make the decision for myself and not for anyone else. When I told her I was taking the position, she knew that it was my dream and ultimately would make me happy and she supported it. The rest of my family responded with, "It's about time! You always wanted to do it." I'm in a good place now, with lots of familial support.

RNM: What Jewish values led you to your career?

JB: My ethical and moral compasses are based directly on my Jewish values, and I find that led me to feeling like this was the career for me.



RNM: How did Jewish values inform your career?

JB: There are two Jewish quotes which I believe in and guide me:

"Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world."

"Justice, justice you shall pursue"

The first quote reminds me that on any given day, I cannot help everyone in need, but I can help someone. Sometimes, that help is minor, and sometimes, it is helping someone on the worst day of their life. But I am in a unique position to save a life every single day, and that is a profound responsibility. I take immense pride in being the person who shows up during chaos and is able to bring order and peace to the situation, with G-d's help.

People see you in their darkest moment and being able to bring that comfort makes me feel that what I am doing is bigger than myself.

The second quote is from my Bat Mitzvah Torah portion, Shoftim. In addition to my passion for helping others I also believe in holding those accountable for their transgressions. Our role as law enforcement is to hold that line and protect the good from the bad. Our systems of justice in both Judaism and America are set up for fairness and consequences, and I am proud to be a member of law enforcement who continues this tradition.

RNM: Were there other members of your family who were law enforcement officers?

JB: My father served as a Chicago police officer for nearly 43 years.

RNM: Why did you join Shomrim, and what does being a Jewish law enforcement officer mean to you?

JB: Judaism is predicated on community, as in the requirement of a minyan, and Shomrim is a community of Jewish first responders. I am proud to be a part of a small but impactful group. We come from similar backgrounds, but we are in professions in which we are a minority. The comfort of knowing other Jewish first responders who understand our jobs is hugely important to me. There are not a lot of Jewish people who can relate, so having Jewish brothers and sisters who understand our work means a lot to me.

RNM: Did you experience any antisemitism among colleagues or in the line of duty?

JB: Amongst my department, since we are so diverse, I have not experienced any antisemitism. The usual ribbing occurs among everyone, and I am happy to engage in that because humor is a good unifier. People will sometimes ask me about being Jewish and seem genuinely interested in learning more about our culture and religion. Some fellow POs haven't known many or any Jewish people, and I always try and explain our culture to them.

On duty, generally most people do not know I'm Jewish. I have worn a flag of Israel on my vest and recently someone said, "You Jew," which clearly had a derogatory undertone. But it was no different than any other verbal attack most officers get. What people don't necessarily know is, as officers, we get verbally attacked for everything: our looks, height, weight, color, hair, name, voice. Anything! I had someone once make fun of the size of my lips! You learn to ignore what these people say and develop a thick skin.

RNM: What have been some of the most meaningful experiences as a law enforcement officer?

JB: Knowing I impacted a life. As trite as that may sound, it is true. I believe strongly in the concept of making this world a better place, tikkun olam. And on a daily basis, being able to do that brings me joy. I work in an area where there are a lot of mental health-related calls, and that is something that is close to my heart. Being able to be there in someone's darkest moment and assure them help is available is a blessing. A lot of police officers are very good at talking to people and have many years of practice. We are able to get through to people and connect, and that is special. I just want to go home every night knowing I made one person's life better. And with this job, I can do that.

RNM: Describe your Jewish background (Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, secular, traditional, in a Jewish neighborhood, in a neighborhood with few Jews, etc.). Were your parents or grandparents immigrants, and did they speak Yiddish?



Joanna Benjamin's father, Milton Benjamin, pins on his daughter the Chicago Police Department star, number 13004, which he wore throughout his entire 43-year career. The Benjamins are the first father-daughter team to serve on the Board of Directors of the Shomrim Society of Illinois.

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My Daughter, the Policewoman

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JB: I consider myself more Conservative. However, I grew up attending a Reform synagogue. I knew many Jewish people growing up. I studied Hebrew for many years and was always interested in the Jewish religion and wanted to learn more. My great-grandparents immigrated here and spoke Yiddish, as did my grandparents.

RNM: When you look at your career in law enforcement, what stands out to you?

JB: How much I've learned. About people, the job, myself. It is something new every day. That's what I love. You never know what you're going to get. I remind people that we enforce the law, but we also are public safety, and that term can mean so many different things. I embrace it all and don't believe in the adage that "it's not a police matter." Who else besides Fire and EMS are available 24/7/365 and only a phone call away? So many things are a police matter because we are there and have the ability to help, so let's do all we can.



On duty at a Chabad event

Chicago Remembers Hersh Goldberg-Polin

By Dr. Rachelle, Gold, CJHS President

We were hoping for the safe return of Hersh Goldberg-Polin, grandson of longtime CJHS members Leah Polin and Dr. Stan Polin z'l (board member), taken hostage to Gaza by Hamas terrorists on October 7, 2023. Instead, we were devastated to learn that on August 31 his body and those of five other hostages were found in a tunnel under Rafah. The six were murdered a short time before the approaching Israeli forces reached them.

Hersh was one of about 250 people seized in the brutal Hamas assault on Israel. He and 29 other young adults, attendees of the Nova music festival, had crowded into a shelter in an attempt to survive. The attackers killed everyone in the shelter except for Hersh and two others. Seriously injured in the attack, with his arm partially destroyed by explosives, Hersh was forced to Gaza. Hersh's parents, Jon and Rachel Goldberg-Polin, became known worldwide for their relentless advocacy for Hersh and all the hostages. Jon and Rachel grew up in the Chicago area and went to Jewish schools here before marrying and later making *aliyah*.

Hersh was buried in Jerusalem on September 2, 2024. A memorial for Hersh was held at Skokie Valley Agudath Jacob, in Skokie, on Sunday, September 22. Many family members spoke, including Leah Polin. Hersh's parents sent recorded messages from Israel.

Leah Polin addressed the Chicago community again on October 7, 2024, the anniversary of the massacre, at a community-wide memorial program organized by the Jewish United Fund. The hundreds in attendance also heard from Yinam Cohen, the Consul General of Israel to the Midwest; rabbis representing the various branches of Judaism; and a Nova festival survivor. For me, Leah Polin's presence and message were particularly moving and meaningful. Through Hersh and the Polin family's advocacy, many of us were able to personalize the trauma of October 7. Her concluding words, spoken with fortitude, conviction, and wisdom, are unforgettable. "October 7 shook our illusions of who we are as a diaspora community. Now we must reckon with who we are and what we must do."

We pray for the release of the remaining hostages and for security and peace in Israel.

THE BOOK SECTION

Cancel Culture Extends to Jewish Books. What Can We Do?

By Robert Nagler Miller, *CJH* Editor

This past year brought the publication of *That Librarian: The Fight Against Book Banning in America*, a memoir by Amanda Jones, which delves into one Louisiana woman's fight to stop certain "concerned" citizens from excluding from public schools and libraries those books they deem anti-Christian and anti-family. *Librarian*, a best seller, has received a lot of press coverage, and it has been prominently displayed in independent bookstores throughout the country.

How successful Jones and her cohorts will be in their efforts to maintain reading spaces that offer titles with broadest range of subjects and perspectives has yet to be determined. But those of us who love books—their words and their ideas, as well as the smell and tactility of their paper—know that we are in a lot of trouble.

According to the Chicago-based American Library Association's (ALA) Office of Intellectual Freedom, campaigns to rid certain books from the shelves of public institutions "surged 65% in 2023 compared to 2022 numbers, reaching the highest level documented by ALA." The ALA added, "Most of the challenges were to books written by or about a person of color or about a person of the LGBTQIA+ community." That amounted to challenges of 4,240 unique book titles. Of the 17 states in which more than 100 book titles were targeted for censoring was Illinois.

This news is sufficiently sobering. But sadly, there have been other worrisome developments. Since last October 7, 2023, when the world changed forever, thanks to the horrific terrorist acts inflicted by Hamas, Jewish authors around the world—but primarily in the United States—have been subjected to an onslaught of antisemitic attacks on their writing and personhood.

This past year, X, formerly Twitter, published a spreadsheet listing the names of authors who, because of their religion or heritage, their support of Israel, and/or their history of having visited the country or having given a talk to a Jewish organization (such as novelist Gabrielle Zevin, who made a presentation to Hadassah membership), were branded "Zionists." Those perusing the list—which was headlined "Is Your Fav Author Zionist???"—were encouraged to boycott "any works produced by 'Zionists,'" wrote James Kirchick in an opinion piece published in the *New York Times* this past May 27 ("A Chill Has Fallen Over Jews in Publishing"). The list has gone viral—"metastasized" seems the more apt verb—and it has cast a palpable pall over an industry that is supposed to be a cheerleader for all books.

PEN America, which touts the First Amendment rights of all writers, canceled "its annual World Voices Festival after a wave of participants withdrew, spurred by a boycott campaign led by writers who say the group's response to the war in Gaza has been insufficiently critical of Israel," wrote Jennifer Schuessler in the *New York Times* on April 24 of this year.

And as the Times of Israel, along with many other news outlets reported a month or two ago, an authors panel at the Albany (New York) Book Festival was canceled after two of its panelists Aisha Gawad and Lisa Ko, refused to share the stage with Jewish moderator, novelist Elisa Albert, who is vocal in her support of Israel.

These are a just a handful of the more flagrant instances of antisemitism, intimidation, censorship, and suppression of ideas that have transpired since last October 7—and they continue unabated to this day. Ask



A small sample of the *CJH* Editor's Jewish books. He implores *CJH* members and friends to invest in them.

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THE BOOK SECTION

Cancel Culture Extends to Jewish Books.

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many Jewish authors, and they will tell you about the canceled readings and book events, diminished coverage in the press, and upticks in direct assaults (mostly verbal, written, and electronic, but nevertheless still vicious in nature).

“This is shades of the 1930s. Calling for a boycott of Jewish authors and their books achieves the same effect as book-burning,” told Elisa Spungen Bildner, the president of the board of the Jewish Book Council,* a non-profit that promotes books by Jews and/or about Jewish subjects. Her words, issued in a released statement, were widely reported in international media, including *The Jerusalem Post*.



The *CJH* Editor among some of his favorite companions: books—and Jewish books, in particular

What can we do as Jewish readers, writers, and lovers of the written word? In addition to protesting each act of hate against Jewish books and authors through public expression—letter-writing, phone calls, email campaigns, and protests—we can keep ourselves educated about the publication of Jewish books. Great sources to apprise oneself of imminent releases include the Jewish Book Council, Association of Jewish Libraries, and the American Library Association, all of which have excellent lists of just- or about-to-be-published books, along with reviews. Hadassah magazine (for which this author also writes) also offers a strong book review section, and the *heyalma* Jewish culture website (www.heyalma.com) has some mighty fine pickings of Jewish books. The *New York Times Book Review*, *Kirkus Book Reviews*, and *Publishers Weekly*, of course, remain the gold standard for all book reviews.

But it's not good enough to read the reviews. If you can afford to do so, invest in Jewish authors at your favorite bookstore. Chicago remains one of the strongest independent bookstore markets. Keep those stores open! Ask for new titles by Taffy Brodesser-Akner (“*The Long Island Compromise*”), Toby Lloyd (“*Fervor*”), Alexandra Tanner (“*Worry*”), Ayelet Gundar-Goshen (“*The Wolf Hunt*”), Lore Segal z”l (“*Ladies’ Lunch and Other Stories*”), Lynda Cohen Loigman (“*The Love Elixir of Augusta Stern*”), Betsy Lerner (“*Shred Sisters*”), and many others. Or, ask your librarian to order a copy for your local branch.

The publishing industry tracks sales, so if they see that books by Allegra Goodman, Elinor Lipman, Alice Mattison, Jonathan Rosen, Joshua Henkin, Linda Pastan z”l, Nathan Englander, and Brian Morton, among many Jewish fiction writers, are selling well, they’ll be more likely to keep them in print, publish them again, and take a chance on up-and-coming Jewish writers.

It’s critical, during these troubled times, to do what we can to support our Jewish book-loving community. A visit to our favorite bookstore or library is a great place to start.

*In the interest of full disclosure, the *CJH* Editor and his husband are supporters of the Jewish Book Council.

CJHS members... YASHER KOACH!

*The Hebrew phrase means
"More Power to You."*

Kudos to CJHS President Dr. Rachele Gold, who wrote a letter, published in the October 5, 2024, edition of the *Chicago Tribune*, in response to a recent article about critics' concerns over new guidelines for organized protests at local university campuses. The guidelines came as a result of anti-Israel demonstrations on campuses, some of which took the form of encampments. With Dr. Gold's permission, we are reprinting her letter below:

Protest guidelines

"The revised guidelines for protests at universities are intended to protect free speech, not to hinder it. The guidelines restore the viability of free speech without favor to one group or point of view. The right to free expression has never been limitless; that is what makes it endure as a cornerstone of our democracy. Debate and dissent can and should continue, but not when they cause harm and violate certain rights and freedoms of others.

"Protests that involve the takeover of university property and the intimidation of other campus groups cross the line from free expression to harmful disruption. This principle applies to all protests."

Programs for You

In addition to the CJHS upcoming program with member Michael Soffer, author of *"Our Nazi: An American Suburb's Encounter with Evil"* (see page 6 of this issue for more details), the Society is planning many other in-person and hybrid programs for your enjoyment and edification.

Stay tuned for details for an early 2025 author event with Mark Jacob, former metro editor of the *Chicago Tribune* and co-author, most recently, of *"Globetrotter: How Abe Saperstein Shook Up the World of Sports."* Jacob will disabuse many of us of a common misapprehension: The Harlem Globetrotters did not originate in upper Manhattan of New York City, but in Saperstein's adopted hometown of Chicago!

If you missed one of our recent programs, do not despair. Most likely, you can watch it on our website: www.chicagojewishhistory.org. Click on the Past

Programs link on the left side of our homepage to connect to programs from 2020 to 2024. Happy viewing!

And, if you have an idea for upcoming programs, we would love to hear your thoughts. Send your suggestions to info@chicagojewishhistory.org.

Oak Park's Jewish Community 1916-1945

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Endnotes

²¹In 1928, 72% of Oak Park voters supported Republican Herbert Hoover. In 1932, 65% voted for him over FDR. "When Villages Vote," *Oak Leaves*, Nov. 10, 1928, p. 1; "Villages Vote for Hoover and Horner in A Record Poll," *Oak Leaves*, Nov. 11, 1932, 1, 40.

²²Until a few years prior, the church conducted its services entirely in German to serve the nearby Forest Park community of recently arrived Germans.

²³Parker's quote: "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice." Theodore Parker And The 'Moral Universe' *All Things Considered* (Sept. 2, 2010), available at Theodore Parker And The 'Moral Universe': NPR. King used the term "moral arc of the universe."

²⁴"America's Part in War is Town Meeting Time," *Oak Leaves*, p. 1, 9 (Jan. 2, 1941).

²⁵*Id.*

²⁶Rollo Wells: Says Fireside Chats Take a Lot of Fuel Lately," *Oak Leaves*, p. 48 (Jan. 16, 1941).

²⁷Transcript of Interview with Zita Broyde Holden by Annabel Abraham, CJHS Oral History Archive p. 4-5 (Aug. 7, 1984). Mrs. Holden died in 2019.

²⁸*Id.*

²⁹"Woman Lecturer at America First Meeting Monday," *Oak Leaves*, p. 20 (July 3, 1941) (the parenthetical in the original suggests the *Oak Leaves* reporter may have provided a type-written copy of the speech from which he or she directly cited, rather than a spoken version, for which, of course there would not be parentheticals)

³⁰Rollo Wells: Too Much Going on For Busy Correspondent," *Oak Leaves*, p. 26 (Nov. 6, 1941).

³¹Author Interview with Naomi Eisley (April 2024).

³².... *Oak Leaves* (Oct. 1941). Charles Lindbergh, Senator Burton Wheeler and Senator Gerald Nye were the most prominent voices of America First. On September 11, 1941, Lindbergh gave an explicitly anti-Semitic speech in Des Moines, Iowa for which he received tremendous public backlash.

³³Northwest Community Club" *Oak Leaves*, p. 101 (Mar. 8, 1945).

³⁴January 11, 1941 Oak Park Village Board Meeting Minutes (available on microfilm at Oak Park Public Library). *The Oak Leaves* sanitized the Northwest Community Club's letter, reporting that the group "urged the trustees to aid the neighborhood in maintaining its home character which might be menaced by a new use for the edifice formerly used by Grace Lutheran church."

³⁵"News of the Churches: First Evangelical" *Oak Leaves*, p. 26 (Oct. 17, 1938).

³⁶May 1941 Oak Park Real Estate Board Minutes (available by request at the OPRF History Museum).

³⁷Zita Broyde Holden interview, supra n.27 at 1. Holden recalls hearsay that "there were signs to the effect that there were no Jews or dogs wanted in front of some buildings."

³⁸Schmetterer, *History of Our Congregation*.

³⁹"Red Cross Units in Every Section of Villages; Need Help," *Oak Leaves*, p.1 (Nov. 12, 1942).

Correction

There was a misspelling in the President's Column in the Summer 2024 issue. The reference to "16th and Koven" should have been "16th and Kolin."

Look to the rock from which you were hewn

הביטו אל-צור חצבתכם



chicago jewish historical society

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Our History and Mission

The Chicago Jewish Historical Society, founded in 1977, is in part an outgrowth of local Jewish participation in the United States Bicentennial Celebration of 1976. Forty-seven years later, our mission remains the discovery, collection, and

ABOUT THE SOCIETY

dissemination of information about the Jewish experience in the Chicago area through publications, open programs, tours, and outreach to youth and others interested in the preservation of Chicago Jewish history.

Tribute Cards for Celebrations or Memorials The card design features the Society's handsome logo. Pack of five cards and envelopes \$36. Individual cards can be mailed for you from our office at \$5 per card, postage included. Mail your order and check to CJHS, P.O. Box 597004, Chicago, IL 60659-7004. You may also order online at our website.

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

- A subscription to our award-winning quarterly journal, *Chicago Jewish History*.
- Free admission to Society public programs. General admission is \$10 per person.
- Membership runs on a calendar year, from January through December. New members joining after July 1 are given an initial membership through December of the following year.

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Historian 500

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