



chicago jewish historical society

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CHICAGO JEWISH History

Boxers

Chicago's Jewish
Prizefighters Once
Ruled the Sport

By Bill Reilly



Barney Ross

Sociologists tell us that the history of American prizefighting followed the country's immigration pattern. The last ethnic group in, those at the bottom of the economic and social ladder, became the pugilists. First it was the Irish, Germans and Swedes. Then it was the Italians and the Jews. Today it's the Blacks and the Hispanics, with the Blacks, although not newcomers, still at the low end of the totem pole.

The sociologists are no doubt right. However, the country's Jewish prize fighters, who were to become so prominent in the first half of the century, had other obstacles to overcome. In addition to the poverty and wretchedness of ghetto life, they had to deal with a deliberately false and misleading racial stereotype: the picture of the "timid and cowardly" Jew who didn't hold a "manly" job but who sewed pants for a living. That is, they also had to fight centuries of anti-Semitism.

Jewish boys thinking about becoming prizefighters also had a number of other problems unique to them, not the least of which was their religious and cultural heritage. Jewish boys were not supposed to beat up on people.

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Board Member Sorkin Finishes History Project

*Book is First of its Kind
Considering History of
Landsmanshaften*

Long-time Society Board member and director of the oral history project Sid Sorkin has published *Bridges to an American City*, a history of *landsmanshaften* in the Chicago area. The result of more than twelve years of work, the book is the first of its kind to treat the Chicago area and the first chronicle of *landsmanshaften* written in English.

Himself a *continued on page 3*

Inside:

- Kingfish Levinsky Had Unlikely Career as Clown Prince of Boxers
- Oral History of Bertha Rissman, Long-Time Hadassah Volunteer
- Photographs of Chicago's Last Wooden Synagogue

President's Column

The Jewish new Year is a time for remembrance and reflection. It is also an occasion for looking at our future plans and the steps we are taking to implement these plans.



Walter Roth

In addition to our usual activities, our Society is embarking on two new endeavors for bringing Jewish history to our members and friends in the Midwest. First, we have engaged a highly skilled professional, Emma

Kowalenko, to assist us in building a database for our existing oral histories and to participate with our members in taping and transcribing new oral histories of Jewish Chicagoans with tales to tell. As an example of this new project, I was recently privileged to join Emma in taping Ben Bentley on his colorful and most interesting life in the sports world. In the near future we hope to publish excerpts from Mr. Bentley's story for the benefit of our readers.

Our second project, perhaps even more ambitious, is our plan to make a video tape history of the Jews of Chicago. Beverly Siegel, a skilled

Jewish film maker in her own right, has been retained to explore and initiate for our Society the feasibility of making such a film. With a screenplay based on H.L. Meites' book, *The History of the Jews of Chicago*, recently republished by our organization, we hope to obtain both public and private grants to enable us to bring this film to fruition. It promises to be a most exciting project and we ask all of you to help us in our endeavors with respect to this film.

As current events clearly indicate, history is never dull. Preserving local history is a satisfying way of participating in historical memories and developments. On behalf of myself and our Board of Directors, I wish all of you a healthy and prosperous New Year. □

Summer Tours Successful Again

Society board member and director of the Summer Tour Program Leah Axelrod announced that this year's series of tours has proved another success.

The three tours took Society members and guests on a walking tour of the Loop, on a bus tour of the old West Side, and on a day-long trip to Michigan's South Shore area.

This year marked the second in a row for the South Shore trip led by Axelrod and board members Clare Greenburg and Judge Sheldon Gardner. According to Axelrod, it sustained the popular response of last year. "Many of the tour participants had memories of the area from their childhoods," Axelrod said. "We would pass one landmark and that would set off a whole new exchange of stories."

Axelrod reported as well that tour

participants met with the same warm welcome as last year from South Shore area residents who took time to discuss their area as well as to offer refreshments for the tour group.

The West Side tour, a staple of the summer tour program since its inception, won positive reviews yet again. Dr. Irving Cutler, long-time board member and noted expert on the history of the West Side, again conducted the tour. "I've been doing these tours for so long," Cutler said, "that I am amazed there are still people who want to go on them. But people do seem to be drawn to the area."

The walking tour of the Loop, offered by the Society for the first time and conducted by Axelrod, Gardner and Society past President Norman Schwartz, attracted three dozen people for a trip around downtown sites of Jewish interest. "The Loop is the heart of Chicago," Axelrod said. "Jews have been part of it in ways that you would expect but also in a lot of ways that might surprise you."

Axelrod also singled out the hospitality of the downtown Loop Synagogue for providing the group with refreshments as well as a tour of the synagogue.

In addition to being entertaining summer activities, the tours permitted the different participants to experience and re-experience the places in the Chicago area where Jews have worked, lived, and made our history.

Members and guests interested in participating in next year's summer tours should look for information in future issues of *Chicago Jewish History* and in future Society mailings. □

Correction

A feature in the last issue of *Chicago Jewish History* incorrectly identified the relationship between Barnett Novitsky, whose tombstone was pictured and translated, and Richard Sobel, a former Chicagoan at work on his genealogy. Novitsky was Sobel's great-great-grandfather. □

Sorkin

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member of a family active in the Dvinsker Verein, one of the last of the groups still functioning as a way to keep alive community ties formed in the villages of pre-War Europe, Sorkin inherited both an affection for the *landmanshaften* as well as information about them.

"I recognized that these organizations had been an important part in the lives of a lot of Chicago immigrants," he said. "I saw from my own family's experiences that remembering where we had come from had been an important part of figuring out who we were."

In addition to the central role *landmanshaften* played in the social lives of immigrant families, they were also very often burial organizations. According to Sorkin, there are more than 125 gates for *landmanshaften* burial plots at Waldheim.

In the course of his book, Sorkin identifies almost 700 of the groups that flourished at one time or another in the Chicago area and names almost 3000 members of the groups.

According to Sorkin, the *landmanshaften* gave immigrants broad and almost immediate connections in their new country. As groups that sponsored events as simple as large dinners, they brought people together on the basis of their shared European origins but also along Orthodox, Zionist or labor-activist lines.

"I think the *landmanshaften* are an important part of the immigrant experience. As we lose the living memory that preserved what they accomplished, I hope that my book can serve as a resource for future historians trying to understand the process our grandparents and parents went through as they came to this country and this area."

Bridges to an American City: A

Survey of Chicago's Landmanshaften, 1870-1990 is published by Peter Lang Publishing in New York for \$65.95 and is available at various Chicago bookstores. □

Deadline for Third Minsky Fund Contest Nears

October 31 marks the deadline for submitting manuscripts to the third Doris Minsky Memorial Fund publication competition. The Fund offers a \$1000 prize as well as publication of the winning manuscript.

Suitable manuscripts dealing with some aspect of Chicago Jewish History may be submitted to the Fund in care of the Society offices, 618 South Michigan Ave., Chicago, 60605.

"We are looking for manuscripts which, while making a contribution to the record of Chicago Jewish history, will also be of interest to the general reader," Society President Walter Roth said.

The competition is open to anyone excluding members of the Society Board of Directors.

The judges prefer that manuscripts be less than 15,000 words, but that requirement will be waived in some circumstances. Manuscripts should be completed work, typed double-spaced, and essentially ready for publication.

The Fund awarded two prizes in 1991, both of which were published in the Fund's Publication No. 1. One manuscript is entitled *Chicago's Jewish Street Peddlers*, by Carolyn Eastwood. The other is *Memories of Lawndale*, by Beatrice Michaels Shapiro.

The Fund also awarded two prizes in 1993, both of which will be published in the Fund's Publication No. 2. One manuscript is *Memories of the Manor*, by Eva Gross, and the

second is *The Chayder, the Yeshiva, and I*, by Morris Springer.

Anyone interested in further information on the competition should contact the Society at (312)663-5634.

The Doris Minsky Memorial Fund was created in memory of the late Mrs. Joseph Minsky of Northbrook, a founder and long-time officer of the Society who died in 1988. □

Information Request:

Looking for "Sinai Babies," History

Mount Sinai Hospital begins its 75th anniversary this year, and in connection with the celebration is looking for anecdotes, recollections, photos and memorabilia. Celebration officials would especially like to identify "Sinai babies," people who were born in the West Side hospital. (A fire in the 1950s destroyed many of the hospital's records.) To become part of the permanent record of the one remaining Jewish institution still in Lawndale, call Sinai's Director of Public Affairs, Diane Dubey, at (312)257-6489 or write her at Mount Sinai Hospital, California Avenue at 15th, Room N325, Chicago, 60608.

--Beverly Siegel

Friedman to Address Next Society Meeting

Peter Friedman, Associate Executive Director for Budget and Planning for the Jewish Federation of Chicago, will speak at the next Society open meeting, October 10 at 2 p.m. at A.G. Beth Israel Synagogue.

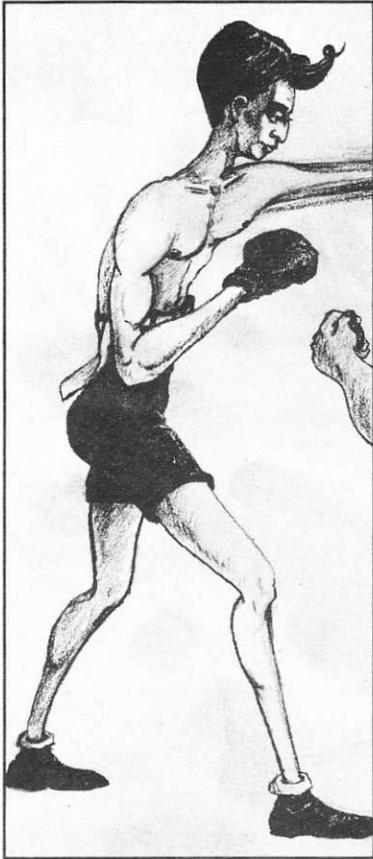
Friedman, will speak on the topic, "Chicago's Jewish Community: How Unique are We? Are We Different from other American Jewish Communities?"

The Society is providing round trip bus service to the talk and there will be a social hour beginning at 1 p.m. A.G. Beth Israel is at 3635 W. Devon.

Boxers

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Being a *shtarker* -- a slugger, a bully -- was anathema in the Jewish community. Jewish boys were supposed to read and study, not throw left hooks.



Harry Harris

When Barney Ross told his father that he wanted to become a prizefighter, his father, an Orthodox Jew, looked at him in disbelief. "Son, let the atheists be the fighters. Let the *shleppers*, the *trumbeniks* be the murderers. We are the scholars."

And even aside from that, budding young Jewish boxers had still other disadvantages. They had no real sports or athletic tradition and they had few real athletic heroes they could identify with. Where their people

came from, sports and games were the privilege of the gentile elite. Besides, living in a crowded slum, how could you become a star baseball or football player if there were no fields where you could play those games.

Boxing was one sport that fit the Jewish kid from the ghetto like a glove. Here you didn't need a million dollar *goyim* athletic spread. Any smelly upstairs gym would do nicely. Here, for the Jewish boy good with his dukes, could be the ticket to fame and fortune. He might even become, like Abe Attell or Benny Leonard, a world champion.

Besides, even if you didn't make it to the top, knowing how to defend yourself was a useful

tool for a Jewish boy growing up on Chicago's West Side back then. It was a time when ethnic gangs -- Poles, Italians, Irish and others -- took delight in going over to "sheeny town" and beating up on the "mockie" kids. A Jewish boy could always run if he had to, but landing a haymaker meant he wouldn't have to worry the next time.

Harris First Great One

Chicago's first great Jewish prizefighter was Harry Harris, who goes back long before the big immigration waves of the 1880s and 1890s that were to produce so many outstanding Jewish fighters. Harris, an English Jew, was born in Chicago in 1880. With his twin brother, he fought in smokers and stags in the city before he was 17 years old.

Known as "The Human Scissors," Harris learned his trade from the famous Kid McCoy, with whom he toured for several years, both of them taking on all comers. In 1901 Harris, who never weighed more than 112 pounds, went to England and beat the famous Pedlar Palmer for the Bantamweight title, becoming Chicago's first Jewish world champion.

Harris just may have been the finest practitioner of the art who ever pulled on a glove. He was never knocked out, some say never even knocked off his feet. He had 54 recorded professional fights although hundreds more were never recorded, since back then they didn't keep records. Of his recorded fights he lost but two. Both of his "defeats" were phony, fought before heavily Irish crowds and with an Irish referee.

Harris, a clever, bon-vivant type and sporting man, quit the ring early and became a successful New York curb market broker and theatrical manager. He died a wealthy man in New York in 1959.

It wasn't until after the turn of the century, however, that Chicago's Jewish glovemen began to make their name in the sport, along with their Jewish counterparts in New York and other big cities. Benny Yanger, billed as the "Tipton Slasher" became a well known main event fighter, as did Charlie White, the "left hook" specialist. And don't let Charlie's *goyish-*

sounding last name throw you: In those days it was common practice for Jewish, Polish and Italian fighters to adopt Irish sounding names to tap into the Irish tradition of the sport. It paid better at the box office.

"Mushy" Callahan, the old welterweight champion, for example -- who went on to be famous for "keeping the Hollywood stars in shape" in his Los Angeles gym -- was born Morris Scheer on New York's Lower East Side.

The Golden Age

But the next 30 years were to become the Golden Age of the city's Jewish gladiators. Through the '20s, '30s, '40s and into the '50s, Jews left their imprint on the sport forever, especially in the lighter weight divisions. And it's fascinating to hear an old West Side fight fan tell of the first time he saw one of them, Joey Medill.

Medill, a 16 year old featherweight in his first amateur bout, was fighting one of the preliminaries in a small club. At stake was a "gold" watch which, if he won, he could "redeem" from the promoter for \$10. This was a common ploy back then to let a boxer keep his amateur standing but still take home a little money for winning.

"God, he was so young...so pale, so fragile looking" remembers the old-timer. "He looked like he should have been in *shul* or home with his mama. But when the bell rang he came out of his corner like a hungry tiger. He threw a blizzard of gloves. And so fast...his feet didn't seem to touch the ground the whole first round. He won a unanimous decision."

Medill, a clever boxer, won 35 straight fights, although he never got a shot at the title. There were other Jewish scrappers in the city better than he was.

Jackie Fields

Chicago's next Jewish boxing champion was Jackie Fields, born Jackie Finkelstein, the son of a kosher butcher on Maxwell Street. A classy combination boxer-puncher, Fields twice held the world's welterweight crown.

Born in 1907, Fields picked up his ring name from Marshall Field's, the Chicago department

store, because he thought it sounded classy. Besides, he figured, who would come out to pay and see a guy named Finkelstein fight? Jackie started fighting amateur when he was fifteen and won 51 of his 54 amateur bouts. In the 1924 Paris Olympics, he won the gold medal in the featherweight competition for the United States.

Fields then turned professional and, managed by Willie Rooney, eventually outgrew the featherweight division and fought as a lightweight and welterweight. In 1929 he outpointed Young Jack Thompson for the NBA world welterweight championship. He lost it to Thompson in a rematch, and then won it back again in a savage 10-rounder against Lou Brouillard at the Chicago Stadium, January 28, 1932.

Fields, a character and a wit, always remembered the Brouillard title bout as his toughest. Maxwell Street had bet their every penny on him. And when Brouillard, a tough, squatty, bear-like French Canadian, knocked him down in one of the early rounds, he said he had no alternative but to get up.

"Getting up and facing Brouillard was a lot easier than facing the guys on Maxwell Street the next day. It was the middle of the Depression and a lot of them had their shops and carts riding on me. Christ, they would have killed me if I lost."

Jackie Fields won 76 out of his 85 professional fights. Although he lived high, he didn't wind up broke or punch-drunk, like so many in his trade. After his retirement from the ring, he became a successful Los Angeles and Chicago businessman, always backing Jewish charities and causes. He is a member of the Chicago Jewish Athletic Hall of Fame.

Barney Ross

Chicago's greatest Jewish prizefighter, and rated with the legendary "Packy" McFarland as the best the city ever produced was Barney Ross. At his peak, Ross held three world championships and was in a class by himself in his profession.

Born Barnet David Rasofsky in New York

City in 1909, Ross was the son of Russian immigrant parents, his father a pushcart peddler on the Lower East Side. When he was two years old, the family moved to Chicago and his father opened a small grocery store in the Maxwell Street district. Barney grew up on its mean streets, and let us say that he wasn't exactly the best-behaved boy in the community.

The life of Barney Ross, as if pre-ordained, was slated to be star-crossed. A strange amalgam of tragedy and triumph, it was the stuff of which soap operas and grade B movies are made.

In 1924 holdup men came into their grocery store and killed his father. Shaken, the young boy quit school and synagogue and took to the streets. He became a neighborhood tough. Sometimes he ran errands for Al Capone, who liked him, and who the boy in turn admired.

A natural with his fists, Barney began hanging out in the local gyms and "working out" with the boys. Nobody could beat him and they persuaded him to enter a local amateur tournament. Few of his opponents lasted through the first round as he went on to win first place.

In 1929 Ross won the Chicago Golden Gloves tournament and the inter-city championship in New York. Turning professional under the management of Sam Pian and Art Winch, he won 48 of his first professional fights. One of the losses was a split decision; in the other he had to give away weight.

June 21, 1933, before a sellout crowd at the Chicago Stadium -- half of the West Side turning out -- Ross beat Tony Canzoneri for the world lightweight title. Maxwell Street legend had it that his mother, since it was *shabbos* and she would not ride, walked all the way from her home to the stadium to see her son fight. When she also refused offers for a ride back, Barney walked with her.

In New York in 1934, Ross decided the

great Jimmy McLarnin in 15 rounds, adding the Junior Welterweight and the Welterweight titles. Ross fought McLarnin three times, winning twice, all of them classics and all still available on old fight films. Watch them and you'll see poetry in motion. Look closely and you might spot Sam Pian and Art Winch, who took a huge chunk of Barney's purse, smiling in the background.

In 1938, past his prime, Ross lost his title conglomerate to Henry Armstrong in a brutal 15-rounder at Madison Square Garden. It was to be his last fight. Badly cut on the inside of his mouth in the early rounds, Barney refused to spit

out the blood; he was too proud to give either his younger opponent or the crowd the satisfaction of seeing it.

Round after round he swallowed it. Nauseated in the late rounds, taking heavy punishment, and sick and reeling, Barney refused to let the referee stop the fight. The referee honored the request of a great champion. Ross finished his last fight on his feet, maintaining his record of never having been counted out in his 79 professional fights.

Although the Armstrong fight was his last in the ring, it wasn't to be Barney's last fight. When his country entered World War II he enlisted in the Marine Corps, even though he was no kid by then. Wasn't that where elite fighters belonged? Sent to the South Pacific with the 1st Marine Division, he was wounded in the battle of Guadalcanal, fighting off a Japanese assault on the foxholes for which he was awarded the Silver Star.

Taken to an army hospital for his wounds, he was also found, like so many of his buddies, to be full of malaria. The doctors gave him morphine to relieve the pain. After his discharge, still in constant pain, he kept using the drug and became hooked. Maxwell Street's greatest hero became a junkie, to the dismay of his many friends, most of whom stood behind him and

*They were a unique product of their times,
this feisty generation of Jewish
prizefighters, most of whom plied their
trade in clubs and arenas before television.*

tried to help him.

In 1948 Hollywood made a thinly disguised movie of his life, *Body and Soul*, starring John Garfield and Lilli Palmer. The movie was a big hit. Its producers, however, refused to pay Ross a cent, claiming that the story was fiction, created by their script writers, and that his kind of life couldn't have happened to anybody. The producers were also well aware of the fact that Ross, in the condition he was then in, couldn't do much about it anyway.

One day, however, Barney turned up missing from his usual West Side haunts. He voluntarily entered the Federal Drug Treatment Center in Lexington, Kentucky. And, in one of his greatest fights, he kicked the habit.

Regaining his self-respect, Ross went into the advertising business in Chicago and did fairly well. His last years weren't quite as the movie had had it; it wasn't all sweetness and light and sleeping with the gorgeous Lilli Palmer. Ross earned big money in the ring but blew most of it on slow horses and fast women and loans to his "friends."

Ross died in Chicago in 1967 after a long and painful bout with cancer, the only fight he couldn't win. In 1956 he was elected to Boxing's Hall of Fame.

Davey Day

Many old-time trainers say that Davey Day, the West Side lightweight, was probably as good as Barney Ross, although he never really had the chance to prove it. Tall, skinny, almost gaunt-looking, Day had a thunderous right hand. He could take out anybody with one punch and he took out a lot of them.

Day's only problem was that he was a stablemate of Barney Ross. Both were managed by Sam Pian and Art Winch and in those days it was considered cannibalistic to match two boys from the same stable. Day often fought the semi-windup on Ross's cards, otherwise being featured in the 8 and 10 rounders in the smaller clubs.

In 1935 New York promoters were looking for fresh meat for Pedro Montanez who had won 33 straight fights, had never been kayoed, and was a lightweight title contender. They brought

in the unknown Day as his next opponent for a main event at Madison Square Garden. Davey knocked out Montanez in the fourth round.

However, after stopping Montanez, Day had a hard time getting big money fights: smart managers didn't want to risk their promising boys against this skinny Chicago Jew who just might ice them in the first round.

Day eventually got his revenge on Pian and Winch for their having him play second fiddle to Ross for his entire career as well as for their being notorious cheapskates with their fighters.

Booked to fight the main event at the Chicago Stadium's season opener, which was always a big seller, Day told Pian and Winch that his wife was suing him for divorce, that she was threatening to hold up the purse, and that, unless he received \$2500 up front, he wouldn't fight. Finally panicking along with the promoter, they coughed up the \$2500. The fight didn't draw as well as expected. Pian and Winch cut only \$2000. But Day, figuring he was finally ahead of the game with the \$2500, hung up his gloves.

The Headliners

Not all of Chicago's Jewish boxers made it to the top but many became headliners, the main event fighters of the day. They drew good box-office in the cities where they appeared and a lot of them were title contenders.

Ray Miller was one of the best. A lightweight, he began fighting professionally at 16 and was unbeaten in his first 38 bouts, winning 15 by K.O.'s. He was the only fighter ever to knock out Jimmy McLarnin, flattening the famed "Baby Face Terror" in eight rounds in Detroit in 1928. Miller defeated three world champions at various times but was never given a legitimate shot at the title. At the tail-end of his career he lost a close ten-round decision to Barney Ross in Chicago. Miller was never counted out. He hung up his gloves in 1933 after 112 fights.

But everybody's favorite back in the days of Chicago's great club fights was Milt Aron, the rabbi's son. Aron was a crowd-pleaser. A tough *momser*, he was always willing to take two

The Kingfish Knew How to Give, and Take, a Solid Hit

By Walter Roth

In a recent book about Jewish boxers, *The Jewish Boxers Hall of Fame* by Ken Blady, the author writes that Chicago's heavyweight boxer, Kingfish Levinsky never bothered to learn the basic art of boxing. He would block an opponent's punch with his face and would attack an opponent's fist with a blunt instrument -- his head. Once in 1930 when he was asked how he had out-pointed the great boxer, Jimmy Slattery, he allegedly replied, "I hitted him where it hoit da most. Da King ain't no sucker you know".

Whether Kingfish ever really uttered these famous words is, of course, a matter of conjecture. But it is undoubtedly true that the Kingfish was a well known figure on the Chicago scene in the late 1920's and throughout the 1930's, and justifiably or not he was considered a "Klutz," the Jewish clown from Maxwell Street.

He was born on September 10, 1910 in New York City, and had the given name of Harry Krakow. In an interview given to a Miami News reporter in 1981, he relates that he was one of 17 children when he and some of his family moved to Chicago's Maxwell Street area in the early 1920's. "My family sold fish and so did I", he said, and "I only went up to the third grade. I fought in the street and finally started boxing out of the Kid Howard Gym".

How he Got "Kingfish"

When he turned pro he decided to change his name to something more memorable. He considered calling himself K.O. Hogan, Slugger Reilly or One-Round Hannigan. But his manager convinced him to keep his Jewish identity, and Harry Krakow took the name "Levinsky" because the manager thought he looked a little like "Battling Levinsky", the great Jewish lightweight champion out of New York City. As for the first name "Kingfish", the Miami News reporter writes that it was taken because it reminded Levinsky of his Maxwell Street

occupation, though other sources quote Levinsky as saying it came from one of the characters in the *Amos and Andy* show, then a popular radio program.

The new name helped him to attract public attention. But it was his brutal overhand right that won him his early fights. One of his early managers was Al Miller, a brother of Davey Miller, the famous Chicago fight referee. The Kingfish, though tall, husky and not bad looking, had no defense, never raising his left hand to blunt an opponent's jabs. The resulting pounding that he took, coupled with the unique vernacular of the Maxwell Street lingo which he uttered, made the Kingfish a favorite butt of the media. Despite his inept style of fighting, by the end of 1931 when Max Schmelling of Germany was the heavyweight champion, the Kingfish was the fourth-ranked heavyweight in the world. And then came the fight that brought him wide national attention.

On the Map

Jack Dempsey, America's greatest heavyweight, had been in retirement for over five years since his famous "slow-count" loss to Gene Tunney in Chicago. Now he was thinking of a comeback after a number of exhibition fights. The Kingfish, then 22, was signed to a four-round exhibition to test Dempsey's stamina. The fight was held at the Chicago Stadium on Thursday, February 18, 1932. Over 23,000 fans saw the Kingfish batter Dempsey, who promptly dropped his plans for a comeback.

The Kingfish now met boxers of national fame. On July 4, 1932 he lost a 20-round decision to Max Baer in 110 degree weather in Reno, Nevada. (Contrary to popular belief, Max Baer was not Jewish). But on September 18, 1933, he beat Art Sharkey in Chicago and ended up that year as the third-ranked heavyweight in the world. By now, the Kingfish had a new manager, his sister Lena Levy. She did not like the way the Kingfish had been treated by his managers -- he had often received a fraction of what his opponents took from the fight proceeds. Lena quickly became a legend. The English

punches to land one.

In 1939 in a Pier 6 brawl at the Marigold Gardens, one old fight fans still talk about, Aron knocked out Fritzie Zivic in eight rounds. Zivic went on to win the welterweight title a year later. Aron kept fighting in the small clubs.



Jackie Fields

With his knock-down, drag-'em-out style, Aron took a lot of punishment, much of it on his generous Jewish nose, which got pounded flat. After one fight in which it was broken again, an infection set in which developed into *septicemia*. Before the discovery of miracle drugs there was no way of combatting this. Milt Aron

died at 25. The boxing fraternity was stunned and the West Side went into mourning. Aron's father, Rabbi Louis Aronson, delivered the eulogy at *Anshe Odessa*.

It was a violent sport. But there were other Jewish battlers to make Chicago fight fans forget about Milt Aron. Eddie Lander was one. Lander was a hard hitter and fast as they make 'em, and was never more than a fight or two away from the top rung on the ladder. Harry Garbell was another; although he never went professional, his amateur record has never been topped. There were also such capable journeymen as Solly Dukelsky, Joey Berman, Danny Goodman, Meyer Grace and tough Al Blitz; and Max Serota, Eddie Shapiro, Sammy Weinstein and Stanley Berg. Berg later became a famous New York boxing referee.

In fact, so prominent were Jewish boxers in the city at the time that Ivan "Bunny" Colitz, who wrote a boxing column, never got over a card he saw at the old Sparta Stadium on the West Side in 1932. "There were six Jewish boxers on the same card. Barney Ross knocked out Henry Perlick. Davey Day kayoed Lou Epstein. And Harry Schuman won a decision over Solly Dukelsky. Today you'd have to go to Israel to

see a card like that."

Chicago's Jewish ringmen were always more prominent in the lighter weight divisions but they had some notable big men, too. Joe Lubin was an amateur heavyweight champion. And, of course, there was the unforgettable King Levinsky. (See related story, page 9.)

Other Parts of the Business

They were a unique product of their times, this feisty generation of Jewish prizefighters, most of whom plied their trade in small clubs and arenas with crowds coming out to see them in a day before television. Back then there were many places to see them: White City, The Cicero Stadium, Sparta, Marigold Gardens, The Ashland Auditorium, and the West Side Arena. The big fights were held at Mills Stadium, the Coliseum, Chicago Stadium, Wrigley Field or Comiskey Park.

It was not too surprising, considering all of the quality Jewish fighters there were, that boxing in Chicago in its golden era became a largely Jewish dominated sport. Jews operated the gyms, such as Macy's, Davey Miller's and Ringside. They were the managers and trainers, such as Ike Bernstein, Danny Spunt, Sam Pian and Art Winch, Ray Arcel and Nate "Night" Lewis. They were the promoters and matchmakers, such as Izzy Goldstein, Mickey "Soldier" Farr, Zibby Goldberg, Irv Schoenwald and Jack Begun. And they even announced at ringside, like the colorful Ben Bentley, who still manages sporting events for the Chicago Park District.

Where did they go, these Jewish gladiators of another generation? Why are there so few Jewish prizefighters today? Simply, the ghettos that spawned them no longer contain Jews. The Jews moved to the suburbs, the second and third and fourth generations becoming a part of America's social and economic elite. They sent their sons to the university. Their boys became doctors and lawyers, no longer having to rely on their fists to get ahead. Let the *shleppers* get their brains knocked out. But look back kindly at Chicago's great little Darlings of the Ghetto, who did it the only way they knew how. □

historian, Robert Holdone, in his book *Giants of the Ring* wrote of Lena:

And while he was committing mayhem and legalized manslaughter in the ring, she would bob up and down like an infuriated Jill-in-a-box urging Levinsky to further deeds of dastardly, with a tongue like a cactus and the vocabulary of a chimney sweep, only pausing in the interwake to give the sweating King a neat and fancy rub down in the best professional fashion.

Lena was up and down in her brother's corner so often that boxing reporters soon named her "Leaping Lena." Under her management, Kingfish met many well known fighters, took his beatings but often won. He was also receiving a greater percentage of the gate. In 1934, Lena was successful in arranging a third fight with Max Baer, now heavyweight champion of the world. On December 28, 1934 the two met for the third time in Chicago. Levinsky had been out-pointed in the first two fights, but they had been close and exciting. Baer had spent his six-month reign as champion carousing in night clubs and was out of condition. The Kingfish came out surging and repeatedly smashed his right into Baer's midriff. Gilbert Odd in his book, *The Women in the Corner*, described what happened next:

There was murder in Baer's eyes as he sat waiting for the second round to start and as soon as he saw the timekeeper move to strike the gong, he started across the ring and caught the unprepared King with a right hander to the chin as he was in the act of rising from his stool. Levinsky was knocked cold; he slid to the canvas and remained motionless while they counted him out.

The Immovable Object

In 1935, a new boxer was appearing on the American fight scene, Joe Louis, the "Brown Bomber" from Detroit. The year had been a disaster for the Kingfish; he had lost 11 fights by knock-outs and won just two. Despite that, Lena managed to land a \$30,000 contract for her



Levinsky with "Leaping" Lena

brother to fight Louis in Chicago. The fact that he might be over-matched did not apparently concern her. The fight was set for Comiskey Park on the evening of August 8, 1935. The Kingfish had not heard much about this black newcomer to the boxing stage and had predicted for the newspapers that Louis would "be a sucker for his right".

However, his brother, Fishky, and others, one after another, told him about the Bomber's record on the evening of the fight. Louis, the Kingfish learned, had just knocked out Primo Carnera in six rounds, and 13 of his 23 victims had been leveled in three rounds or less. Suddenly, as the story goes, the Kingfish was petrified. Some say he locked himself in a toilet, which had to be forced open. Some say Levinsky had to be dragged into the boxing arena. A couple of the preliminary fights were cancelled for fear that the Kingfish would not stay for the main fight. The main bout, witnessed by 40,000 fans, lasted 2 minutes and 21 seconds. Louis threw some punches, Levinsky one in return. The Kingfish fell to the floor and was quickly counted out. Some fans never saw any of the fight, as it was over so quickly. It was, of course, a disgraceful moment for the Kingfish. His reputation as a "klutz" and clown was now secure.

Lena gave up her job as the Kingfish's manager after she was suspended for unbecoming conduct in the ring when a 10-round decision went against her brother. The Kingfish's boxing career also went on a steep decline. In 1937 he managed to arrange a fight in London with Jack Doyle, an eccentric British singer and boxer. The fight apparently reached comic levels, for the Kingfish was reported to have held onto Doyle so often that the two of them were waltzing in the ring rather than boxing. While in London, the Kingfish visited Buckingham Palace, of which he was reported to have said, "Da joint where dat other King hangs out". He boxed professionally until 1939, ending his career with a record of 72 victories and 6 draws in his 110 fights. He had earned over a half a million dollars during his boxing career, but when he quit the boxing ring he was penniless.

He turned to wrestling for a short time in order to make a living. In Tampa, Florida, he entered a novel match with a Chief Chewaki that allowed both boxing and wrestling in the same fight. He was often battered in these matches and his wrestling career ended when he punched a referee.

The Kingfish was married three times. His first wife, a tap dancer, was said to have divorced him on the grounds that he ate herring in bed and the bones tickled her. Nothing is known of his second wife. His third wife, whom he married in Crown Point, Indiana in 1938, was Roxanne Glickman and she was a fan dancer.

A New Career

At the time of his retirement from the boxing and wrestling rings, the Kingfish was said by some to have been slightly eccentric. He also became a tie salesman. Many Chicagoans still remember, with great warmth, seeing the Kingfish in local hotels and restaurants, selling his colorful ties which bore his Kingfish label and usually cost about \$3.50. Later he took himself and his tie business to Miami. The Miami News quotes a bellboy at a Miami Hotel with respect to the Kingfish's sales tactics:

I've watched him for 10 years and know his

JOE LOUIS VS. KING LEVINSKY
WED. - AUG. 7 (10 ROUNDS)
SEATS ON SALE—MORRISON HOTEL
GRAND HOTEL—5046 SOUTH PARK
RESERVED SEATS \$3.60, \$6.00, \$10.00 GENERAL ADMISSION \$2.40
(ALL TAX INCLUDED)
 Joe Foley, Promoter Mickey Farr, Matchmaker
COMISKEY PARK 35th AND SHIELDS

The Program from the Infamous Fight against Louis

routine...He tells them he's punch drunk. Some of the people believe it and buy 'cause they feel sorry for him. But I don't. I think that's just how he sells his ties.

The Kingfish is no longer selling ties. He appears to have disappeared from public life, though no obituary has appeared. If alive, he would be 83 years of age. While he may have been a clown to the media, he was to many Jews, a hero from Maxwell Street. Chicagoans recall his feats well. One veteran Chicagoan was quoted in the Miami News:

Kingfish was the toast of Chicago. He was an idol of the Jewish community...He was such a character and on any given night he could beat anyone. He fought the best heavyweights on earth.

Ben Bentley, a veteran Jewish ring announcer, who now works as a TV sport commentator and Park District publicist, views the Kingfish as a "tough, courageous fighter", despite the Louis fight. After all, another world heavyweight champion, Max Schmelling suffered almost the exact same fate at the hands of Louis in June, 1938.

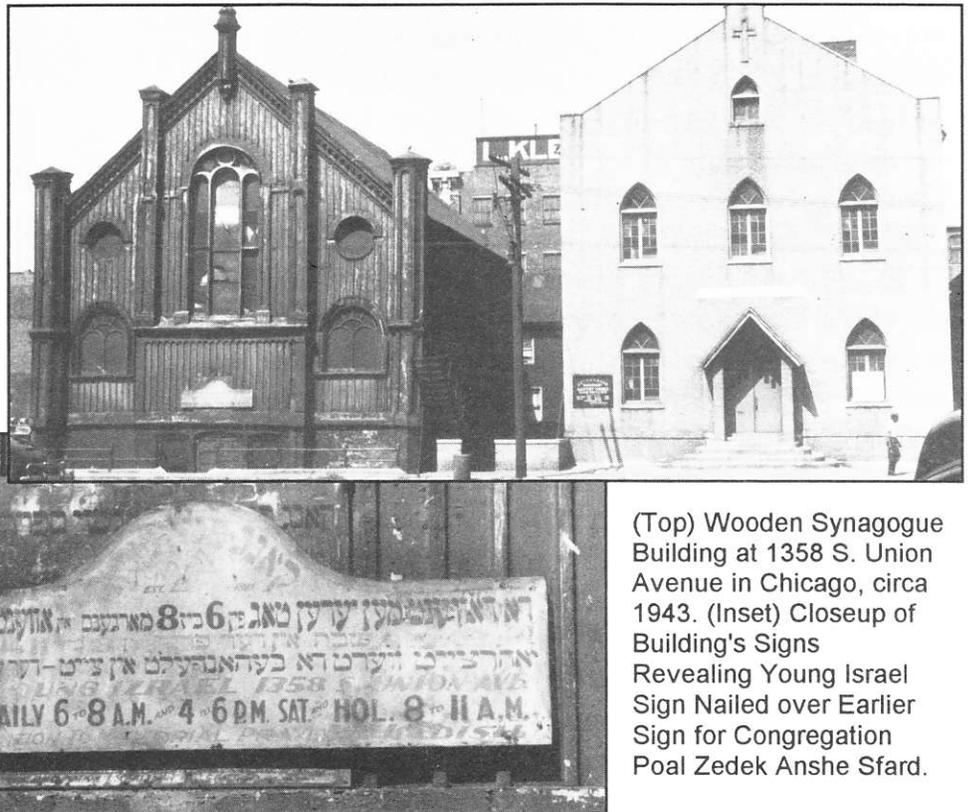
The Kingfish, whether alive or not, deserves to be remembered. He is a representative of those poor, uneducated, impoverished Chicago Jews who used their fists, as well as their heads, to punch out their destiny in the arenas and gardens of the Promised Land. □

Photographs of Wood Synagogue Picture History

Chicago Jewish history is richer because Dr. Jack H. Sloan thought it important to take pictures some 50 years ago of a wooden synagogue about to be demolished.

That synagogue was at 1358 South Union Avenue, in the Maxwell Street area, and was called Congregation Poal Zedek Anshe Sfarad according to the city directories from 1910 through 1923. However, the sign pictured on the building (in front of an earlier one reading Poal Zedek) gives the name of a later occupant, Young Izrael (sic), a congregation founded in 1883.

One of those two Orthodox congregations continued in existence long after the demise of the Union Avenue building. Poal Zedek is now located at 2801 West Albion Avenue. Young Israel of Chicago, a local branch of a national movement founded in the 1900s, is situated in a bungalow at 4931 North Kimball Avenue, but it not connected to the earlier Young Israel.



(Top) Wooden Synagogue Building at 1358 S. Union Avenue in Chicago, circa 1943. (Inset) Closeup of Building's Signs Revealing Young Israel Sign Nailed over Earlier Sign for Congregation Poal Zedek Anshe Sfarad.

We can verify the building's location in two ways. It is next to the former Roumanian Congregation at 1352 South Union Avenue, which in this picture is already identified by a sign on the building as the Gethsemane Missionary Baptist Church. Also visible in a sign from L. Kle(in)'s Department Store on Halsted Street over the rooftops.

Judging from the automobiles in the picture, the pictures must have been taken in the late '30s or early '40s. According to the barely legible sign, services were held from 6 to 8

a.m. and 4 to 6 p.m. On Saturdays and holidays, they ran until 11 a.m. "...to Memorial Prayers ...Kadish" is also painted on the sign.

It is interesting to note that the two rolls of eight-exposure film were developed for 10 cents each and the 16 prints were made for five cents each.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Sloan for giving these pictures to us. If you have pictures of Jewish historical interest, please let us know. □

--Norman D. Schwartz

Society Welcomes New Members

It's been a quarter of growth for the Society and we would like to welcome the many new members who have joined in the last three months.

We welcome each of them separately and all of them collectively. The job of telling the history of our community is possible only when all of us participate in it.

We are grateful for our continuing

members as well as the following new members:

*Mr. & Mrs. Irving
Feinman
Mr. & Mrs. Ken
Hollander
Sheldon Isenberg
Harriet Gerber
Lewis
Barbara Morgenstern*

*Mr. & Mrs. Arnold
Miller
Leonore Seelig
Temple Chai
Roberta Sal Ury
Mr. & Mrs. Harry
Wolff, Jr.
Nancy Zisook*

We invite everyone to participate in all of our activities. See the newsletter

and other mailings for announcements of our quarterly open meetings and consider participating in our oral history project, our proposed video history of the Jews of Chicago, and in the planning process behind the many events we undertake.

What's more, we ask you to consider giving memberships to our Society to friends, family members or former Chicagoans who may have left the city but not gotten it out of their hearts entirely. □

Oral History Excerpt:

Bertha Rissman Tells of Hadassah's Early Days, Raising Funds for Israel

Bertha Read Rissman was a part of Chicago Jewish philanthropic organizations for more than 65 years. As a founding member of the Chicago Hadassah, as a leader in the efforts to sell U.S. World War II bonds and then Israeli bonds, and as president of Hadassah during the dramatic years following the founding of Israel, she helped organize the fundraising organizations we know today.

The following excerpt is from an oral history taken from Mrs. Rissman by Muriel Rogers, Adele Hast, and Norman and Moselle Schwartz on October 24, 1977 when she was 92 years old.

Rissman: Hadassah as you know is very much tied up with Zionism. In the beginning there were people who came here from Europe where there were groups interested in the ideal of sometime having a home in Palestine. Among them was Mr. Bernard Horwich. He and others came here and they organized a group called the Knights of Zion. That was the first Zionist group. Mr. Horwich and a lawyer by the name of Mr. Zolotkof were delegates of the first Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland in 1897.

Hadassah came into being in 1912 which was a long time after 1897. It came into being as a result of Henrietta Szold's visit to Palestine. She visited Palestine with her mother and she was very much disturbed by the medical conditions in Jerusalem where the women had all the old-fashioned superstitions and ideas about child raising such as bundling, evil eye, and things like that. Henrietta Szold had a class at Temple Emanuel in New York -- a study group -- and when she returned from Palestine, she told the group about her experience there. This was on Purim Day in 1912 and it was at that time that Miss Szold suggested to her group that they do something to help lessen the infant mortality in Palestine. They decided that instead of just being a study group, they would become an organized group to do something for at least the infants in Palestine and since it was Purim they took the name of Hadassah because that was the name of Queen Esther.

That was in 1912. When Miss Szold was successful with that group, she decided to go on a trip through the country and see if she could not get other groups interested because her original group was only a small group of 20 women. So she came to Chicago. At that time there was a group in Chicago of young women who called themselves the Clara D. Hirsch Group -- named after Baron Hirsch, the great philanthropist. When Henrietta Szold spoke to this group they were all interested in doing something for Palestine so they changed their name to Hadassah. There was another group that Miss Szold spoke to (she was a good friend of the first Mrs. Julius Rosenwald) and Mrs. Rosenwald invited a group of friends to come to listen to Miss Szold and they became interested in doing a little philanthropic work for Palestine. They would try and raise a little money to send to Palestine. But of course that group was not too long-lived, the reason being that one of the Rosenwalds became the leader of the Council of Judaism against Zionism. But that didn't stop Hadassah from growing and growing.

Interviewer: When did Henrietta Szold come to Chicago?

Rissman: That was in 1913. As I said, the first Chicago Hadassah group met on the West Side in the Jewish People's Institute on Taylor Street. Hadassah was a very small group and they were an appendage of the Zionist organization. In 1918 Judge Mack came to Chicago because after the Balfour Declaration he wanted to interest men in joining the Zionist organization and he spoke at Rodfei Zedek. At that time my mother and I both lived on the South Side and it just so happened that my brother, Edward Chayes, was Judge Mack's secretary. He considered Judge Mack to be an outstanding man and so we were anxious to hear what Judge Mack had to say.

My mother and I went to the meeting at Rodfei Zedek and it was decided there to form a Zionist group on the South Side. They needed officers -- and I don't know how this happened because I didn't think anyone knew me there -- but anyway, they asked me to be secretary of the South Side Zionist organization.

I had three very young children at that time but my mother was delighted that I was elected to the position. I said I couldn't possibly take it but my mother said that if I wanted to go she would stay with the children; but believe me, she never did. Her motto was that she didn't want to be a *nonke*. Some

of the older women of that time thought it was sort of degrading to be called in to sit with their grandchildren. Nowadays grandmothers babysit more, but not in those days. So out of the blue sky I not only became a member of the Zionist organization but also the secretary of the South Side group...

[One of Chicago Hadassah's later presidents]... was Braina Olschang Shulman. Braina came from Canada. She married here but she didn't know anyone here and she was not originally interested in joining the organization but her mother-in-law got her involved in Hadassah.

Braina's second husband was Bernard Shulman. Now the Shulman family were the backbone of the Zionist movement in Chicago. Max Shulman was one of the earliest Zionists and Hannah Shulman was one of the presidents of the original small group of Hadassah...

So you see, Hadassah had a good, solid beginning with good leadership. Now Braina was a very bright woman and a good president and she did very well. She died a few years ago at a Hadassah meeting on the North Shore for bonds. She finished her speech and said, "God Bless You" and dropped down dead. So that was a very nice exit but shocking.

During Braina's administration I insisted we have a U.S. bond drive -- this was during World War II -- and we raised 5 million dollars in U.S. bonds in our Hadassah office. It was like a branch of the U.S. Post Office.

Interviewer: Didn't you get an award for the U.S. bonds?

Rissman: Yes. I was chairman of the U.S. bond drive during Braina's administration, 1943-45.

Interviewer: And you were president after Braina?

Rissman: Yes. Right after Braina I became president. But before I was president of [Chicago] Hadassah, in 1925 at a meeting of the Zionist organization and Hadassah in Wisconsin, we organized the Midwest Region of Hadassah and I was



Photograph by Moselle Schwartz

Bertha Rissman in 1978

president of the Midwestern Region from 1925 to 1930. We had 13 states in that region. I travelled to all of our organizing chapters but in 1930 my first husband died. He was hurt in an auto accident so that was why I retired in 1930 from the Midwest Region.

During my administration as president of Chicago Hadassah, it was a very exciting time because from 1945 to 1949 there was the end of the war, the opening of the Displaced Persons Camps, the declaration of independence of Israel -- so it was a time of great excitement and interest. During my

administration we had 15,000 members in Chicago. Those years were hectic but the most soul-stirring. It was the time when everyone was interested and wanted to do something to help.

During the Israel war of 1948, under my administration as Hadassah president, we organized two blood banks -- one at Michael Reese and one at Mt. Sinai -- to send blood to Israel. I have a picture of that if you want to see it.

In 1951 Ben Gurion came to this country to start the Israeli bond drive. At that time he thought that it was very important that Israel does not just live by donations but that people should invest in Israel. Now National Hadassah was not too excited about it because they thought if we got our women to buy bonds for Israel we wouldn't take care of our own Hadassah projects. But I felt that with more people involved in Israel, there would be more who were concerned about everything in Israel. So I had quite a struggle to get our group to accept the idea of bonds.

After I served as Chicago Hadassah president, I was asked to be Hadassah bond chairman, so I was the first all-Chicago chairman of Israel bonds.

Interviewer: Going back to the early years of Hadassah -- what were the kinds of activities of the organization?

Rissman: When I first came into Hadassah we raised money by giving bazaars, theater parties -- all those

things that cost them so much to put up. It seemed to me that it was demeaning and too much effort for too little results. My idea was what we called at that time the tithe, based on the Biblical idea that everyone should give 10 percent of their income for the needs of the community. Bertha Birkman was fundraising chairman at that time. We felt everyone should give their contribution and get other contributions from other people and do away with all these affairs -- spending so much money to get a name to appear and all that, and that's when we went out in a total effort to make it something for the whole public. Afterwards it was turned into the "Give and Get" luncheon. Now the first Give and Get luncheon was in 1927. Pearl Franklin was president. We got 1000 women who each had \$50 to their credit whether they gave it or got it. It was the most

sensational affair in that era -- 1927 -- for a woman's organization to raise that much money and to get 1000 people to attend. Then we had a special hostess for that luncheon -- Mrs. Balaban, the mother of the theater Balabans. The luncheon didn't cost us much. At that time you could get a luncheon for \$2.50 a person and so for a thousand people it wasn't such a tremendous sum. Mrs. Balaban was the hostess for a couple of years and, when she passed away, Hattie Callner became our hostess for a number of years. At that first Give and Get luncheon we raised almost \$50,000, but Milton Callner gave us the rest so we would have the total \$50,000. It was really a landmark in the history of women's organizations in Chicago.

Interviewer: That was 1927?

Rissman: Yes. Last year was our 50th anniversary of that first Give and Get luncheon.

Interviewer: Hadassah has been involved with so many different projects. What were the first ones?

Rissman: The first one was to send two nurses to Jerusalem to try and teach the women how to take care of their babies and to set up a welfare station to treat the children, etc. Now Hadassah was able to raise money to send only one nurse, but Mr. Nathan Strauss said that if we had the money for one nurse, he would give the money for the other nurse so that the two nurses would be in Jerusalem together. And

that project was called "A Drop of Milk."

Now in 1918 after World War I, Miss Szold asked Hadassah to set up a medical unit of doctors. There was a hospital in Jerusalem called the Rothschild Hospital and they would give the building to Hadassah if Hadassah would come and bring a unit over there. Now that was the first Hadassah medical unit: doctors, nurses, dentists, dieticians, everything that a hospital required. That was the first big venture that Hadassah had.

Now with this "Drop of Milk" project, this spread to other cities. It just didn't remain in Jerusalem. The big thing that we had of course was the hospital. And

then Nathan Straus opened a sort of clinic in Jerusalem. (The building is still there being used by Hadassah.) This was a clinic where people could go in

My mother said that if I wanted to go she would stay with the children; but believe me, she never did...women of that time thought it was degrading...to sit for their grandchildren.

as outpatients, as it were. Mr. Strauss was very much interested in the work that Hadassah was doing and that was what he did by himself, but of course Hadassah had to support it. Lots of people had good ideas that were put in Hadassah's lap to take care of, and our quotas go up and up.

Interviewer: Was this hospital project for the national or was it just for the Chicago area?

Rissman: For the national. Every project that Chicago had was a part of the national picture. The national organizes the project, makes the budget for the project, and assigns a quota to each chapter in order to fill that budget. We do not go out and do separate work from the national.

Interviewer: This was true from the start, even in the early years?

Rissman: Yes, always. We were just part of the big picture.

Interviewer: Were there many chapters nationwide at that time when Chicago started?

Rissman: The first one was in New York but Henrietta Szold travelled all over the country and I don't know how many there were. When I became regional president in 1925 there were very few chapters in this region. I probably started a dozen or more -- Indianapolis, Joliet, etc. I can't even recall the number of places I went to start the chapters. □