



chicago jewish historical society

# CHICAGO JEWISH HISTORY

*“Now the dreary winter’s over / Fled with him are grief and pain /  
When the trees their bloom recover / Then the soul is born again.”*

*from “Nachum: Spring Songs” by Moses Ibn Ezra, translated from the Hebrew by Emma Lazarus  
American Academy of Poets, poets.org, May 2024*

## The Whole World Is a Narrow Bridge: A Synagogue Reborn on the South Side

By Laurence Edwards

*Kol ha-olam kulo gesher tsar me'od  
V'ha-ikar lo l'fached klal*

The whole world is a narrow bridge and the main thing  
is not to be afraid  
– *Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav*

Churches are being turned into performance spaces, like the Epiphany Center in Chicago<sup>1</sup> and Amazing Grace in London.<sup>2</sup> Old banks and warehouses are becoming exhibition spaces and studios, such as the Stony Island Arts Bank.<sup>3</sup> Now, a century-old synagogue, which also served several Christian congregations over the years, has been resurrected as an active center for creative arts.

Its immediate neighborhood is rich with art and history. One block north is Washington Park, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. In the park, just a few blocks away, is Lorado Taft’s magnificent sculpture, “The Fountain of Time.” About eight blocks east is the University of Chicago’s Logan Center for the Arts. Four blocks to the west is the home that playwright Lorraine Hansberry’s father bought, itself a central figure in “A Raisin in the Sun.” About five blocks to the south is the Emmett & Mamie Till-Mobley House, an historic landmark. Chicago Jewish history buffs will also recognize the area as the location of the Drexel Home (1893–1981).<sup>4</sup>



Amber and Tom Ginsburg had been looking in and around Hyde Park for some land on which to build a home, a “family compound.” Buying a vacant lot from the City of Chicago proved daunting (bureaucratic obstacles that really could be simplified). Then they happened upon a church building that was for sale. It looked like the building was destined to be torn down for development of a couple of apartment buildings. But the Ginsburgs thought that the building could be saved. And they were further interested because the building had originally been a synagogue. Tom’s father, Sam, contacted the Chicago Jewish Historical Society in 2020 and received a prompt response from the late Jerry Levin, who helped him compile a timeline of B’nai Bezalel’s history.<sup>5</sup>

continued on page 4

## PRESIDENT'S COLUMN



Dr. Rachelle Gold

Can we enhance our understanding of Chicago Jewish history by exploring other American Jewish communities? Absolutely. My conviction is confirmed by a fascinating recent trip to Savannah, Georgia, an historic American city that has a small Jewish population of about 4,000, but a multifaceted, strong Jewish community with a long record of settlement. (My 2025 trip to Savannah's "sister city," Charleston, South Carolina, also sparked new perspectives on our Chicago community, and, like the Savannah visit, enabled me to build Jewish connections between my host city and Chicago. I wrote about the Charleston trip in the Spring 2025 issue of *CJH*.)

To plan my visit to Savannah, I consulted Rachel Heimovics, our erudite past president, who has been a resident of the South for many years. She is an expert and leader in the field of Southern Jewish history, having served as past president of the Southern Jewish Historical Society and founding managing editor of the Society's journal, *Southern Jewish History* (*SJH*).

Rachel's referrals led me to Mark Bauman, founding and current editor of *SJH*; Rabbi Lance Sussman, historian of American Jewry, *SJH* memoir editor, and rabbi emeritus of Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel in Elkins, Park, Penn.; and to B. H. Levy Jr. ("B. H."), a prominent Jewish Savannahian who is a descendant of Benjamin Sheftall. Sheftall was one of the first Jews to arrive in Savannah, in 1733, the year the colony was settled.

I want to share the Savannah experiences that made an impression and can be applied to our Chicago Jewish community. At the outset, I reminded myself that colonial American Jewish communities, of which Savannah is one, have Sephardic roots, distinct from the Ashkenazic origins of communities founded later. As we all know, Chicago's first residents arrived in the 1840s from German-speaking lands. They established our oldest congregation, Kehilath Anshe Ma'arav, now KAM Isaiah Israel, in 1847.

My Jewish experience in Savannah began at B. H.'s synagogue, Congregation Mickve Israel, the third oldest in the U.S., established in 1733. B. H. and his father, B. H. Levy Sr. z"l, were presidents. The monumental building, completed in 1878, is noted for its neo-Gothic architecture. B. H. graciously set up private tours and meetings with Mickve Israel's personable and knowledgeable members and staff. I toured the synagogue, the Jewish sites in the surrounding historic district, and the historic Jewish cemeteries. My guides were Bruce Cohen, Herbert and Teresa Victor, Tony Lembeck, and Toby Hollenberg. I also met with Bob Greenberg, the executive director of Mickve Israel.

Among the many amazing things I saw was the Torah scroll brought over by the first Jews. Believed to be the oldest in the U.S., it was scribed in the 1400s. It is on display in the museum of Mickve Israel. I also visited the site of the first Jewish burial ground in the median of one of Savannah's famous city streets and read the touching inscriptions on the monuments in the historic cemeteries. I also observed the current and former Jewish-owned stores on Broughton, the central commercial street.



One of the Jewish-owned businesses on Savannah's Broughton Street

I was inspired to think about patterns of acceptance of Jews by the larger community and Jewish contributions to America. My visit occurred too soon to see the major exhibition that will be hosted by Mickve Israel, from May 1, 2026, through January 2027, "celebrating the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, telling a powerful and timely story — how Jewish settlers and other religious minorities helped shape the foundational American ideal of religious liberty" ([mickveisrael.org/america250](http://mickveisrael.org/america250)).



## 2026 Officers and Board of Directors

Dr. Rachele Gold

**President**

Rabbi Moshe Simkovich

**Vice President**

Janet Iltis

**Secretary**

Debra Eisenstein

**Treasurer**

Patti Ray

**Membership Chair**

Raymond Asher

Eric Benjaminson

Rachel Heimovics Braun

Rabbi Laurence Edwards, Ph.D.

Elise Ginsparg

Jacob M. Kaplan

Joy Kingsolver

Dr. Jessica Kirzane

Mark Mandle

Dr. Edward H. Mazur

Matthew Nickerson

Joan Pomaranc

Joel Rubin

### Past Presidents

Muriel Rogers z"l

*Founding President*

Dr. Adele Hast z"l

Rachel Heimovics Braun

Norman D. Schwartz z"l

Walter Roth z"l

Dr. Edward H. Mazur

Jerold Levin z"l

### Chicago Jewish History

is published quarterly by the CJHS at

610 S. Michigan Ave., Room 803,

Chicago, IL 60605.

Phone (312) 663-5634

[info@chicagojewishhistory.org](mailto:info@chicagojewishhistory.org).

Single copies \$12 postpaid

**Editor/Designer** Robert Nagler Miller

Submissions: Request guidelines at

[info@chicagojewishhistory.org](mailto:info@chicagojewishhistory.org)

The Jewish Savannahians I met emphasized that, in their experience, anti-Jewish discrimination has been minimal, with Savannah Jews having played significant roles in all sectors of life of the city and the State of Georgia. Historical accounts show that colonial-era Jewish immigrants achieved acceptance, but these early Jews had to overcome obstacles.

Georgia came into existence in 1732, when the British created a trusteeship to establish the colony. Organized Jewish communities already existed in Newport, Rhode Island, and New York, and Jews were living in Charleston, South Carolina. James Oglethorpe was the administrator and founder of the Georgia colony. Savannah was to become the third Jewish community in America. Oglethorpe and the first settlers arrived from England in February 1733. An epidemic struck the settlement shortly thereafter. In July 1733, a group of 41 Jews arrived, consisting of Portuguese *conversos*, Jews who had converted to Christianity under coercion during the Inquisition but practiced Judaism in secret. Having fled to England, they were joined in the new colony by a number of German Jews. There was resistance to the arrival of the Jews, but their timing proved to be opportune. They were allowed to stay because their group included a doctor, Samuel Nunes, who was needed to help control an epidemic that had already killed the community's doctor and others.

The colony, however, was averse to granting property rights to the Jews. A legal query was submitted to officials in Charleston. No restrictions were found, thus allowing Jewish land ownership, and advancing the Jews' integration and participation in the economy and general community.

In addition to the Reform Mickve Israel, Savannah is home to synagogues representing other major denominations: Agudath Achim, Conservative, founded in 1903; and Bnai Brith Jacob (BBJ), Orthodox, founded in 1861; and a Chabad. Since I was interested in getting a feel for the breadth of the community, and in particular, the challenges of practicing Orthodox Judaism in a small community, I contacted BBJ and met there with Rabbi Avi Nitekman. A native Chicagoan, Rabbi Nitekman is head of BBJ's *kollel*, a group of scholars engaged in advanced Torah study, and is soon assuming the rabbinic leadership role from the retiring Rabbi Avigdor Slatius, BBJ's spiritual leader since 1981. Rabbi Slatius also has a Chicago connection: his wife grew up there.

BBJ, like Mickve Israel, cherishes its history. Rabbi Nitekman showed me mementos and artifacts displayed in the beautiful, spacious synagogue building, which was constructed in 1962. He described the vitality of the Orthodox community, including local people and transplants, as well as those who had become more observant. He pointed out the on-site availability of services regarded as essential for an Orthodox community: a Jewish day school, the Rambam Day School; a kosher caterer; and a newly built *mikvah*, or ritual bath – belying the assumption that Orthodox life requires a large Jewish population.

A few blocks from BBJ is the Jewish Educational Alliance (JEA), established in 1912. It serves the local community "through an array of cultural programs and community events, educational and fitness classes, social groups for teens and adults, charitable work, [and] holiday celebrations. ... The JEA strengthens family life and enhances community relations." ([savannahjea.org](http://savannahjea.org)). The JEA houses the Savannah Jewish Federation. I met with the Sam Friedman, the executive director of both organizations, who echoed the optimism expressed by others. He noted that Jews from different religious sectors identify with the broader Jewish community and try to work in concert for the benefit of all. There are more connections among different denominations than in many larger Jewish communities. For example, a father with a young family who had relocated to Savannah for

continued on page 8

## The Whole World Is a Narrow Bridge

continued from front page

### Then: Congregation B'nai Bezalel

In the midst of a busy and richly historic South Side neighborhood, the members of Congregation B'nai Bezalel built a synagogue in 1923 at 6028 S. Champlain Ave. The congregation had been founded in 1904. (Some accounts say 1906 or 1910, but a cornerstone of the building clearly says, "Organized 1904.") Its previous address was 6141 S. Drexel Ave., which would have been directly across the street from the Drexel Home. That is the address given for a meeting (see below), but it is not clear whether there was a synagogue at that location. It seems to me more likely that it was the address of a member, or perhaps of an office where meetings could be held. Other than that address, I have been unable to find any trace of B'nai Bezalel's physical presence from its founding in 1904 to the construction of the building on Champlain in 1923.



Congregation B'nai Bezalel cornerstone. Names on cornerstone (top to bottom): Leo Behrstock, Joseph Leibowitz, Mordecai Roman, Jacob Siegel

photo by Tom Ginsburg; photoshopped by Sam Ginsburg

Bezalel is the name, appropriately, of the famous art academy in Jerusalem founded by Boris Schatz in 1906. It is unusual, though, to name a congregation for the chief architect of the desert Tabernacle (see Exodus 31:1–5), which leads one to think it may have been founded by skilled craftsmen and artisans. I have been able to find very little information about its founding members. Tom mentioned an old clipping in which members of the congregation referred to themselves as “the B'nai Bezalel,” not just members, but inheritors, in some sense, of the legacy of Bezalel.

Of the names listed on the cornerstone, I have found the following. A Leo Behrstock is buried at Shalom Memorial Park, where his marker gives the dates 1881–1961. The website Geni.com has a listing for a Joseph Leibowitz, who was born in Romania in 1874. The brief description says, “Joseph worked with Theodore Hertzfel (Zionist) in Europe. He was a builder/contractor and built homes in Chicago and Detroit. When he was around 50 or 60 he had cancer of the larynx. He had an artificial voice box after the surgery.”

These were not the only individuals active in the congregation. In a biographical sketch of Dr. Irving Barkan, an educational leader in the Chicago Jewish community for some 40 years, Edward Mazur writes:

“Irving Barkan’s involvement in Chicago Jewish education began in 1933, while he was pursuing his doctorate [at the University of Chicago]. Dr. Alexander M. Dushkin, a seminal figure in Jewish education, not only in Chicago, but also nationally and in the yishuv, offered him a teaching position at Congregation B'nai Bezalel in Hyde Park. Barkan was one to face challenges boldly and directly. He went around the neighborhood, knocked on doors, and asked families to bring their children to the synagogue’s school.”<sup>6</sup>

Barkan’s tenure there lasted only two years, after which he joined the staff of South Side Hebrew Congregation in South Shore, where he remained for some 20 years. He also served as Superintendent of the Board of Jewish Education of Metropolitan Chicago.

Congregation B'nai Bezalel occupied the building from 1923–1942. A notice in *The Sentinel* announces the ground-breaking on May 23, 1923. The notice describes the congregation as “a progressive orthodox synagogue,” and also mentions two affiliated organizations: the Young People’s Jewish Council of Woodlawn and the Women’s Jewish Council of Woodlawn.<sup>7</sup> By June 1934, there were mergers, and the congregation was identified as “Cong. Beth Jacob B'nai Bezalel Anshe Misrach,” still at the Champlain address.<sup>8</sup> (Anshe Misrach or Mizrach had been previously located at 56th & Wabash.) Adam Neuberger is listed as Rabbi and M. Waxer as Cantor. Some time after vacating the Champlain building, the congregation is listed at 2660 E. 75th St. Two years later, B'nai Bezalel is located at 7544 S. Saginaw. Finally, about 1956, Congregation B'nai Bezalel Central Synagogue constructed a building at 7549 S. Phillips, where it continued to operate until 1969. For most of those years, its Rabbi was Abraham Shoulson. That corner, 76th & Phillips, was once known as the “Jewish Corner.”<sup>9</sup> The building on Phillips is now the Free

Salvation Missionary Baptist Church. Across Phillips was Congregation Habonim, whose building now houses South Central Community Services. And on the southeast corner was a YMHA, now the location of the Rebecca K. Crown Center of the Chicago Youth Centers. In the 1986 anniversary volume published by *The Sentinel*, an article by Rabbi William Frankel on the Conservative Movement in Chicago lists B'nai Bezalel under "Conservative Congregations Which No Longer Exist."<sup>10</sup> At some point, there was apparently a shift in affiliation.

Over the next seven decades, the Champlain facility was owned by several different Christian congregations. Best known was The Cosmopolitan Church of Prayer. Their famous choir had five top-20 singles on the gospel charts.<sup>11</sup>

### The Architect

The building was designed by David Saul Klafter, also known for designing some of the first movie theaters in Chicago, as well as garages, bus terminals, and private homes. He later served as Cook County architect (1941-1948).<sup>12</sup> One of his designs for a private residence, the Fred L. Mandel Jr. (of Mandel Brothers Department Store) house in Highland Park, is listed on the U.S. Register of National Historic Places.<sup>13</sup> In *The Sentinel's History of Chicago Jewry 1911-1961*, Klafter is referred to as the "dean of Jewish architects today."<sup>14</sup> As of 1961, he had spent more than 50 years in the profession, for some of them as part of the firm Klafter, Klaber & Grunsfeld, and also associated with his brother, Joseph H. Klafter. Hyman Meites notes that he was a native of Cincinnati but grew up in Chicago. He studied at the Art Institute and at the University of Illinois School of Architecture.<sup>15</sup> Klafter could well be the subject of a separate article.

### A Mysterious Absence

The Hyman Meites history was published in 1924, with a supplement in 1927. It includes descriptions and photos of Chicago synagogues at that time. It makes no mention of B'nai Bezalel as a congregation. Meites is quite complete in giving detailed descriptions of other synagogue building projects around the same time. The 1920s (post-World War I and pre-Depression) were an active time for construction projects of all kinds. South Side synagogues were part of the boom.

Meites tells us that Rodfei Zedek was planning a new building at 54th and Greenwood. KAM's new building at 50th and Drexel is pictured. Isaiah Temple at Greenwood and Hyde Park Boulevard (1923) is pictured, along with the information that the building was completed at about the same time as the merger between Isaiah and Temple Israel (B'nai Sholom Temple Israel had been at 53rd and Michigan), and thus the new building became Isaiah-Israel. Today it is KAM-Isaiah Israel.

Other South Side congregations described at length include:

- South Side Hebrew Congregation at 74th and Chappell. (Meites includes a photo of the cornerstone of the South Shore building being laid, 1926.)
- South Shore Temple (72nd and Jeffrey) was organized in 1922.
- Beth Hamedrash Hagadol (Anshe Dorum) at 5129 Indiana
- Chicago Sinai at 46th and Grand Boulevard (now Martin Luther King, Jr.) built 1911

Altogether, Meites offers a rather complete list of South Side congregations of the time, most of them illustrated. Still, Congregation B'nai Bezalel is strangely absent.

Any theories as to why B'nai Bezalel goes unmentioned in such an otherwise complete historical survey would be purely speculative on my part, but I cannot help speculating. Were the founders of CBB more blue-collar than the pillars of the business community in Hyde Park and Kenwood? Was Woodlawn already a less well-to-do community? Such might be suggested by the unusual name B'nai Bezalel - artisans and craftsmen rather than captains of industry. If so, one wonders whether some of them might have been among the workers who came to the South Side to build the World's Fair of 1893, and then perhaps stayed.



The ark as it now appears in the former sanctuary  
Photo by Laurence Edwards

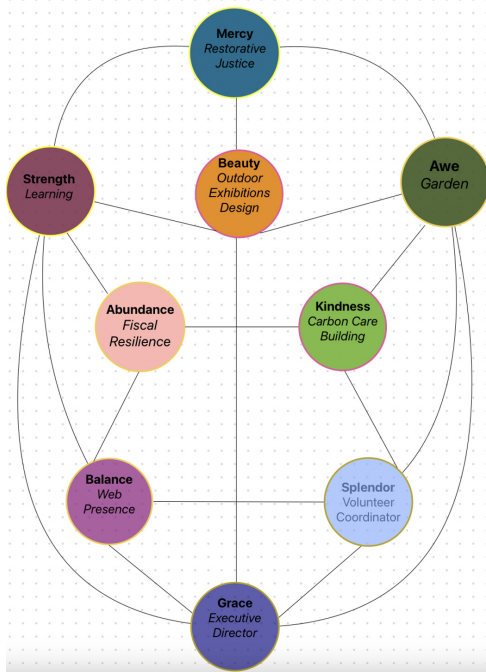
## The Whole World Is a Narrow Bridge

continued from front page

Irving Cutler cites a letter found in the Chicago Jewish Archives from December 1922. Officers of B'nai Bezalel are summoning an unnamed member (or perhaps recent treasurer?) to a meeting to be held at 6141 S. Drexel Ave., "to make an accounting of all moneys collected by you for and in behalf of the congregation," and threatening legal action.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the funds in dispute were collected for the construction of the new building. There is no indication of how the dispute was resolved, but the building was completed. Did some whiff of scandal attach to the congregation after this dispute, and did that lead Meites to think it better left unmentioned?

### Now: Narrow Bridge Arts Club

Narrow Bridge Committee Structure



The resurrection of the 1923 building was undertaken in 2020 by Amber and Tom Ginsburg. Tom and Amber, who met at Berkeley High School, highlight the diversity of the Bay Area Jewish community. Tom grew up in a modern Orthodox synagogue, while Amber was from the unaffiliated world of abundant laughter, large dinners, and leftist politics.<sup>17</sup> They have imported some of that Bay Area spirit to Hyde Park. Prior to their intervention, the building was facing likely demolition. As noted on the Narrow Bridge website, "They were the bidders who were not going to tear down the building and convert the three lots into the zoning approved 23 condominiums." Now it is their home, as well as a bustling center for other practicing artists. And the project has been realized with scrupulous attention to reuse of materials and ecological impact.

Amber is a practicing artist who also lectures in visual arts at the University of Chicago. Her own self-description hints at this newest undertaking:

"I create site-generated projects and social sculptures that insert historical scenarios into present day situations, as well as engage present day histories to imagine alternative futures. My background in craft orient my projects toward the continuities and ruptures in material and social histories... Always interested in history, more recently, I have been drawn to imagined futures, specifically a future that includes human survival. I work in large-scale sculptural forms that engage a specific site..."<sup>18</sup>

"Site-generated projects," "alternative futures," "a future that includes human survival" – all of these elements come together in the Narrow Bridge.

Tom is Professor of International Law at the University of Chicago. Among his many involvements: He currently co-directs the Comparative Constitutions Project, an effort funded by the National Science Foundation to gather and analyze the constitutions of all independent nation-states since 1789.... [He works] with numerous international development agencies and foreign governments on legal and constitutional reform. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and co-host of the *Entitled* podcast on human rights. He is also the founding Faculty Director of the Forum on Free Inquiry and Expression.<sup>19</sup>

On a cold February morning, Tom gave fellow CJHS Board member Mark Mandle and me a tour of the facility. Amber was leading an art workshop, and I caught up with her later.

Amber and Tom have paid tribute to the Jewish origins of their building through a subtle weave of references and symbols: The name, "Narrow Bridge," alludes to the well-known saying attributed to Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav, cited at the beginning of this article. Somewhat buried in the website is a chart of committee structures that looks, intentionally, a lot like traditional renderings of the kabbalistic *Sefirot* (divine attributes).

And, of course, the name of the original congregation, quite visible over the front door of the building, alludes, as mentioned above, to the skilled artisan in the Book of Exodus, and lends itself perfectly to the purpose of being a home for makers of fine arts and crafts. That was indeed serendipitous.

For all the history associated with the building, more exciting is how the project ties history to the future. The deep attention to the environmental challenges and opportunities of reusing an old building led the Ginsburgs to work closely with architects and engineers who would help figure out how to reuse materials. In a WBEZ interview, Amber tells us that only old insulation and toxic materials were disposed of (just six dumpsters for the entire project!).<sup>20</sup>

The objective of the carbon positive design is to leave the biosphere better off, rather than simply not adding harm. This is achieved through a clever design of the building's metabolism that includes state of the art insulation technologies, geothermal wells, solar panels, on-site rainwater collection, and recycled materials.<sup>21</sup>

If you are interested in knowing more about this aspect of the project, there is a more detailed description on the Narrow Bridge website, including links to the informative websites of the contractors.

The day Mark and I visited, workshop spaces were in active use. Members do not have individual studios; rather, workspace and equipment are shared and available to members. (Tom compared this to the philosophy of a kibbutz.) Amber, who serves as "Civic Director," emphasized the advantages of open workspace: "We evolve by watching each other and being in proximity."

Members also donate time and effort – thousands of hours a year, according to Tom – to organizational aspects of the club. Art exhibits are planned on an ongoing basis. Members come mostly from Hyde Park and Woodlawn, as well as from South Shore and Pilsen. Among the amazing artists who are active Club members are painter Arthur Wright and quilter Dorothy Burge. Since this article is primarily focused on history, please go to the Narrow Bridge website for more information on the day-to-day operations.

Bridges connect. This narrow bridge connects neighbors and neighborhoods. It connects a synagogue's past with a very different future – the founders imagined a synagogue, with its traditional functions of prayer, study, and community. Yet naming the congregation for the original Hebrew artist, and calling themselves "the B'nai Bezalel," perhaps they were already dreaming a future use for this sacred space. And Amber and Tom Ginsburg, pouring personal resources, time, and imagination into this project, have created a model that may yet create a bridge to a more ecologically conscious city. If all new building projects in Chicago paid similar attention to reusing materials, creating an energy surplus, walking lightly and with respect on the land – Chicago could become a prototype of sustainable cities of the future. In the meantime, may the spirit of Bezalel hover over the labors of the artists at work in and on the Narrow Bridge!

## Appendix

Here are four items with lists of names. I am including them both for historical interest and in case any readers recognize a name or two and can add a story.

Congregation letterhead from 1925 lists the following officers: Jacob Siegel, President [in 1922, H. Primstein was President<sup>22</sup>]; H.L. Rhein, Vice-President; Morris L. Roman, Secretary; L. Williams, Treasurer; L.A. Gordon, Recording Secretary; N. Ridker, Corresponding Secretary; Simon B. Bransky, Chairman of the Board.<sup>23</sup> The Rabbi was Dr. A.E. Abramowitz, who later had a 30-year tenure at Albany Park Hebrew Congregation.<sup>24</sup>

On Sunday evening, December 22, [1929], the annual Chevrah Kadisha banquet was held at the community center of the congregation, with Mr. J. Kaufman, superintendent of the cemetery, acting as toastmaster. Vocal selections were rendered by Cantor and Mrs. M. Waxer and Mrs. J. Shapiro. The latter was accompanied by her husband, Mr. J. Shapiro, on the violin. Addresses were given by Rabbi Teller, President J. Siegel, and Vice President M. L. Roman. Mr. M. Simon was secretary of the Chevrah Kadisha. Mr. I. J. Withall was elected Gab-bai Rishon and Mr. J. Maisel Gabbi Shani of the Chevrah Kadisha.<sup>25</sup>

Sisterhood Beth Jacob B'nai Bezalel Anshe Misrach – Installation of the newly elected officers for the ensuing year was held on Monday, June 18, [1934] at Mandel's Tea Room at 12:30 o'clock. Reservations could be made at the Temple office. The officers were the Mesdames: J. A. Lewitz, president; S. B. Bransky, first vice-president; S. Tatarsky, second vice-president; B. Ziv, recording secretary; M. Herman, financial secretary; I. Barkan, corresponding secretary; W. Greenberg, treasurer; M. Kople, chaplain.<sup>26</sup>

Bnai Bezalel Central Congregation (1910–69). Past rabbis: Abraham E. Abramowitz, Morris Teller, Adam Neuberger, Alfred Fruchter, Paul Bender, Sigmund Sobel, Ephraim Prombaum, Abraham B. Shoulson, and Isaac Mayefsky.

continued on following page

# The Whole World Is a Narrow Bridge

continued from preceding page

The Bnai Bezalel Sisterhood still existed [as of 1986], met regularly, and worked on behalf of Torah Fund and Magen David Adom.<sup>27</sup>

## Sources

- Chicago Jewish Historical Society, *Synagogues of Chicago: Compiled from Chicago City Directories, Parts I & II* (1991)
- Irving Cutler, *The Jews of Chicago: From Shtetl to Suburb* (University of Illinois Press, 1996)
- Hyman Meites, *History of the Jews of Chicago* (Reprint by Chicago Jewish Historical Society, 1990) "Facsimile of the original 1924 edition. Includes Special supplement: excerpts from the 1927 edition."
- Narrow Bridge Arts Club website: <https://www.narrowbridgeartsclub.net/>
- Naomi Waxman, "A law professor and artist are transforming a decrepit former South Side Chicago synagogue into a green community space." JTA, July 13, 2021
- Robb Packer, "Synagogues of Chicago" Facebook page, December 3, 2020
- Dennis Rodkin and Sasha-Ann Simons, "What's That Building? Narrow Bridge Arts Club." WBEZ, January 29, 2026. Photos by K'Von Jackson.
- "Narrow Bridge Arts Club." Chicago Architecture Biennial, 2026.
- Sam Ginsburg and Jerry Levin, "Tom and Amber's New Place" (unpublished) has been very helpful to my research. It was shared with me by Tom Ginsburg.
- The Sentinel, The Sentinel's History of Chicago Jewry*, 2 vols. (1911-1961; 1911-1986)
- The Sentinel*, Illinois Digital Archives: <https://www.idaillinois.org/digital/collection/p16614coll14/id/5341/rec/1>

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> <https://epiphanychi.com/>
- <sup>2</sup> <https://amazinggracelnd.com/london-bridge/>
- <sup>3</sup> <https://www.rebuild-foundation.org/>
- <sup>4</sup> The Drexel Home included both the Home for Aged Jews (1893) and the Jewish Home for Orphans (1899). See Hyman Meites, *History of the Jews of Chicago* (Chicago: Jewish Historical Society of Illinois, 1924), 607.
- <sup>5</sup> Much of the history that follows was compiled by Sam Ginsburg, with assistance from Jerry Levin of the Chicago Jewish Historical Society. I have added to the research, as noted in footnotes and Sources, as well as with help from Google Street View.
- <sup>6</sup> Edward H. Mazur, "Dr. Irving Barkan and Jewish Education in Chicago" in *Chicago Jewish History*, Fall 2010, pp. 16-17.
- <sup>7</sup> *The Sentinel*, Vol. 50, No. 9, 1923, p. 16. "Congregational Notices"
- <sup>8</sup> *The Sentinel*, June 7, 1934, p. 16. "Congregational Notices"
- <sup>9</sup> Charles Bernstein, who grew up in the neighborhood, confirmed this to me in a conversation.
- <sup>10</sup> *The Sentinel's History of Chicago Jewry 1911-1986* (Chicago: Sentinel Publishing Co., 1986) p. 175.
- <sup>11</sup> Now located at 5648 S. State Street. Their Facebook page still has some exciting music! <https://www.facebook.com/cosmo5648/>
- <sup>12</sup> Irving Cutler, *The Jews of Chicago: From Shtetl to Suburb* (University of Illinois Press, 1996), p. 174.
- <sup>13</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mr.\\_Fred\\_L.\\_Mandel\\_Jr.\\_House](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mr._Fred_L._Mandel_Jr._House)
- <sup>14</sup> *Sentinel History 1961*, p. 67.
- <sup>15</sup> Hyman Meites, *History of the Jews of Chicago* (Reprint by Chicago Jewish Historical Society, 1990), p. 394.
- <sup>16</sup> Cutler, p. 120
- <sup>17</sup> Their own description.
- <sup>18</sup> <https://dova.uchicago.edu/people/amber-ginsburg>
- <sup>19</sup> <https://www.law.uchicago.edu/faculty/ginsburg-t>
- <sup>20</sup> <https://www.wbez.org/architecture/2026/01/29/whats-that-building-narrow-bridge-arts-club>
- <sup>21</sup> <https://www.narrowbridgeartsclub.net/carbon-neutral-design>
- <sup>22</sup> Cutler, p. 120.
- <sup>23</sup> A copy of the letterhead, including officers, Rabbi, and the architect's drawing of the building appears on the Narrow Bridge website.
- <sup>24</sup> Cutler, p. 240
- <sup>25</sup> *The Sentinel*, v.076 no. 13, 1929, p. 16
- <sup>26</sup> *The Sentinel*, June 7, 1934, p. 15
- <sup>27</sup> Rabbi William Frankel, "Conservative Movement," *Sentinel's History of Chicago Jewry, 1911-1986*, p. 175

## President's Message

continued from page 3

professional reasons told me that he likes the community's intimacy. The Jews know and support each other, he said. He is affiliated with all the synagogues and sends his children to the Rambam Day School.

All of the Jewish Savannahians I met extended themselves to me with kindness and enthusiasm. They were pleased to learn about the Chicago Jewish Historical Society, and excited that I would be publishing my reflections about their community. We can learn lessons about adaptation, collaboration, and determination from this special community.

## Recommended resources

- [mickveisrael.org/history-of-cmi.html](http://mickveisrael.org/history-of-cmi.html)  
 history of Congregation Mickve Israel
- [bbsynagogue.com/pages/our-history](http://bbsynagogue.com/pages/our-history)  
 history of Congregation Bnai Brith Jacob
- [jewishsouth.org/sites/default/files/sjh\\_v.29a\\_levy\\_127-167.pdf](http://jewishsouth.org/sites/default/files/sjh_v.29a_levy_127-167.pdf)  
*Journal Southern Jewish History*, Vol. 29a, 2026
- "Rebraiding Southern Jewish Identity: The Savannah Diary of B. H. Levy Jr." by Lance J. Sussman and Lynda Barness

## The NFL's First Jewish Referee: Bobie Cahn

Interview by Esther Mosak

What a year for football in Chicago, with the Bears advancing to the playoffs for the first time in 15 years! At this historic moment, *Chicago Jewish History* spoke with Jack Lewitz, grandson of Bobie Cahn, the first Jewish coach in the NFL. Jack shared his family story with Esther Mosak.

**Mosak:** Why did you want to tell your grandfather's story?

**Lewitz:** My grandfather's name is Bobie (not Bobby!). It is a nickname. His actual name is Norman. My mom is 99 years old. She's an only child and adored her father. I was trying to get my grandfather inducted in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. My son helped me put a letter together, sent it to George McCaskey, owner of the Chicago Bears. He finally called me back. He appreciated all the information I had sent him about my grandfather, but he was basically more interested in getting football players in the Hall of Fame. Then I contacted the Jewish Sports Hall of Fame. ...[He's] not being considered this year. My wife is the one who said, "You never contacted the Chicago Jewish Historical Society to tell the story."

**Mosak:** What do you know about your grandfather, from your mom's recollections or your own childhood memories?

**Lewitz:** He was 5 feet 1; I don't think he weighed 125 pounds. Before he became an official, he became an athlete. He was from Colorado originally. I don't know how he ended up in Chicago. It was earlier than 1910. He went to Wendell Phillips High School in Bronzeville. In 1920, he won the running broad jump and then came in third place in the 50-yard dash. That same year he won broad jump interscholastic at Northwestern. He also played baseball for three years and football for two years, in high school and college. He enrolled at the University of Illinois, realized there were no Jewish farmers in Illinois, and decided to move to the University of Chicago. He played baseball for them, and football for them, but got really injured playing football. His mentor there was Alonzo Stagg, head of the Athletic Department. He was a big name at the time. Going through sports, Bobie got lots of injuries. When I knew him as kid, his fingers were broken.

**Mosak:** What do you remember of him from your childhood?

**Lewitz:** I was a kid in Highland Park. Bobie had a heart attack and died while we were on a ski trip, in 1964. (My whole family was skiers. I'm in my tenth year now teaching at Wilmot.) He was always a funny person, he played practical jokes all the time. He smoked Camel cigarettes, and would put the ashes in my hand. He was a character. I remember going to Florida to see him—my grandparents lived there. One thing he did buy me was a chameleon. I remember going to the Hyde Park Hotel and seeing him there. He was living there. I was 8 or 10. He liked to gamble, play gin rummy.

**Mosak:** Would you say he was Jewish-identified?

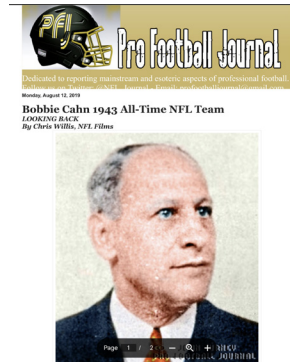
**Lewitz:** He was very Jewish-identified. He talked about being an official in the early days of football, how he had to work with people of all different nationalities and races. [Jack reads from handwritten notes by Bobie that he wrote for an autobiography]: "[N]ever once, with my players or spectators, were any allusions made about my religious status. The sporting world takes on individuals at face value, regardless of their color or creed. That has been my experience. No one, never, while I was officiating at the National Football League, ever mentioned my religion. It's really hard to believe, because in heated battle, there were insulting remarks. Lousy Polack, Dirty Dago, Shanty Irish, but never was the word Jew mentioned. On many occasions, when tempers were boiling, that could have been expected at any time." He wasn't religious about Saturday or Jewish holidays.

**Mosak:** What more can you share about his time at the University of Chicago?

**Lewitz:** Part of his college career was interrupted by World War I. He left college, and was part of the first 500 soldiers to reach France. While in France, for close to two years, he played one game of football, and two baseball games, against the Canadians and other American teams.

Bobie asked Alonzo Stagg about officiating. He said it was a pretty good idea. But you have to study the rules and be an expert at the rules. Staff was thought of more as an amateur position. Stagg said, "Go ahead Bobie." Their relationship went on a for a long time.

To pay for college, Bobie worked five days a week for Carson Pirie Scott and several other companies. These were companies that had their own semi-professional baseball teams. To play for the team, you had to be an employee. He also worked for the South Side park commissioner, teaching sports. He made a lot of contacts. He basically ma-



continued on following page

## Bobie Cahn

continued from preceding page

jored in refereeing. Through contacts with these companies, he did his first officiating game. This was a semi-pro football team on the Northwest side of Chicago. It was a test to see if it would become official. The game was played on a vacant lot, there was not a blade of grass, there were broken bottles, spectators stood on the sidelines. There were players from all walks of life: office workers, bartenders, truck drivers. Bobie arrived an hour before, was told to dress in a washroom at a saloon. He comes out in uniform –white flannel trousers white shirt, black tie, white cap. The crowd teased him... He goes out, meets the players, finds one Polish guy is wearing brass knuckles. He said he had very tender hands. Bobie told him he couldn't play with brass knuckles. He took them off. After the game, his outfield was completely destroyed. Bobie paid \$4 for the uniform, was paid \$7 for the game.

**Mosak:** How about his time officiating?

**Lewitz:** He started officiating in 1919 for high schools and small colleges in Chicago. He would take a train to Gary, Indiana, and officiate a game on Friday night. On Saturday morning, he would go to Wheaton College and officiate a game there, then take another train to Lake Forest College on Saturday afternoon. Then another game for the Big Ten. He was an insurance manager/broker, that's how he really made his money. He did all these things on the weekends for 20 years. In the early NFL, George Halas had no money to pay the officials. He was out begging for donations to pay officials. Bobie got paid \$40, \$60, for championship games. He did it for the love of the sport.

**Mosak:** Do any of these games stand out for you?

**Lewitz:** The two most important games he officiated: 1932 NFL Playoffs. This was supposed to be at Wrigley Field, Bears vs Portsmouth Spartans (later Detroit Lions), They were going to play in Wrigley, but the field was so frozen, they moved indoors to the Chicago Stadium. Even if you're not knowledgeable about sports, there's a big difference between a football field and playing a game indoors ... had to deal with the lines, how to do field goals, and extend the field 30 yards. He had to come up with some creative ways. He was the referee. The other, his all-time favorite to officiate, was the 1934 NFL championship Game between the Chicago Bears and New York Giants in polo grounds in New York. He called this the greatest game he ever officiated. The polo ground was completely frozen. The Bears were beating 13 to 9 at half-time. The New York team decided to go run out to department stores and get sneakers for the whole team because they were sliding all over. They came back, put on different shoes, and beat the Bears 30 to 13.

**Mosak:** What's been published about your grandfather?

**Lewitz:** Chris Wilis works on the *NFL Archives*. He contacted me, was doing research on my grandfather... [on his officiating] Thanksgiving day games, 1922–1938. There's an article Bobie wrote for *Esquire* magazine, "The Fellow with the Whistle," 1936. There is a series of books published by Hinckley and Schmidt in the 50s, with signatures by Daley, Grange, Sayers. My grandfather was very well liked, very well respected. For the early football games, they would advertise using his name, because he was a personality.

**Mosak:** Is there anything more you could add about his Jewish identity as an NFL referee?

**Lewitz:** He said it: Basically, there was so many different walks of life, he was never treated badly, not a word about his being Jewish was ever mentioned ... Jerry Markbreit was the next Jewish referee. Irv Kupcinec, for a very brief time, was an NFL referee. (Look for Ray Asher's article on Markbreit in the summer 2026 issue.)

Bobie got along very well with George Halas. George didn't like ... one game [Bobie] was officiating, my grandfather called a foul on the Bears, and Halas yelled out, "You stink, Cahn." My grandfather tacked on another 10 yards, then yelled back, "How do I smell from here?" They played against each other. But after the game, they respected each other.

Bobie ... would run down field, jump on piles of these humungous athletes, the ball would not advance any further than it had to. He was very, very by the rules. He made sure they played the game, followed the rules. That's why he was so beloved. I remember reading, back in the early days, he called a timeout or a game because one of the players had lost his gold filling. So they went searching around the field.

**Mosak:** Would you describe your grandfather as a trailblazer in the sports world?

**Lewitz:** Oh, yeah. He never talked about his being a baseball player, football player, track star. He was a very good baseball player, played third base in The Mercantile Leagues. ... I didn't realize that Chicago had all these different semi-pro teams.

He did this at such a time in history. ... How many Jews went to the University of Illinois? It was basically an agricultural school back then. That's why he loved the University of Chicago.

## It All Started in Chicago: Martha Sharp, a Righteous Gentile, Served the Jewish Community for Decades. Part II

By Susan Elisabeth Subak

*Chicago Jewish History* is pleased to publish the second installment of Susan Subak's profile of Martha Sharp, who, along with her first husband, Waitsill, was responsible for saving many European Jewish lives during World War II. See Part I in our Winter 2026 issue.

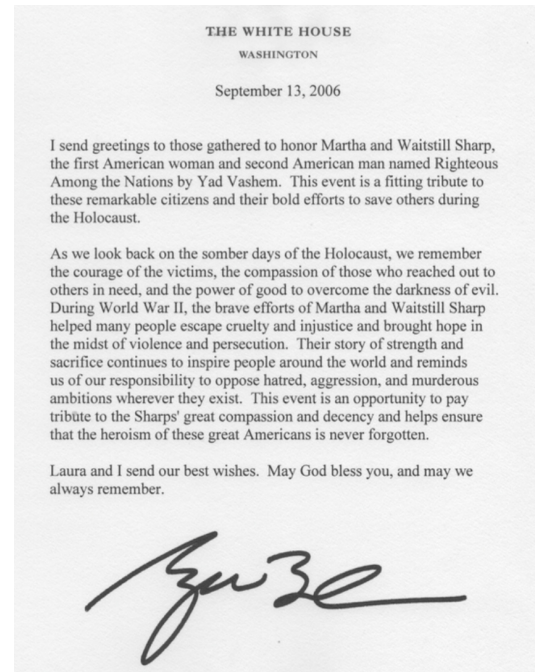
**D**uring her lifetime, Martha received some recognition and interest about her work with refugees in France and even experienced a group reunion of the "children's party" that she had arranged in Vichy France in 1940. Later in life, however, she seemed most interested in talking about the work that she had done for Hadassah and the State of Israel. Her work with Hadassah had spanned decades. "You know I visited Israel ten times," she began enthusiastically in an interview with her alma mater, only to be deflected three times by her interviewer, who asked her to talk more about her college days (Brown University, oral history, Suzanne Goldberg, tape 2). Eventually, she was able to talk about her favored subject in subsequent interviews and in her memoir, "Church Mouse in the White House," which was made publicly available only in 2016, some 20 years after her death.

When Martha returned to Boston in December 1940 from France and Lisbon, she had met up with a friend from Brown, who introduced her to the Jewish women's organization Hadassah. Martha recalled that she was thrilled to discover this program. "It was the kind of organization that I wished I had founded.... I became terribly interested when I was in France because of what they were doing to the Jews." Her friend urged her to make a speech at one of the chapter meetings, and it was so successful that she received a call from the national office offering her a countrywide speaking tour. Over the next years, she gave hundreds of talks, covering the chapters in all the major cities, to rave reviews. (Brown University, 1987, Tape 9). Part of each talk was raising awareness and funds for the Youth Aliyah program. "The British insisted on being paid \$800 for each person and when we raised that [sum], I had a feeling now a child can go to Israel." (Brown University, 1985, part 2 of 2).

As the years went on, she also started a new organization, Children to Palestine, to raise funds from non-Jews who might be moved to contribute. For the board of directors, she drew upon notable Unitarians, including Samuel Atkins Eliot, the son of the former president of Harvard University.

Martha's involvement in Hadassah in the United States and overseas peaked in 1948, and a sampling of letters shows what a stir she made. The chair of the Tulsa, Oklahoma, chapter had this to say of her January visit: "The entire Jewish community has been revitalized by her visit and re-inspired by her devotion to our cause. In addition, she accomplished worlds of good with our Christian neighbors, most of whom had never heard the story of the concentration camps, let alone that of Youth Aliyah, Hadassah and Children to Palestine." And from Durham, North Carolina, in March: "Today I am at a loss for words to describe what she has done for us and has meant to the Jewish community of Durham. ...Not in a hundred years could we have done the job she did for us last night in better understanding between Jews and Christians. Even I, a seasoned Zionist, having heard many speeches can only say, 'I am grateful that we have Martha Sharp. She is a genius.'" (Hadassah archives, rg 10, b.29 f. 10; Courtesy of Hadassah, The Women's Zionist Organization of America, Inc.)

After working with Hadassah for several years, Martha received a letter from Henrietta Szold, the founder of Hadassah, inviting her to visit Israel. Martha set off in February 1945, but Szold passed away while Martha was en route (Brown University, 1987, Tape 9). When she arrived, she was greeted by Golda Meyerson (Golda Meir)



**A letter from President George W. Bush acknowledging the lifesaving efforts of Martha and Waitsill Sharp**

## Martha Sharp, a Righteous Gentile. Part II

continued from preceding page

and stayed at the home of Chaim Weizmann, the first President of Israel. She toured the villages for youth and the educational and job training programs that had been developed, programs that had some resemblance to the Hull House settlement that she had known as a young adult.

She visited again in 1947, and in the summer of 1948, a few months after the Truman Administration recognized the Jewish state. The Youth Aliyah program was faced with the situation of general conscription at age 17 and the dearth of people to supervise the 12,000 children and youth who had recently arrived but were often too young to join Israel's armed forces. Most of her time in Israel was spent at the compounds that housed the youth—and she weighed in with her view on which communities were most successful—but by 1948, she had gained the trust of Israeli leadership more generally. In August, she met with Moshe Kolodny (Moshe Kol), the head of the country's youth program; Fritz Lichtenstein (Peretz Leshem), who had led the international youth agricultural training program; and Joseph Schwartz, whom she had met in Lisbon in 1940. They arranged for her to fly to Casablanca and then “go underground.” She emerged in Paris some 10 days later to the great relief of her family in the U.S., who had been kept in the dark the entire time. She had apparently obtained a great deal of information while there, and one might wonder whether she had assumed some guise that would have misled anyone suspicious of her ties to Israel. In her past work in Europe, she had sometimes made drastic changes in dress to avoid being noticed. In any case, in her report to Hadassah, she noted that the majority of young Moroccan Jews were malnourished but showed a strong interest in emigrating to Israel.

During this period, Martha, along with Hadassah leaders Gisela Warburg Wyzanski and Tamar de Sola Pool, visited displaced persons camps in Europe and Cyprus (Rachel Deblinger, “In a World Still Trembling,” unpublished dissertation, p. 61). Martha was also recruited to visit Baghdad to report on conditions of the Jewish community there. She wrote a report on the difficulty that the community faced due to traditional discrimination and animosity towards the new Jewish state, and she later recalled that Abba Eban read portions of her report in his address to the United Nations.

While Martha was traveling almost constantly during the years 1941 to 1948, Waitstill was often at loose ends, having resigned from his position at the Wellesley Hills Unitarian Church. He had felt overwhelmed in the ministry without the regular presence of Martha and had taken on an administrative job with the United Nations that he had found unfulfilling. In 1949, when he was offered a job in Chicago as director of the Council Against Racial and Religious Discrimination (CARRD) of Greater Chicago, he jumped at the opportunity (UIC archive, Chicago Urban League, Box 263, F. 645). More than 100 organizations were affiliated with CARRD, and Waitstill summed up its purpose with his typically idiosyncratic phrasing: “to command faithful performance of human relations ...it exists to condemn malfeasance, misfeasance, or nonfeasance in the same.” (UIC archive; Chicago Urban League - Human Relations Department CARRD correspondence August 15, 1950; Box 263 Folder 636). Martha supported the move, which would allow them to promote fairer housing and employment practices for Blacks, a purpose that they both found worthwhile. They bought a house in Hyde Park and enrolled their daughter, Martha (“Marty”), in junior high school. (Their son, Hastings, was already a student at Brown University.)

The Chicago job gave Waitstill a purpose that was mainly local but also broader. He advocated for the U.S. to ratify the international genocide convention and for Illinois legislation that would address job discrimination (UIC Chicago Urban League Box 263, F.635). He pushed for greater police protection for Blacks who were moving into neighborhoods hostile to their presence.



Anna Rosenberg, Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Truman Administration, under whom Martha Sharp worked

Martha continued with her work with Hadassah and her projects overseas. In 1950, having recently returned from Israel, she received a call from President Truman's Secretary of the Air Force, Stuart Symington, offering her a high-level position working on civil defense as special advisor to the National Security Resources Board. By this time, the Soviet Union had begun testing its own nuclear bomb, and on the home front, it was the start of the "duck and cover" campaign to protect Americans against the fallout from a possible nuclear war. This subject might have seemed like a departure from her previous interests, but Martha had spent a great deal of time in Israel and had been privy to sensitive information of various types and was aware of danger from Arab violence. One of the leaders of the Democratic National Committee, and a former *Chicago Tribune* reporter, India Edwards, had insisted that Martha was the perfect person for the job.

Martha took the Washington job but spent her weekends in Chicago. Eventually, she took on additional responsibilities in the Truman Administration, accepting a joint appointment working under Anna Rosenberg. Rosenberg, who had been born into a prominent Hungarian Jewish family, was the Assistant Secretary of Defense and the highest-ranking woman in the Pentagon (Gorham, *The Confidante*). Martha's job was to set up committees to support female veterans and wives of servicemen. She had a high regard for Harry Truman, "practical, creative, thoughtful, brilliant, never left the office early." The sentiment was apparently mutual, as she was regularly invited to attend meetings convened by the President (Brown University, 1987, Tape 10).

Waitstill, in contrast, was enmired in Chicago city politics and local conflict resolution, which was not always his cup of tea. "Marty recalled that her father was sometimes the target of spitballs, rocks, and the like, as white residents were protesting the prospect of Black neighbors, sometimes violently. Waitstill was finding some comfort in the community of the First Unitarian Church of Chicago, located in Hyde Park, but he voiced a yearning to return to the ministry (Leslie Pennington, statement, March 5, 1954). Martha's weekends in Chicago had become less frequent after she accepted the second job at the Pentagon, and the couple increasingly struggled with the distance between their two lives.

Chicago, the city where the romance between Martha and Waitstill had begun, was the site of the complete unraveling of their marriage. In November 1952, with the election of Eisenhower, Martha's time in the Truman Administration was over. Waitstill resigned from his job with the CARRD. They separated in that year, and Martha moved to New York City. Within a few years, Waitstill had a new ministry in Davenport, Iowa, and eventually remarried. Martha married David Cogan, a notable engineer based in New York who had invented a cathode tube for television. She continued working with Hadassah and philanthropic projects related to Israel, but she decided that in this new chapter of her life, she would retire from the public commitments that she had pursued for so long and so well.

Martha died at 94 in 1999 in Providence, the city of her birth, where her daughter, an archaeologist, had become a member of the Brown faculty. She posthumously received the Yad Vashem honor in 2006 in recognition of the dangerous missions she had undertaken multiple times to escort children and adults out of Nazi-controlled regions and persevere with mountains of paperwork and protracted negotiations on behalf of Jewish refugees. Waitstill, on the other hand, had struggled with the social demands of his assignments in Lisbon and Marseille and had spent much time on a covert project to evacuate Czech servicemen. Compared with Martha, he had had little contact with Jewish refugees, but at one point in the summer of 1940, Varian Fry had asked him to accompany the Jewish German novelist Lion Feuchtwanger and his wife Marta from Marseille to Lisbon, and he agreed to do this. Noting this accomplishment, Yad Vashem agreed to include Waitstill in the award, making the Sharps the second and third Americans, after Varian Fry, to be honored as Righteous Among the Nations.

### Author Citations

Becker, Stephen. *Marshall Field III: A Biography*. Simon and Schuster, 1965.

Brade, Laura E. "What the Authorities of the Land Wish Done: Relief and Rescue by the American Committee for Service in Czechoslovakia: 1938-1939." *Czech Journal of Contemporary History*, 2023 (3):761-784.

Cogan, Martha Sharp (author) and Ghanda di Figlia (Ed). *Church Mouse in the White House* (2016 edition).

Deblinger, Rachel. "In a World Still Trembling": American Jewish Philanthropy and the Shaping of Holocaust Survival Narratives in Postwar America (1945-1953), 2014, unpublished PhD thesis UCLA.

Di Figlia, Ghanda. *Roots and Visions: The First Fifty Years of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee*, Cambridge MA: The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, 1990....

Gorham, Christopher. *The Confidante: The Untold Story of the Woman Who Helped Win World War II and Shape Modern America* (Citadel, New York, 2023).

Marino, Andy. *A Quiet American: The Secret War of Varian Fry* (New York: St. Martins, 1999).

Subak, Susan Elisabeth. *Rescue and Flight: American Relief Workers Who Defied the Nazis* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010).

Subak, Susan Elisabeth. "In Transatlantic's Varian Fry Story, Jews are Not Helping Their Own." *Times of Israel*, April 23, 2023.

Subak, Susan Elisabeth. "The Sorrow and the Pity Revisited: Justes Femmes." *Times of Israel*, August 23, 2025.

## The Role of Chicago Jewish Delis. Part II

By Zach Meyer

*Chicago Jewish History* is pleased to publish the second installment of Zach Meyer's ode to Chicago's Jewish delis. See Part I in our Winter 2026 issue.

Chicago's first Jewish delis opened up in predominantly Jewish neighborhoods as a means of serving the local community (Gotham Bagels, 2021). With this in mind, it becomes clear how the main customers of these delis were members of the surrounding Jewish community, sharing language and food, and delis naturally helped to facilitate an already shared sense of community. Harpo Marx, a famous New York vaudeville comedian, stated that at the deli, he was, "back with [his] own people, who spoke [his] language, with [his] accent" (Satloff, 2019). In the deli, one could speak their native tongue, whether it be New York-accented English for Marx, Yiddish, Polish, or Russian, and eat a comforting, traditional meal. The deli was a place where no one had to put on an act.

The Chicago Jewish deli Hungarian Kosher Sausage, formerly found at 2613 W. Devon, demonstrates how Chicago Jewish delis helped to foster these Jewish-to-Jewish connections expressed above; they held a fundraising day in which a quarter of all the day's earnings were donated to Camp Moshava in Wisconsin, a children's Jewish summer camp (*Chicago Jewish Sentinel*, June 23, 1977). Jewish summer camp, regardless of one's experience, serves as a means of cultural transmission, fostering a shared Jewish identity and creating a sense of belonging. The fact that Hungarian Kosher supported this summer camp demonstrates the unique role of these delis in cultivating a shared identity.

By supporting Camp Moshava, Hungarian Kosher Sausage was investing in this broader cultural project, but the deli's approach went beyond a simple financial contribution. The establishment of "Camp Moshava Day" transformed a routine business transaction into a community mobilization effort, inviting local patrons to participate in supporting Jewish youth development through their purchasing choices. This strategy accomplished something more sophisticated than fundraising alone. By framing the day around the camp's mission, the deli created a temporary shared purpose that united diverse community members around a common Jewish cause. Customers who might have different levels of religious observance, various economic backgrounds, or distinct relationships to Jewish tradition could all participate equally by simply choosing to eat at the deli that day. The fundraiser thus became a vehicle for community cohesion, allowing individuals to express their Jewish solidarity through the familiar, accessible act of dining out while simultaneously contributing to the cultural continuity that summer camps provide for the next generation.

Delis also served as a way of connecting Jews and non-Jews. Chicago was also home to the Terao Family (Nisei) Delicatessen. This deli was bought by the Terao family of Japanese origin and continued to function as a Jewish deli: they served traditional Jewish food, hired Jewish staff, and observed religious holidays (Satloff, Bettmann Archive). In this case, the deli was a place that transcended ethnic and cultural boundaries. It became a place where those who weren't Jewish could take part in deli culture, and this helped to facilitate cross-cultural transmission between Jews and non-Jews.

The story of Nate's Deli serves as evidence of the fact that the deli is a place that can transcend racial divides as well. Nate Duncan worked for the original owner, Ben Lyon, from 1947 to 1972/1973, and ended up buying the deli from him and continued to operate it as a Jewish deli serving kosher food. Duncan was of African-American descent and learned the practices of the deli while working for the Lyon family, even picking up Yiddish (Maxwell St. Foundation, 2024). This powerful story demonstrates how the deli fostered connections between people of different races, especially during a time in which racial boundaries were ever prevalent. The fact that Duncan continued to operate the deli as a Jewish one further demonstrates how Duncan was able



Photo courtesy of the Maxwell Street Foundation

to connect with the Jewish community and foster a sense of sharedness and community-ness, breaking down some of the racial and social divides present at the time.

The above instances also demonstrate how the term “Jewish Deli” emerged as its own distinct style of food, garnering a reputation for itself. The uptake of this style of restaurant and cooking was so recognizable, by Jews and non-Jews, to a point that it became commercially viable. Even if the deli wasn’t run by Jews, the deli retained its Jewish character through the food itself. As delis became commercialized, they began to expose individuals of all backgrounds to Jewish deli culture and Judaism itself, regardless of who owned the deli or who ate the food.

These examples show that delis served as unique community spaces where Asian-Americans, African-Americans, and Jewish-Americans could form genuine connections that crossed multiple divides simultaneously.

The story of Chicago's Jewish delicatessens reveals their profound capacity to serve as community-building institutions that extend far beyond their commercial functions. These delis truly act as one of Oldenburg’s “third places” through their ability to foster community, connection, and social life. Chicago's Jewish delis demonstrated how engaging with food itself is a means of engaging and partaking in Jewish practices secularly, but also how delis can serve as both a bridge between communities and an anchor for cultural identity.

In an era of increasing social fragmentation and cultural polarization, the deli model suggests that spaces that honor specific cultural traditions while remaining open to broader community participation can serve as powerful antidotes to division. These establishments remind us that community building and progress often happen in untraditional places, like over a meal at a deli.




---

## Delightful Deli Memories

The deli that stands out in my memory is Jerry’s Deli, which was on East Ohio Street, across the street from Marquis Publishing Company, where I worked as an editorial assistant at *Who’s Who*. I was there for a year and a half after graduating from Wright College and before finishing my degree at Roosevelt University.

The deli's owner would bark out orders, which I would get as takeout to bring back to the office. He never yelled at me.

Fourteen years later, I came back with my toddler daughter. The owner remembered me and smiled. I think he was pleased to see that I was no longer the shy young woman I had been.

And the food was just as good as I'd remembered it.

*Alice Solovy, CJHS member*

## Welcome New Members

Barbara J. Brooks  
Chicago, IL

Robert Levy  
Chicago, IL

Sarah and Daniel Rappoport  
Chicago, IL

Sarah Rothschild  
Highland Park, IL

---

## See Our New Website!

Members, if you have not already done so, please be sure to check out the Society’s updated and up-to-date website: [www.chicagojewishhistory.org](http://www.chicagojewishhistory.org).

In addition to an entirely new look, the website includes enhanced content, including biographies of our Board members and team. As always, you can find on the website details about our upcoming programs, tours, and other public events, as well as past issues of *Chicago Jewish History*.

---

## Chicago Jewish Boxers Part I

By Chaim Rosenberg, M.D., Ph.D.

During the first third of the 20th century, boxing was a major Chicago sport. Raised by immigrant parents in the ghetto, many Jewish boys gravitated from street fights to the boxing gymnasium, where the more skillful began amateur and then professional careers. They headed to the photography studios to pose in shorts for their advertising pictures, leaving us a splendid record of agile, young<sup>1</sup> Jewish tough guys of yesteryear. "Jewish boxers are always fairly scientific," claimed the Inter Ocean newspaper in 1903, "crafty and admirable in the ring." The most famous of the Chicago Jewish boxers was Dov-Ber Rasofsky, better known as Barney Ross, whose career I described in an earlier paper. Here are other Jewish pugilists who came from the Chicago Jewish ghetto:

### Harry Harris

Harry Harris and his twin brother, Sammy, were born November 1880 on the South Side of Chicago. "They were so exactly alike that few could tell them apart." When the boys reached 90 pounds and 5 foot 7 inches, they began boxing in a gym. Harry's quickness was noted by Kid McCoy, the 1896 world's middleweight champion, who trained in the same gym. The Kid "saw that Harry had the makings of a good boxer and offered him some of the finer points of the game," including the corkscrew punch, delivered by twisting the wrist.<sup>2</sup>

Tall and thin for a bantamweight, Harry was known as The Human Scissors and as "The Human Corkscrew." His great weapon was "his straight and unerring left-hand jab." In 1899, Harris knocked out former world featherweight champion, Billy Murphy. He defeated most of his opponents, including fellow Chicago Jewish boxers Barney "Kid" Abel, Maurice Rauch, and Sig Hart. In 1900, Harry moved to New York because he had "just about exhausted the supply of 110–112-pound men in this neighborhood."<sup>3</sup> In 1901, he journeyed to England to fight Pedlar Palmer for the world's bantamweight title. Back in Chicago, his brother Sammy, a capable bantamweight, became ill with kidney troubles and died March 3, in his parents' home at 188 East 40th Street.<sup>4</sup> In their 15-round fight on March 8 at the National Sporting Club in London, Palmer, "the little Englishman...had met his master [and] was hopelessly outclassed" by Harris, who "jabbed away steadily and held his man safe to the end of the contest."<sup>5</sup> Harry Harris won on points to become world bantamweight champion and the first Jewish boxing world champion.



HENRY HARRIS OF CHICAGO

The triumphant Harry Harris returned to Chicago June 5, 1901, declaring he was ready to take on any boxer in the world in the weight division of 110–120 pounds. He complained that "the people would rather pay to see a couple of heavyweights without boxing ability, slugging at each other, than watch a pair of scientific bantams."<sup>6</sup>

In 1902, Harris relinquished his title because he was unable to maintain his weight as a bantamweight boxer. He retired from boxing in 1907 after 53 fights, but was never knocked out. He served as manager of the Amsterdam Theatre in New York. In 1918, he purchased a seat on the New York Stock Exchange and worked successfully for Robinson Duff & Company. He died in 1959, aged 78 years.

### Maurice Rauch

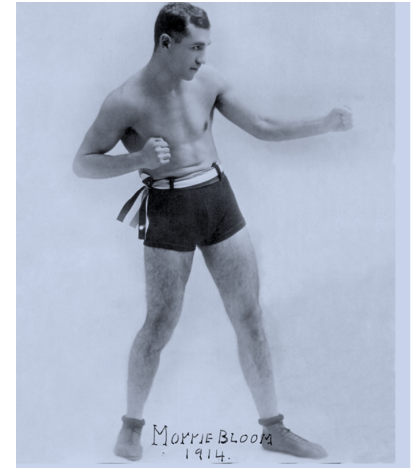
Less known than Harry Harris, Maurice Rauch was born in Russia in 1878 and, a few years later, moved with his family to Chicago. His professional bantamweight boxing career stretched from 1897 to 1910. He fought 87 bouts, winning only 32. Most of his fights took place in Chicago. Rauch "blew his money as fast as it came in." After retiring from the ring, he settled in California, where he died in March 1925 after he was struck by an automobile.<sup>7</sup>

### Barney "Kid" Abel

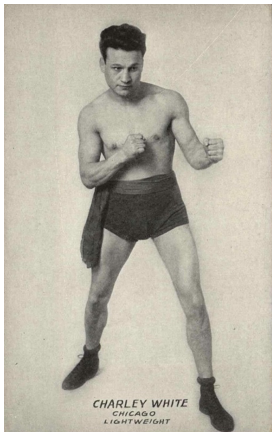
Born in 1879, Barney Abel was another of the early Jewish professional boxers to emerge from the Chicago ghetto. He turned professional in 1899, fighting in the featherweight division. His early bouts took place in Chicago. In 1900, he twice fought fellow Jewish Chicagoan Harry Harris, and in 1902, fought Abe Attell. Barney Abel was "a Jewish boxer" and "ghetto boy who could absorb a vast amount of punishment."<sup>8</sup> After his retirement from the ring, with more losses than wins, he worked as boxing trainer and manager to Sammy Mandell, Ceal Harris, and Walcott Langford. Barney Abel died age 65 of heart disease.

### Morrie Bloom

Born Morris Blumberg, he fought as a welterweight from 1906 to 1916 under the moniker Morrie Bloom. On April 6, 1911, Bloom fought fellow Chicagoan Packey McFarland in Racine, Wisconsin. Under the headline "Ghetto Boy Punching Bad," the Chicago Examiner wrote that "it was a bad match [with Bloom] fighting like an old woman with a broom." Three thousand disappointed fans "witnessed the slaughter and hooted at Bloom all the way."<sup>9</sup> McFarland knocked out Bloom in the eighth round of a 10-round fight, "much to the great dismay and financial embarrassment of the whole ghetto."<sup>10</sup> A Racine, Wisconsin, newspaper was more forgiving: "Chicago Hebrew shows game spirit [taking] thirty to forty punches each round, returning but few."<sup>11</sup> After retiring, Morris Bloom worked as a boxing coach.



### Charley White



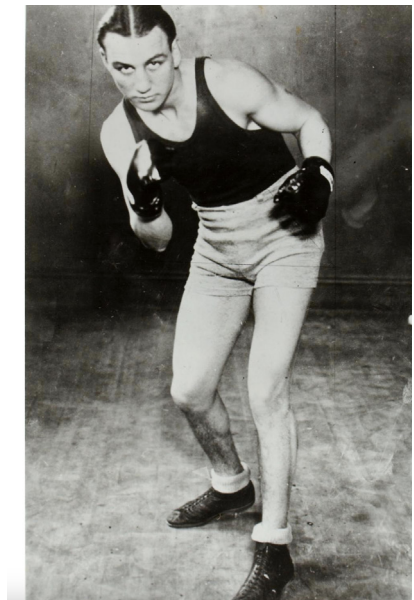
Charles Anchowitz was born 1891 in Liverpool, England, the son of a tailor from the Pale of Settlement. At age 7, he moved with his family to the Chicago's West Side. Weakened by tuberculosis, he was enrolled by his father at the O'Connell Sports Club, where he learned to box. By age 18, he was clear of tuberculosis and launched his professional lightweight career under the moniker Charley White. In his 18 years in the ring, he fought 173 times, winning 87. Among his opponents were fellow Jewish boxers Abe Attell in 1909, Leach Cross in 1915, Ted "Kid" Lewis in 1915, Benny Leonard in 1920, and Sailor Friedman in 1921. Years after his retirement, Charley White developed dementia and died in Los Angeles, aged 68.

### Jackie Fields

On March 25, 1929, Jackie Fields, "a product of the Chicago ghetto," defeated Young Jack Thompson in a 10-round fight before 27,000 fans in the Chicago

Coliseum and was proclaimed welterweight champion of the world. Fields held the world title until 1932.

He began life as Jacob Finklestein, born 1908, on Maxwell Street, Chicago. His Russian-Jewish immigrant father ran a kosher butcher shop in the neighborhood. Jacob worked out at Barry's Gym, 180 W. Randolph Street, Chicago. When he was 14, the family moved to Los Angeles. Jacob dropped out of school and gravitated back to the boxing ring, where he became a leading amateur welterweight. Turning professional, he changed his name to Jackie Fields, after Chicago's famed Marshall Field's department store. In a busy career, he fought 84 bouts, with 72 wins. He lost to a fellow Jew, Lewis "Kid" Kaplan, but beat Mushy Callahan. His boxing career was cut short by an eye injury. Jackie invested much of his earnings in real estate, but lost it all during the Wall Street crash. For a while, he worked as a salesman for the Wurlitzer Jukebox Company. In 1965, he trained the American boxing team for the Maccabai Games. Later, he became part-owner of a Las Vegas Casino. Jackie Fields died in Las Vegas at 79.



## Chicago Jewish Boxers

continued from preceding page

### Davey Day

On March 31, 1939, Davey Day fought the great Henry Armstrong at Madison Square Garden for the world lightweight championship. The fight ended in the twelfth of the scheduled 15-round bout, with both of Day's eyes almost shut from the pounding he received from Armstrong.<sup>12</sup>

He was born David Daitch in 1910 in the heart of Chicago's Jewish West Side. Although a leading lightweight contender, he was overshadowed by Barney Ross, who was raised in the same area. Both boxers were managed by Art Winch and Sam Pian. Day began his professional boxing career in the early 1930s. He fought 74 professional bouts, winning 59 (20 by knockout). He was tall and thin, earning him the moniker "The Human Stringbean."<sup>13</sup> Day retired from the ring in 1941. He settled in Oak Lawn, owned a luggage store in the southside of Chicago, and served as boxing coach at the Lake Shore Athletic Club. He died in 1990 at 78.



### Kingfish Levinsky

"At last, a Hebrew contender for the heavyweight title," declared a 1930 Chicago newspaper. "Boxing sages have been attempting to develop a Hebrew to ascend to the foremost throne of fistiana. Only two years ago, Harry 'King' Levinsky was peddling fish along Maxwell Street. Now, on the West Side they hail Harry Levinsky as the Jewish heavyweight hope."<sup>14</sup> He was born Harris Krakow in September 1910, the son of a fishmonger on Chicago's Maxwell Street. His ring name was a combination of Battling Levinsky (of Philadelphia), his hero, and the "Kingfish" character from "Amos n' Andy."<sup>15</sup>

During a 10-year career as a professional boxer, Kingfish Levinsky fought 119 bouts (79 wins). He took on the leading heavyweights of his time, including Primo Carnera (two losses), Max Baer (two losses), and, in 1934, fellow Jewish boxer Art Lasky (one loss, one draw). King Levinsky's most humiliating fight was against the great Joe Lewis on August 7, 1935, in a scheduled 10-round bout at Comiskey Park, Chicago. Within the first two and one-half minutes of the first round, Levinsky was on the floor three times and pleaded with the referee: "Don't let him hit me again. I am through." The referee helped the beaten Kingfish Levinsky to his corner and declared Lewis the victor by TKO. After boxing, Levinsky turned to professional wrestling until his retirement in 1946 at age 36. In 1934, he married the fan dancer Roxana Sands, but the marriage lasted hardly a month. Five years later, he married Freda Berg. Kingfish Levinsky died at 81.

"If you defined the efficiency of a prize-fighter by his ability in the ring, Harry Krakow ('Kingfish Levinsky') would not rate better than tenth among U. S. heavyweights," said a *Time* magazine article. "Last year he had 15 fights, won only eight. If you defined efficiency as a fighter's ability to earn money at his trade, Kingfish Levinsky might rank as best fighter in the U. S. ... Kingfish Levinsky's earning power is due partly to an engaging slapstick manner in the ring, an engaging entourage. ... It is due partly to the fact that most of Levinsky's fights have been in Chicago, where he grew up on the West Side and entered the fish-peddling business with a pushcart on Maxwell Street."<sup>16</sup>

Look for more Chicago Jewish boxers in Part II of this article, which will appear in the Summer 2026 issue.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Inter Ocean* August 2, 1903, p.31.

<sup>2</sup> *Fort Wayne News & Sentinel*, May 25, 1918, p. 12. *The Minneapolis Journal*, February 15, 1914, p.26.

<sup>3</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, January 5, 1900, p.5.

<sup>4</sup> *Chicago Tribune* March 3, 1901, p.17.

<sup>5</sup> *Inter Ocean* May 24, 1901, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> *Inter Ocean* June 5, 1901, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> *Kansas City Times*. March 10, 1926, p.12.

<sup>8</sup> *Inter Ocean*, March 23, 19024, p.4.

<sup>9</sup> *Chicago Examiner*. April 8, 1911, p.19

<sup>10</sup> *Los Angeles Herald*. November 19, 1918.

<sup>11</sup> *The Journal-Times*, Racine, Wisconsin, April 8, 1911, p.5

<sup>12</sup> On May 31, 1938 Armstrong defeated Barney Ross to become world welterweight champion.

<sup>13</sup> *The Oshkosh Northwestern*, June 1, 1940.

<sup>14</sup> *Collier's Eye*, Chicago, Illinois. August 23, 1930, p.3.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph S. Page, *Primo Carnera: The Life and Career of the Heavyweight Boxing Champion*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland. 2014, p.75.

<sup>16</sup> *Time* magazine, May 9, 1932.

## Jerold Levin 1942 - 2026

The Chicago Jewish Historical Society is saddened to learn of the death of Jerold Levin, a former President and Co-President of its Board of Directors and a founder of the organization. He was 84.

Jerry, as he liked to be known, joined the Board in 2009 and became Vice President two years later. He became Acting President in 2016 and served as Co-President from 2017 until 2022, when he stepped down from his duties due to declining health.

A proud son of Chicago's South Side Jewish community, Jerry graduated from South Shore High School and Bradley University. While he worked in the building industry for most of his life, he had a passion for Chicago Jewish history and, thanks to his affability, knew Jewish Chicagoans from every walk of life and geographical quadrant.

"We thought that he was related to all of Chicago Jewry," quipped former CJHS President Dr. Edward Mazur, fondly remembering his friend and former Board member. "Often, when we discussed the history of Jewish Chicago, he would say that he had a relative in that organization or shul."

Dr. Rachele Gold, CJHS President, said, "Jerry was not merely a member of the Jewish community. He was a leader. When he became involved in causes he believed in, he took on responsibility.

"Jerry's work ethic was hard to match," Dr. Gold added. "He made himself available for all kinds of Society needs, from planning programs to representing the Society at public events. He was curious about details that people tend to overlook. I had the opportunity to see his large collection of reference books about Chicago Jewish businesses and institutions. When the Society received queries, Jerry frequently was the one who had the facts to reply."

Added Robert Nagler Miller, Editor of the Society's *Chicago Jewish History*: "Jerry was a caring, gentle man – and a gentleman. I remember during the early days of the Covid epidemic, when it was difficult to find masks, he contacted my husband and me to let us know where we could access them. He always demonstrated that level of thoughtfulness to others."

In addition to CJHS, Jerry was deeply involved in his synagogue, Temple Beth-El of Northbrook, where he was a former President. On the Chicago Jewish Funerals website, many friends and fellow synagogue members praised his leadership. "Jerry was a true mensch, and I enjoyed working with him on many Temple projects over the years," wrote Paul Festenstein. He "represented many decades of service, support, and dedication," wrote Herb Cohen.

Jerry is survived by his wife, Evie (Evelyn); his son, David; and his sisters, Carolyn Winter and Pamela Stehmer. He was predeceased by his son, Craig.

---

## More Programs for You

Members, be on the lookout for two outstanding CJHS programs!

On Sunday, August 30, Michael Zmora, who wrote a series of articles for *Chicago Jewish History* about the Jewish communities of Oak Park and River Forest, will guide his audience through his research process. His in-person talk, which will also be available online, will take place at Northbrook's Temple Beth-El at 2 p.m. The CJHS is co-sponsoring his presentation with the Jewish Genealogical Society of Illinois.

On Sunday, November 1, journalist and producer Dan Protesch will provide updates to his original WTTW program "Jewish Chicago 1833 to 1948 and Jewish Chicago 1948 and Beyond." He will show a segment from the original broadcast and talk about recent developments in Chicago's Jewish community. Stay tuned for details on time and location.

Details about both programs will be found soon on the CJHS website: [www.chicagojewishhistory.org](http://www.chicagojewishhistory.org).

---

Look to the rock from which you were hewn

הביטו אל-צור חצבתכם



## chicago jewish historical society

610 SOUTH MICHIGAN AVENUE • ROOM 803 • CHICAGO, IL 60605-1901 • 312-663-5634

### IN THIS ISSUE

- A Synagogue Is Reborn on the South Side
- Thoughts on Jewish Chicago ...  
from Savannah
- The NFL's First Jewish Referee: Bobie Cahn
- Martha Sharp, a Righteous Gentile. Part II
- The Role of Chicago Jewish Delis. Part II
- Chicago Jewish Boxers Part I
- In Memoriam: Jerry Levin

#### 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-nine years later, our mission remains the discovery, documentation,

#### ABOUT THE SOCIETY

and dissemination of information about the Jewish experience in the Chicago area through publications, public programs, tours, and outreach to scholars and all 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. Mail your order and check to CJHS, P.O. Box 597004, Chicago, IL 60659-7004. You may also order online at our website.

**Back issues of Chicago Jewish History** cost \$12 apiece. To request back issues, please email the Society at [www.chicagojewishhistory.org](http://www.chicagojewishhistory.org)

Visit our website [www.chicagojewishhistory.org](http://www.chicagojewishhistory.org)

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

Inquiries: [info@chicagojewishhistory.org](mailto:info@chicagojewishhistory.org)

**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.

Life Membership \$1,000

Annual Dues

Historian \$500

Scholar \$250

Sponsor \$108

Member \$54

Student (with I.D.) \$18



Like us on Facebook