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הביטו אל-צור חצבתם



chicago jewish historical society

THE HISTORY OF THE CHICAGO JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY

ITS FIRST YEAR

JANUARY 1977 - JANUARY 1978

by Charles B. Bernstein

The Chicago Jewish Historical Society was organized as an outgrowth of the tremendous interest in local Jewish History generated by the Chicago Bicentennial Jewish Exhibit at the Museum of Science and Industry in November and December, 1976. The exhibit gained tremendous popularity, and the Jewish community flocked to see it by the thousands. The exhibit was co-sponsored by the American Jewish Congress and the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago.

About 200 persons volunteered to serve as guides at the exhibit under the chairmanship of MURIEL ROBIN. On the last day of the exhibit, January 2, 1977, MOSHE SAMBER, a consultant for the Board of Jewish Education, saw the exhibit and remarked to Muriel how wonderful it was. She lamented that the exhibit was closing. He agreed it was a pity and suggested that the exhibit materials might be stored at the Board of Jewish Education building until it could be decided how to continue the project on a permanent basis. Little did they know that this offer would soon give birth to the CHICAGO JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

On January 9, 1977, MURIEL and BURT ROBIN hosted a brunch at their Hyde Park home for some of the more active guides in the exhibit, ostensibly to thank them for their hard work. Muriel and Burt then informed their guests of the new development with the Board of Jewish Education and asked for ideas on what could be done to perpetuate the exhibit and the interest in Chicago Jewish history which it had created. Out of this conversation, those present decided to organize the Chicago Jewish Historical Society.

With all successful undertakings, luck plays a vital role, and here it was no exception. Coincidentally, CHARLES B. BERNSTEIN recalled that he had just received a copy of the publication of the Spertus College of Judaica Library in which there was a long article about the Chicago Jewish Archives. The Archives had been established a number of years ago at Spertus to collect and preserve memorabilia and materials relating to Chicago Jewish history, and the article urged the Chicago Jewish community to deposit materials with it. Bernstein suggested that someone speak to the people at Spertus College about somehow working with them on the Chicago Jewish Archives, since they had the expertise and facilities and the group had the people who were interested in going out and collecting such material.

Then , EENIE FROST casually said, "I'm the president of the Spertus Library Guild, I'll call RICHARD MARCUS, head librarian and administrator of the Archives, tomorrow and talk to him about it." Eenie set up an appointment with Marcus, who said he was delighted to have the opportunity to work with the new group. He joined the Society and became one of its most active members. This is an example of the type of people who have gravitated to the Society and how effectively they get things done.

Two weeks after the brunch at the Robins', another meeting was held, on January 23, this time at the Northbrook home of JOE and DORIS MINSKY. Joe was president of the Chicago Chapter of the American Jewish Congress and Doris was the Congress' co-chairman of the Bicentennial Jewish Exhibit. The following persons came from all over the Chicago area to attend the meeting at the Minskys': NORMAN D. SCHWARTZ, MURIEL & BURT ROBIN, ALLENE (EENIE) & JACK FROST, MARCIA WEILAND, AMMIEL & PAYAH PROCHOVNICK, RUTH BRANDZEL, CHARLES B. BERNSTEIN, MARK MANDLE, CAROL & LARRY KRUCOFF, RACHEL HEIMOVICS, MARLENE FLEISCHMAN, MARCIA & KARL JOSEPHY, MOSHE SAMBER, ROSEANN CHASMAN, and, of course, the MINSKYS.

At this meeting the group elected the following officers: MURIEL ROBIN, president; NORMAN D. SCHWARTZ and RUTH BRANDZEL, vice presidents; ALLENE FROST, recording secretary; and CHARLES B. BERNSTEIN, treasurer. The group decided to have a founding meeting on March 13, 1977 which would be open to the public. At the suggestion of RACHEL HEIMOVICS, Muriel made a long distance call to BERNARD WAX, the executive director of the AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY at Waltham, Mass., and invited him to speak. A mailing was sent to about 400 people, mainly guides and others involved with the Bicentennial Jewish Exhibit, and by the time of the meeting, about 75 people had become members. Approximately 75 people attended the meeting, which was held in the party room at 330 W. Diversey, the building in which RUTH and SOL BRANDZEL reside, and they hosted the meeting. Vice-President NORMAN SCHWARTZ gave a stirring invocation. Another 24 persons joined at the meeting. BERNARD WAX spoke words of praise and encouragement.

The gathering at the founding meeting approved the purposes of the Society, which had been drafted by Bernstein. They read as follows:

TO COLLECT, PRESERVE AND EXHIBIT MEMORABILIA AND MATERIALS OF EVERY KIND PERTAINING TO THE SETTLEMENT, HISTORY AND LIFE OF JEWS AND THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF METROPOLITAN CHICAGO, ILLINOIS; AND TO CONDUCT EDUCATION PROGRAMS, ENCOURAGE STUDY AND RESEARCH, AND DISSEMINATE INFORMATION PERTAINING TO THE SETTLEMENT, HISTORY AND LIFE OF JEWS AND THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF METROPOLITAN CHICAGO, ILLINOIS.

The next project was that of formalizing the organization: drafting articles of incorporation, by-laws and an application for tax exempt status. All were quickly accomplished.

The Society also worked on developing a co-operative relationship with Spertus College of Judaica. In early June, these arrangements were culminated with the understanding that Spertus would provide the Society with an office in its building, and the Society would donate any archival materials it received to the Chicago Jewish Archives and would encourage its members to volunteer their

services to the Archives. The Society is indebted to the foresight and magnanimity of DR. DAVID WEINSTEIN, President of Spertus College of Judaica; PHILLIP SPERTUS, Chairman of the Board of Trustees; DR. NATHANIEL STAMPFER, Dean of Students; and NORMAN ASHER, Trustee, who spent much time and effort in working with the Society's representatives to achieve this arrangement.

The next major activity was an open meeting on June 5 at Spertus College. The speaker was RICHARD MARCUS, who spoke on "Treasure Hunting for Chicago Jewish Archives." This meeting was a joint function with the Spertus Library Guild. The program was co-chaired by EENIE FROST, wearing her other hat as President of the Library Guild, and MURIEL ROBIN, President of the CJHS and its major-domo and dynamo. About 150 persons attended the meeting, and about 40 signed up for Marcus' series of four seminars on how to collect archives, that were held over the summer. These seminars will, hopefully, be given on a continuing basis. In this way the Society will develop a large cadre of trained persons who will be able to go out into the community to individuals and organizations, bring in memorabilia to the Chicago Jewish Archives, and help its staff process the material. The Archives Committee of the CJHS, comprised of the "graduates" of Marcus' seminars, and chaired by Marcus, has continued to meet to plan strategy and work.

The Society operates on a broad, flexible, open-minded basis in an effort to appeal to as many interests as possible. For example, it learned that RABBI MALCOLM STERN, the dean of American Jewish genealogists, was to be in Chicago in late June. It immediately contacted him and arranged a program with him as the speaker for June 30 at Temple Beth El on Touhy Avenue. The fascinating program opened with the Rabbi of Beth El, VICTOR WEISSBERG, giving a brief but informative and entertaining talk on the history of the congregation. (It is 106 years old, and those present learned that in the last century its building was once blown down by a cyclone.) The meeting initiated the Society's practice of holding its meetings in various synagogues in the area so it can learn more about them and stimulate interest among rabbis and members about the histories of their own congregations.

After Rabbi Weissberg, Rabbi Stern spoke to the enthusiastic audience of 150 persons. He was very well received. There was even a non-Jewish amateur genealogist who was anxious to meet Rabbi Stern and obtain his autograph.

The next activity, another huge success, was the first in an ongoing series of bus tours of historic Jewish sites in Chicago. This tour, on July 17, was of South Side Jewish Chicago and was conducted by CJHS board member RACHEL HEIMOVICS, who is also a board member of the American Jewish Historical Society as well as a professional tour guide. The tour included mainly old synagogues, from the famous Dankmar Adler's KAM at 33rd and Indiana to Congregation Anshe Cheltenham, a shtiebel at 78th and Muskegon. The tour, at \$8.00 per seat, was sold to capacity.

A second equally successful tour followed on August 7th. This tour traced the Jewish community in Chicago as it migrated westward and then northward. It was led by Society board member DR. IRVING CUTLER, a professor of geography, who also leads tours professionally. A highlight of this tour was a stop at the magnificent Anshe Sholom Synagogue, now a Greek Orthodox Church, but with the name plaques of the synagogue members still on the pews. Because

of the enthusiastic response to both tours, they were repeated during October.

During this summer period the Oral History Committee was formed under the co-chairmanship of MOSELLE MINTZ and MARK MANDLE, and it began holding meetings. The committee received a professional assist from Society members DR. EDWARD MAZUR, who established training sessions for persons who desired to learn how to take oral histories, and from ADELE HAST, who led the first oral history interview, that of Hadassah trailblazer MRS. BERTHA READ RISSMAN. The committee received a grant of \$1,000.00 from the West Valley Section of the National Council of Jewish Women to purchase equipment. This grant was accompanied by a commitment from the West Valley women to become active participants in the Oral History program of the Society. Special thanks to CJHS board members NANCY COHEN and MARCIA ROSS who encouraged the women to make this generous contribution.

The Exhibit Committee was organized under the chairmanship of KENNETH H. COHEN, and began to hold meetings in order to plan the Society's first exhibit. It relied on the artistic expertise of board member ROSEANN CHASMAN, exhibit designer; and the expertise of MARYLOU SEIDENFELD, recorder; as well as the dedicated hard work of NORMAN SCHWARTZ, NANCY COHEN, SYLVIA KLEIN, DORIS MINSKY, ELSIE ORLINSKY, BURT ROBIN and MARCIA ROSS. The Exhibit Committee plans to open its exhibit on the 2nd floor of the Spertus College building for the Anniversary Meeting on February 12, 1978.

The Society opened its fall programming with an open meeting at Spertus College on October 16. About 120 persons were present to hear CHARLES B. BERNSTEIN speak on "The Genesis of Chicago Jewry", a review of early Chicago Jewish history until the Civil War.

The Society concluded its first year of programming on December 11 at Temple Sholom. After RALPH HALPERIN gave the 120 people in attendance a resume of Temple Sholom's 110 year history, PROF. WILLIAM J. ADELMAN, a program associate of the Chicago Labor Education Program at Circle Campus of the University of Illinois, spoke on "Jewish Workers in Chicago--1841 to Today."

A Speakers Referral Service, operated by vice president RUTH BRANDZEL, provides speakers to area organizations interested in Chicago Jewish history. The bulletin of the Society, SOCIETY NEWS, edited by ROBERTA BERNSTEIN, informs members of Society activities as well as interesting facts about Chicago Jewish history. Other board members plan the bi-monthly open meetings, the publicity, and the myriad of tasks that are necessary to a growing organization.

As of February 8, 1978, the Society has 265 members. It has achieved its goal of becoming a "people" organization and a "doing" organization, concentrating its efforts on substantive activities. What has been particularly gratifying, besides the enthusiastic participation by such a high percentage of its membership, is the cross-section of the membership. The membership roll of the CJHS includes practically every aspect of the Jewish community, from well-known philanthropists and Sentinel "cover people" to working people and graduate students, of all ages, all Jewish religious denominations (and some non-Jewish), and all parts of the metropolitan area. They have all been able to work together, contributing fruitful ideas from their own backgrounds and experiences, to the betterment of the Society's goal, the recording and popularizing of Chicago Jewish history.

For the future the Society has many ideas for exhibits, programs and activities on the drawing board. It welcomes the suggestions, requests and participation of all its members. As SALLY GOLDSMITH, CJHS board member and former president of the Spertus Library Guild, is fond of saying, "Perhaps you would like to be a part of this."