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הביטו אל-צור הצבתם



chicago jewish historical society

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CHICAGO JEWISH History

Etz Chaim

First Institution of Advanced Jewish Studies in Chicago Area Became Predecessor of Theological College

By David Gleicher

The Hebrew Theological College, located in Skokie, Illinois, recently held its 70th annual dinner, commemorating the founding of the College in 1921. The College's roots go back over twenty years further, however, to a modest yeshiva named Etz Chaim.

As masses of Eastern European Jews settled in Chicago in the last decades of the nineteenth century, Jewish education took a number of forms. Many children received their education at after-school Talmud Torahs, some of which were run by a single synagogue, while others were community-based and shared by several congregations. Most notable among the latter was the Moses Montefiore Talmud Torah, founded in the late 1870s.

Cheders Widespread in City

Many other Chicago Jewish children, however, received their religious education from private *melamdim*. These entrepreneurs were often men who had failed at most other occupations and, knowing a little Hebrew, declared themselves qualified to teach children.

These schools, called *cheders*, sometimes advertised themselves in Yiddish, *Du lernst men Aleph Beis biz Bar Mitzvah*. The sign was intended to convey that the cheder's curriculum covered all subjects starting with the

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Next Open Meeting:

Louis Boshes
to Talk on
Chicago Jews
in Medicine

Dr. Louis D. Boshes, the distinguished educator, scientist and physician, will be the speaker for the Society's next open meeting on April 24 at Emanuel Congregation. He will speak on "The History of Men and Women in Medicine in the Chicago Area 1837-1994."

Himself a veteran of the Chicago medical scene, Dr.

Boshes will offer a *continued on page 3*

Inside:

- Walter Roth on Adolf Kraus and Efforts to Help Russian Jews at Turn of Century
- Oral History of Sports Figure Ben Bentley
- Betty Lans Kahn's Memoir of Chicago as WWII Liberty Town

President's Column

Recently, while rummaging through some old papers to determine which could be preserved and which needed disposal, I came across an edition of *The Hyde Park Weekly* dated June 13, 1946. I was a junior at Hyde Park High School then and I worked as an



Walter Roth

editor and regular contributor for the paper. What caught my interest was that this issue contained, I believe, the first article I ever wrote about a matter of Chicago Jewish history. It concerned Dr. William Rubovitz, a well-known pediatrician, and I beg your indulgence in reprinting it here:

Dr. William Rubovitz, '96 Alumnus to Attend Coming Senior Prom

"I'm looking forward to the grandest time of my life at the coming senior prom," chuckled Dr. William Rubovitz, brother of Miss Clara Rubovitz, Hyde Park teacher, with a fondly reminiscent glow in his eyes.

Dr. Rubovitz, a Hyde Park graduate of June, 1896, and now a prominent surgeon at the Michael Reese Hospital, will be a guest at

the June prom. His sister thought he would enjoy coming to the dance since a number of his patients are graduating this semester. His memories of Hyde Park days are warm indeed, he even remembers "flunking out of another school and attending Hyde Park only at the persuasion of his father, who convinced him he should not quit school."

He made up for lost time in his freshman year and went ahead to join the Drama Club and debating team, at one time even representing the school in an oratorical contest. An enthusiastic athlete, he played tennis and went out for bicycle racing.

He brought to mind also, with fond nostalgia, the memory of a geometry teacher who made him take over an examination which he got a grade of 99 and who made a practice of never accepting papers with a grade of less than 100.

I wrote at a distance of 50 years from the times Dr. Rubovitz was recalling and now, astonishingly, I find it is nearly 50 years since I wrote the article myself. The little newspaper story I wrote then is now a window back to a century ago at Hyde Park High School.

History works that way. We learn

from our grandparents and parents and we teach our children and grandchildren. I imagine the ongoing enterprise of the Chicago Jewish Historical Society to be recording scraps of history for our own curiosity and in anticipation of the curiosity of the Jewish Chicagoans who will come after us.

We cannot know what stories, photos and memorabilia we collect today are going to seem relevant 50 years from now, but if we fail to collect those things we can be sure we will impoverish our grandchildren and their grandchildren by denying them a chance to know the world that came before they did.

I invite you all to help us in this effort, to help preserve the stories you have collected of Chicago's Jewish past and to help preserve stories that are in danger now of being forgotten entirely.

I am sorry to have to report that Board member Seymour Raven passed away in February. Through his long association with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Seymour contributed a great deal to the culture of our city. We remember with fondness the lecture he presented to our members last year about Jews in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Seymour also often shared with us his many stories, always of humorous content, about Jewish life in Chicago. We extend our sincere sympathy to his family and many friends. We will miss him. □

Society Welcomes New Members from Past Quarter

While we are a Society concerned with history, we can never afford to lose sight of our own future. It is for that reason that we are delighted to welcome several new members. We look forward to their participating in our ongoing activities and perhaps to

play important roles in new projects.

<i>Jeffrey Cohler</i>	<i>Mr. & Mrs. Louis Mandel</i>
<i>Mr. & Mrs. Bernie Ebstein</i>	<i>Michael Michaelman</i>
<i>Mrs. M. Gerber</i>	<i>Barbara Parson</i>
<i>Mrs. Robert Gordon</i>	<i>Nathaniel Sachs</i>
<i>Mr. & Mrs. Michael Jackson</i>	<i>Natalie Schmitt</i>
<i>Charlotte Josephs</i>	<i>Louis Weiss</i>

We invite all of our members to

become involved in our different ongoing projects as well as to attend our quarterly open meetings and our annual full membership luncheon.

We ask as well that you spread the word about the Society. Society membership and its accompanying subscription to *Chicago Jewish History* can be a good way to keep in touch with Chicago and it can make a thoughtful gift for friends in the area and friends who have moved away. □

Boshes

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personal and a historic account of the ways in which Jews have been involved in medicine as doctors practicing on their own and as members of local hospital staffs.

A specialist in neuropsychiatry, Dr. Boshes's resume reads like a novel. He has written or co-written more than 250 publications, including books, medical articles, sections of neurology in systems of medicine, monographs, encyclopedia entries and book reviews. In addition, he has given over 900 scientific presentations on radio, television, and in person.

He is a specialist in epilepsy and his book on the subject is soon to appear in its third edition, having already been translated into numerous languages. He holds the rank of Ambassador to the International Bureau and League Against Epilepsy which is accredited to the World Health Organization. He also helped develop the the Consultation Clinic for Epilepsy at the College of Medicine at the University of Illinois-Chicago.

He holds a number of area hospital appointments as well. He is Attending in Neurology at the College of Medicine at University of Illinois-Chicago; Attending Neurologist at Cook County Hospital; Senior Attending in Neurology and Psychiatry at Michael Reese Hospital and Medical Center; Senior Attending Neurologist and Psychiatrist at Columbus/ Cuneo/ Cabrini Hospitals; and he was Senior Consultant in Neurology at the V.A. Facility in Downey, Illinois and at the Nicholas J. Pritzker Center for Children.

As an educator, he served as a Professor in the Department of Nervous and Mental Diseases at Northwestern University when he was part of that faculty from 1947 to 1963 and later was appointed to the faculty at the University of Illinois-Chicago in

the College of Medicine where he is still active with the rank of Clinical Professor of Neurology, Emmeritus. He is also Professor of Neurology at the Cook County Post Graduate School of Medicine in Chicago since 1970.

In addition, he was an instructor in Zoology at Northwestern University's College of Liberal Arts from 1928 to 1930 and he worked as a visiting Guest Instructor in Neurology at the University of California School of Medicine in San Francisco after the end of World War II while he was still on active duty in the U.S. Navy. Further, he has been a visiting Professor in Neurology in many countries, including Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Spain, Portugal, Japan, Israel, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina and Puerto Rico.

Dr. Boshes's talk begins at 2 p.m. but it will be preceded by a social hour from 1 p.m. The meeting is open to members and non-members alike and the Society invites everyone to attend.

Emanuel Congregation is at 5959 N. Sheridan Road in Chicago. □

Historical Society Exhibit Focuses on Clothing of Immigrant Jewish Women

Society members should be certain to visit the current Chicago Historical Society exhibition entitled "Becoming American Women: Clothing and the Jewish Immigrant Experience."

The exhibition is a colorful representation of what it was like for Jewish immigrant women to assimilate into a new world governed not only by new laws but also by new fashions.

The exhibition runs until January 2, 1995. The Chicago Historical Society is located at 1601 N. Clark St. For further information, call (312) 642-4600. □

Getting Tax Benefits from your Donations

Did you know that you can receive tax benefits for contributions to the Society? Of course, your annual dues are tax deductible. But, did you realize that any additional gifts during lifetime also qualify for an income tax deduction (assuming you itemize deductions) and that gifts given at death qualify for a charitable deduction against an otherwise taxable estate.

While we hope you will want to make lifetime gifts so you can see the good that is accomplished, it is very easy to make testamentary gifts by your last will or living trust. Simply have your attorney include language similar to the following in either your will or your trust, as the case may be.

For unrestricted gifts:

"I give \$ _____ (or specified property) to the Chicago Jewish Historical Society, of Chicago, Illinois, for the unrestricted use of the Society, as determined by its Board of Directors."

For restricted gifts:

"I give \$ _____ (or specified property) to the Chicago Jewish Historical Society, of Chicago, Illinois, to be used solely for the purpose of _____."

If you or your attorney has any questions about this, please give us a call.

In addition, we hope you will keep the Society in mind when it comes to disposing of relics of Chicago's Jewish past that might be of interest to the entire community.

We are always looking for items that represent elements of Chicago Jewish History that have been forgotten or overlooked. Our space is limited, but we would be delighted to talk with you about any materials you feel are appropriate for preservation in the Chicago Jewish Archives. □

Etz Chaim

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Hebrew alphabet and continuing through Bar Mitzvah training. However, it was usually translated as "Here one studies the Aleph Bet until he is a Bar Mitzvah." The second meaning was closer to the reality of these private cheders.

In 1890, a 45-year-old newcomer from Lithuania named Abraham Leo Simon arrived in Chicago. Simon had been the head of a Hebrew high school in Europe and, observing the deplorable state of local Jewish education, became determined to establish a similar institution of quality in Chicago.

The goal of such a school would be to teach students Gemara (that is, the Talmud) in addition to Hebrew and Bible.

Controversy in Teaching Gemara

While the study and teaching of Gemara is not a controversial topic today, it certainly was in the 1890s. The lay leaders of the Talmud Torahs thought that Gemara was too difficult for American children to learn and was irrelevant as well. One unnamed teacher taught his class Talmud secretly, hiding his copy of the lesson in his desk. One day the school's president dropped in unexpectedly and, discovering the forbidden subject being taught, physically beat the teacher. Not surprisingly, Talmud ceased being taught at that school.

Simon's quest to establish a quality Jewish high school program occupied much of his first nine years in Chicago. He went door to door seeking pledges for his school. He had been promised aid if the community would support him with five hundred pledges of one dollar a year.

In 1899, the required number of subscribers was reached. Simon and his supporters personally built the benches and chairs for the

the school, obtained the needed books, and hired the first two teachers. The school was given the name *Y'shivath Etz Chaim*, and was launched with 34 students.

Birth of Etz Chaim

Three years later, on April 15, 1902, Etz Chaim was officially incorporated by the State of Illinois. The first address for the school was 18 O'Brien St. (the equivalent today of 621 W. O'Brien St.).

The official "object" of the school was "to maintain a private Hebrew Free School for the purpose of teaching the Talmud and other Hebrew classics, and also to financially assist students whose circumstances may otherwise not permit [them] to undertake these studies."

Most of the early leaders of Etz Chaim

belonged to Congregation Mishna Ugmoro, regarded as the most Orthodox synagogue in Chicago. Unlike other synagogues in those days, no one could be an officer of Mishna Ugmoro unless he was a Sabbath observer. The members were loyal to their rabbi, Simon H. Album, who viewed himself as Chicago's chief rabbi.

Showdown for Chief Rabbi Title

In 1903, another group of Chicago Jews brought Jacob David Willowski, known as the Ridbaz, to serve as the city's chief rabbi. Album and Ridbaz quickly clashed over the lucrative control of rabbinic supervision over Chicago's large kosher meat industry. A sideshow to the kashrut battle was a fight over control of Chicago's infant yeshiva. A meeting was set one evening for 7 p.m. to vote on which rabbi would control Etz Chaim.

The meeting began promptly at 7 and well before 8 p.m. the Album forces had scored a decisive victory. At 8 the Ridbazists began filtering into the meeting only to be told it was over. They argued that the vote had taken place too early: "Since when is it a custom among Jews

One unnamed teacher taught his class Talmud secretly, hiding his copy of the lesson in his desk. The school's president, discovering the forbidden subject being taught, physically beat the teacher.

for a meeting to start on time? A meeting called for 7 ordinarily starts at 9. Now that we have arrived at 8 we are one hour ahead of time." Their arguments were to no avail. Within a year, a disgusted Ridbaz left Chicago and the fight was over.

Arrival of Jacob Greenberg

Meanwhile, Etz Chaim had moved twice: in 1903, to 316 Maxwell St. (now 847 W. Maxwell St.) and, in 1905, to its permanent home at 100 Johnson St. (now 1243 S. Peoria) where it would remain until 1921.

The year 1905 marked an educational milestone for the yeshiva: the arrival of Jacob Greenberg. For the first six years of its existence, Etz Chaim's curriculum had been limited to *chumash* (Torah studies). Neither Talmud nor Hebrew language were taught despite the presence on the faculty of Jacob Dolnitzky, one of the greatest scholars among Chicago's rabbis. It was Greenberg who added the study of Talmud to the curriculum, thus achieving Abraham Simon's goal.

Etz Chaim was relatively secure financially, supported by the pledges obtained by Simon and his friends. Unfortunately, that financial security was wiped out by the Depression of 1907. The school issued "An Appeal to the Jewish Public," stating bluntly that "the financial condition of our Yeshivah is very poor."

The school was behind in salary payments to teachers and had no coal for heat. The crisis was not short-lived, for the following year a similar appeal was issued.

Funding Crisis Resolved

By 1910 the crisis was over, and Etz Chaim was again flourishing. In general, Orthodox leadership in Chicago was rejuvenated in the early 1910s by the arrival of young rabbis Saul Silber, Ephraim Epstein, Abraham Cardon,

Chaim Zvi Rubinstein, and Eliezer Muskin. It was the children of new immigrants who made up the student body of Etz Chaim, there being virtually no native-born students in those days.

The 80 or so pupils of the yeshiva had a long day. Following their public school studies, they had classes at Etz Chaim from 4 to 8 p.m. and from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Sunday mornings. Although Etz Chaim was considered a high school, many of the students were younger than high school age, starting their studies at the yeshiva at nine or ten.

The Program According to One Boy

Rabbi Ephraim Epstein sent his nine-year-old son, Harry, to Etz Chaim beginning in 1912. His teacher was Rabbi Herman, a superb rebbe to the 25-30 students in the class.

After that year, Harry's class shrunk to 18-20 students. Over the next two years he found Rabbis Levin and Levinthal less inspiring than Rabbi Herman had been. In 1915, young Harry entered Jacob Greenberg's class which proved to match

Rabbi Herman's in quality.

The course of study in those days was mostly Gemara, with a bit of Chumash. The Gemara study was not on a high level, the text itself being augmented only with Rashi's commentary. Rabbi Greenberg remembers the Etz Chaim building on Peoria as having small classrooms which were poorly equipped and poorly ventilated. Harry Epstein, however, has a student's memories of games being played in the basement, and does not recall the problems of the building.

The Students of Etz Chaim

Despite the long hours spent in study, the students of Etz Chaim were "regular kids." They played and fought with each other like children everywhere. They even played dice outside the school, with one student serving as the lookout for the local

Despite the long hours spent in study, the students of Etz Chaim were "regular kids." They played and fought with each other like children everywhere. They even played dice outside the school, with one student serving as the lookout for the local police.

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Adolf Kraus and the Effort to Help Turn-of-Century Jews of Russia

Chicago Attorney Held Series of Meetings with Tsar's Minister Trying to Ease Conditions

By Walter Roth

By the beginning of the twentieth century, European Jews hoping to immigrate to the United States found allies in some of the Jews who had immigrated a generation or two before. These more-settled Jews, confident in their Americanness and newly accustomed to their political power, lobbied in various ways for increased Jewish immigration and foreign policies that favored Jews abroad. It is difficult even now to determine how successful their efforts were, but Chicago's Jewish community, particularly attorney Adolf Kraus, played a central role.

By 1904, Kraus was already recognized as a major Jewish civic leader. Horrified at the reports of the Kishnev pogroms of 1903 -- pogroms which received widespread media attention and which were the focus of a mass meeting at which Clarence Darrow and Jane Addams spoke -- he determined to find some way of helping Russian Jews.

Antipathy for Nicholas II

1904 was a propitious time for such a project. Before then, Nicholas II was considered intolerable by American Jews and the American media. He was deemed one of the last absolute monarchs in the world and he served as a symbol of the worst aristocratic abuses. When one of his ministers, Viacheslav Van Plehve (said to have

been responsible for many anti-Jewish pogroms) was assassinated by a bomb thrown by university student Igor Sazanov, many Americans applauded. *The Chicago Daily News* even wrote an editorial praising Sazanov in which it suggested, "The Cubs should hire him as a pitcher."

In 1904, however, the Japanese attacked the Russian naval base at Port Arthur and the Russo-Japanese war ensued. Initially, American foreign policy and public opinion supported the Japanese. Jacob Schiff, a leading New York Jewish financier, used the vast resources of his investment banking firm to float huge bond issues to assist the Japanese. But American policy and media sympathy began to shift as terrorist assassinations of Russian officials grew and the Japanese inflicted a series of stunning defeats on the Russian armed forces.

American Opinion Shifts

These more-settled Jews, confident in their Americanness and newly accustomed to their political power, lobbied in various ways for increased Jewish immigration and foreign policies that favored Jews abroad.

When the Russian Baltic fleet was wiped out in the Battle of Tsushima in May, 1905 and the sailors of the Battleship *Potemkin* mutinied, Americans became

concerned. President Theodore Roosevelt determined that the collapse of Russia was a greater peril than the continued tyrannical rule of the Tsar would be. Japanese incursions into Manchuria and Korea raised American ire and the American media began to find the Japanese were becoming the "yellow scourge." In this atmosphere, the Tsar sent representatives to the United States to negotiate a peace treaty with the Japanese, all under American auspices. Among these representatives was Sergei Witte, then Russian Finance Minister, soon to become Prime Minister and a Count, and the man to whom Adolf Kraus would address most of his appeals.

Witte, unlike most of the Tsar's officials, appeared to be quite gracious and agreeable. With American foreign policy now friendly to

the Tsar, Witte planned in his own words "that in view of the considerable influence of the Jews on the press and other aspects of American life, especially in New York, not to exhibit any hostility toward them." Therefore, in August, 1905, Witte agreed to meet a delegation of Jewish bankers, businessmen and community leaders to show the Tsar's affection for his non-Christian subjects.

In Kraus's autobiography *Reminiscences and Comments* published in 1925, he claimed it was at his request that Witte came to meet with a delegation of American Jewish businessmen on August 14, 1905 at Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Besides Kraus and investment banker Jacob Schiff, the meeting included Oscar Straus, a New York businessman who would soon be appointed by Roosevelt as the first Jewish member of the U.S. cabinet, and Gregory Wilenkin, a Russian Jew and Witte's official interpreter.

Kraus's First Meeting with Witte

Kraus's goal at the meeting as well as in his subsequent contacts with Witte, seems to have been to use his personal charm to demonstrate that Jews could be civilized and modern citizens of the world. He wanted to show through the example of his own self that Jews deserved full rights of citizens. His description of a key point in the meeting showed that hope:

Many questions were asked and answered during the interview. To Mr. Schiff's question, Will you please tell me why you, as a Russian, have full rights in your country while he (pointing to Mr. Wilenkin), also a Russian, has none?

Witte, without hesitation, answered that the restrictive Russian laws applicable to Jews, if printed would fill a large volume; that they were unjust, that they ought to be repealed, but that that should be done gradually, for if they were repealed at once it might create a revolution; that only the Emperor could repeal the laws, but that not much could be expected from the Emperor so long as the young Jews were leaders among the Revolutionists; that we ought to

use our influence to convince the young Jews that it was to our interest to be loyal to the Emperor; that if that could be done, the Emperor would probably grant relief.

To this remark, Jacob Schiff made a sharp retort which was, however, toned down by the more balanced judgment of the other members of the delegation.

Such a version of the events was more controversial than it first appears. Philip Bregstone in his *Chicago and Its Jews* published in 1933, reports that some of the Chicago press had reported that Witte demanded that the delegation members use their influence to keep Russian Jews from revolutionary activities. Witte supposedly issued an "ultimatum as a condition for the removal of restrictive laws" and press notices further stated that the members of the committee promised to use their power to influence their Russian brethren.

Controversy Follows Meeting

Bregstone further reports that when Kraus returned to Chicago, a public meeting was arranged at Anshe Knesseth Israel Synagogue, on the corner of Clinton and Judd streets, at which Kraus was to report the results of his mission. However, a group of Jewish "radicals" incensed at the "incorrect" reports of the conference, came to the synagogue with the avowed purpose of causing a disturbance. They almost succeeded in breaking up the meeting. The police were called out and about a dozen protesters were arrested as ringleaders.

Bregstone himself became part of the Kraus-Witte affair because, as an assistant city attorney assigned to the Maxwell Street police court, he was called upon to prosecute the cases. Clarence Darrow's law firm was engaged for the defense and Peter Sissman, then a partner of Darrow, was in charge. Sissman demanded a separate jury trial for each of the defendants. When the first trial resulted in a guilty verdict, Bregstone felt he had made his point and he turned to Kraus, the aggrieved party, for permission to drop charges against the other defendants. Bregstone reports that Kraus said:

I cannot blame these people for feeling as they do. They received the wrong impression through the reports of the press concerning our interview with Count de Witte and although they probably acted too rashly, I believe they have already been punished...

After Witte returned to Russia, the Tsar appointed him a Premier of Russia and proclaimed a new constitution, supposedly granting new freedom to the Russian people. There followed immediately a wave of pogroms against Jews in Odessa and other Russian cities. Kraus, as President of B'nai B'rith, telegraphed Witte demanding that he protect the Jewish population.

Kraus's Efforts Find Some Success

Kraus's telegram reportedly impressed the Russians. Witte replied by wire to Kraus that "You may be assured that the government will use all possible measures to prevent violence against peaceable inhabitants without regard to what nationality they belong." *The Chicago Daily News'* St. Petersburg correspondent reported on April 25, 1906:

The publication of a letter written by Adolf Kraus of Chicago and Premier Witte's reply thereto has caused a sensation in Russia. The entire press recognizes the Chicagoan's communication as statesman-like and humane.

Whether the Kraus-Witte communications would have any effect soon became a moot point when Witte died suddenly and the Tsar's constitution turned out to be a fraud. The revolution that was shaking Russia was crushed and the attacks on Jews continued. Adolf Kraus, however, continued his campaign to convince the Tsar's representatives that if they could only meet "civilized" Jews, their anti-Semitism would

cease.

New Efforts to Impress Duke Boris

Kraus writes that in 1907 he met Grand Duke Boris of Russia during a royal visit to Chicago. During this visit, Kraus had occasion to meet with the Grand Duke and Baron Schlippenbach, the Russian Consul in Chicago. Kraus proposed to arrange a luncheon of forty Chicago Jews, recent immigrants from Russia, so that the Duke "might see for himself what good citizens they become when offered the advantages of a friendly environment."

Kraus apparently recruited forty Russian immigrants and had them shaved and dressed appropriately for the occasion. Kraus notes that the "Grand Duke outdid himself in affability and amiability. He had a few words to say to each one as my guests were introduced to him and responded most cordially to a toast to his health."

Kraus's hopes of convincing Duke Boris by his luncheon that Jews were

"likeable" was doomed to disappointment. Kraus concludes this episode by writing in his autobiography that later, when he wrote the Duke words of protest against the continuing pogroms, he never received an answer.

Kraus's Legacy Uncertain

In the end, it seems Kraus accomplished little in his efforts to ameliorate the situation of Russian Jews. The fact that he tried at all is remarkable, however. He epitomized the Jewish immigrant who was able to prosper within his first few years in America. Born in Bohemia in 1850, he immigrated to the United States fifteen years later. A few years later he came to Chicago and was admitted to the bar in 1877.

He had a successful practice, with many of his clients being non-Jewish Bohemians. He was Corporation Counsel under Mayor Carter

They imagined that their own success was proof that other Jews could experience comparable success under improved political conditions. Kraus felt that if only he could convince the Tsar's ministers that the Jews were really not different, anti-Semitism would wither away.

Etz Chaim

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police.

The World War led to the next crisis at Etz Chaim. The War halted the flow of immigrants to Chicago. Deprived of its main source of new students, the yeshiva suffered. At that time, the local Talmud Torahs were not preparing their graduates for any advanced Jewish education and were not a source of Etz Chaim students.

In the long run, however, the War led to a strengthening of Etz Chaim. The student shortage crisis caused Rabbi Greenberg to leave the yeshiva to become principal of the Moses Montefiore Talmud Torah.

In that capacity, and with a change of attitude of the Talmud Torah lay leaders, Greenberg overhauled the current system. Montefiore became a "prep school" for Etz Chaim. In one year alone, fifty Montefiore students entered the yeshiva.

Etz Chaim had survived its crisis with the realization that future growth would come from American, not only immigrant, children. By the end of the War, however, it was no longer the only yeshiva in Chicago. A group of rabbis and parents had established Beth HaMedrash La Rabonim, a more advanced yeshiva for their growing sons.

Rival Institution Emerges

For a few years, the two schools were in competition for funds and battles raged in the local Jewish newspapers regarding the relative

They argued that the vote had taken place too early: "Since when is it a custom among Jews for a meeting to start on time? A meeting called for 7 ordinarily starts at 9. Now that we have arrived at 8 we are one hour ahead of time."

merits and deficiencies of each school and its leaders.

By 1921, however, under the leadership of Ben Zion Laser (also spelled Lazar), who was involved in both yeshivas, peace broke out. On October 15, 1921, with the incorporation of the Hebrew Theological College, the two schools officially merged.

Laser, the first president, was soon replaced by Saul Silber, Chicago's greatest Orthodox Jewish leader, who would head the College for a

Adolf Kraus

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Harrison and from 1895 to 1896 published and edited *The Chicago Times*. In 1899 he was elected president of Isaiah Congregation on the South Side. With his election as President of B'nai Brith in 1905, he became deeply involved in Jewish communal affairs, becoming also an active member of the Jewish Committee.

Kraus Representative of Generation

His activities are representative of the hopefulness that filled those Jewish leaders who attained quick success in America. They imagined that their own success was proof that other Jews could experience comparable success

under improved political conditions. Kraus felt that if he could only convince the Tsar's ministers that the Jews were really not different from their Gentile countrymen, anti-Semitism would wither away.

Kraus reports in his autobiography that he was disappointed his Reform Jewish background had taken him far enough away from Jewish tradition that he was never a *bar mitzvah*. He may also have regretted his useless efforts to appease the Tsar's anti-Semitism with protestations of Jewish innocence. For all of their success in their new land, the Jews of America achieved uncertain results when they tried to use that success as leverage on the world political scene. □

Memoir:

World War II Servicemen and Women Found Chicago an Inviting Liberty Town

By Betty Lans Kahn

The following memoir was written by Betty Lans Kahn in 1992, as a way of recording her memories of the role her cousins May and Phil Bloom played in running one of Chicago's USOs on a regular basis and of recording some of the details she remembers of the way in which Chicago's USO's operated.

We at the Society hope you find her memoir interesting in itself, but we hope further that it will inspire others to record their recollections of other institutions that were once central to Chicago Jewish life. We invite you further to write us with additional information on the subject of USOs and the role in which Jews played in their operation.

Chicago was a wonderful liberty town for servicemen and women. They were welcomed everywhere. The city and its populace opened its arms and its heart to these men and woman all so far from their homes and loved ones. Many cities were not so hospitable for they had long histories of the rough and crude military personnel and sea-going men from other eras that left a bad taste in the mouths of local citizens. Norfolk, Virginia was one such town, but that's another story for another time. This story is about a small USO in the heart of the Chicago Loop.

Sometime during the years 1941-45, Chicago had very active USO centers all over the city. The main and largest one was in the Loop, an area primary to the pulse of the city and bounded more or less by the Elevated tracks that ran in a square above some of the streets. It was surrounded by Grant Park, The Art Institute, shopping, hotels and offices among other conveniences. I remember every block in the city had a Block Captain whose job it was to collect cakes, cookies and pies to send down to

the USO for the chaps to enjoy. It was a volunteer job and I was on our block's "committee" to help, too.

Needless to say, the girls in the city and suburbs were recruited as volunteers to work in the USOs as entertainment, serving help, and dance partners for the servicemen who came to visit them.

Lots of young people met, dated, fell in love and eventually got married. It was the only place guys and gals could meet one another in a respectable way. The lists were long of applicants who wanted to serve as hostesses and it took months to get accepted.

One small USO in the Loop on North Wabash was for Jewish service personnel and anyone else who wanted to come was welcome. It was funded and staffed by the Jewish community as their way of showing their support for our fighting forces as well as helping Jewish service personnel who might be lonely for ties from home and their spiritual observances. It was this USO that some cousins of mine were involved with.

My cousin (by marriage) was the owner of a prosperous ladies' underwear factory called Phil Maid Lingerie, named after himself: Philip S. Bloom. He was married to my mother's first cousin, May. They were a kind and generous couple and had no children of their own, so they were extra kind and attentive to younger cousins like me. Phil did many wonderful things for me and for others, but unfortunately did not live to see the years of a long, long life.

I remember being invited down there one Sunday when they took over this small USO. They did it once a month, or every Sunday -- I'm not sure which -- but the young daughters of their family and friends were invited down to be hostesses now and then. It was a fun event.

I recall the mountains of food of all kinds available for the boys. Hams and roast beef, salads, cakes and pies, ice cream and soda, coffee; all of it was food seldom enjoyed by our boys in uniform. Everything was free -- my cousins paid for it all out of their own pocket --

and the fellows could eat to their heart's content.

There was music to dance by, probably a juke box. There were games, cards, books and magazines. And there were places for quiet talk or laughter. Sailors, soldiers, air corps men, marines, they all came. We all ate and danced and laughed and forgot the war for a few hours.

One of the things I recall the most vividly that showed me the heart of these cousins was the "raffles" they would have throughout the afternoon. The winners could call their folks or sweethearts, or friends anywhere in the United States for free. The phone booth was just outside the door. May and Phil Bloom picked up the tab for all of it. May's sister, my cousin Irma Weil, also came and assisted as did their other "older" friends.

I can still see and almost hear a young serviceman coming up to Phil and asking him, quietly, if his buddy could somehow "win" a phone call home. His friend was especially homesick and lonely he told Phil. Well, my darling cousin said, "Sure. Tell him to just go and phone his family." His smile was ear to ear and off the young man went to find the phone. Somehow Phil and May picked up the bill on that phone during the time they took over the USO each time. I never asked them.

That was the closest time I ever got to a USO, although I did attend some dances -- one at Great Lakes Naval Training Station and one at Fort Sheridan, both just north of Chicago. As usual, the fellows stood along one wall and the girls held up the other wall, and never did the twain meet. Call it shy.

Many such military facilities held open house for the civilian population. My cousin met her husband there. He was in the Navy but was given a medical discharge not too long afterwards. They are married nearly 50 years now and have three daughters and many grandchildren. Her school had tea dances on Sunday afternoons for service personnel and I went to one for the Midshipmen at Abbot Hall at Northwestern University and dated a chap I met there for a few months until he was shipped off

to Norfolk, Virginia and went to sea on a destroyer.

Servicemen still talk about Chicago's warmth and hospitality to them during those World War II years. They were given free rides on all public transportation, too, and often free tickets to plays, movies, and other entertainment around the city including Comiskey Park and Wrigley Field for White Sox and Cubs baseball games. They were welcomed into private homes, too, and invited for dinners, especially at holiday times. One just had to notify whatever local military installation they were interested in, or post a notice at the USO.

In those days you could safely give a lift in your car to a servicemen or woman without fear for your wallet and your life. The M.P.'s and Shore Patrol also had to walk their beat in places like Lincoln Park, Jackson Park and Grant Park where the young fellows and their sweeties would find the dark and the benches ideal for wooing.

The USOs and the wonderful liberty town were what attracted so many men on leave as well as those stationed nearby and in the city itself. The Army took over the famous Stevens Hotel on Michigan Avenue and the soldiers used to hang out of the hotel room windows and catcall and hoot at the young women passing below on the sidewalk. It was all in fun and no one minded the good humor and admiration.

Military personnel were stationed in office buildings, too, and I remember them being in the Board of Trade Building as well. They got the best and fastest service at lunch while we secretaries had to sit and be late getting back from lunch. I purposely dropped a handful of silverware on the table to get a waitress's attention one time to the howls and laughter of my co-workers also sitting it out. It worked, I might add.

That's about all I knew about the USO programs there but there must be a lot of memorabilia on them in the archives in Chicago some place and many of you reading this might be able to add some of your memories as well. □

Society Announces Schedule for Summer Tour Program

Society Board member Leah Axelrod recently announced the schedule for this summer's Society tours. The tours have become a staple of Society programming, proving themselves popular each year.

There are three tours scheduled, covering between them much of the Greater Chicago area: Hyde Park, the Northwest Side and the South Haven-Benton Harbor area.

This is the third year for the "Summers of the Past" tour of South Haven and Benton Harbor. It will be conducted again this year by Leah Axelrod and Clare Greenberg.

Tour organizers hope they will be able again to visit the small Jewish community that continues to prosper in the area. Last year's tour was hosted by Joe Marcus of B'nai Shalom Temple in Benton Harbor (pictured at right).

The tour takes place on August 7 and is an all-day affair.

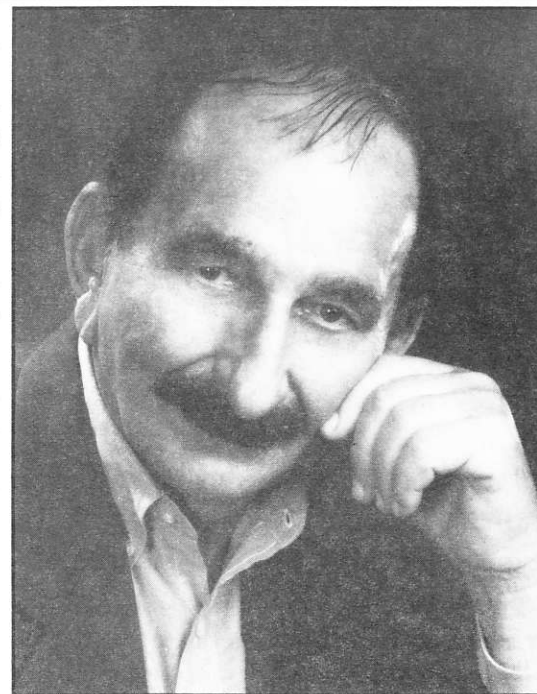
Mark Mandle, who last year led a walking tour of sites of Jewish interest in the Lakeview area, will lead a walking tour of Hyde Park on July 10.

Mandle is a former Society Board Member; his tour last year received positive reviews.

Finally, on August 28, Board Member Dr. Irv Cutler will lead a tour of old Jewish neighborhoods on the Northwest Side. This tour is being offered for the first time this year. In years past, Dr. Cutler has gained a wide following with his tours of the Old West Side.

This year's tour will include a stop at the Chicago Historical Society to view the current exhibit, "Becoming American Women: Clothing and the Jewish Immigrant." It, too, is an all-day affair.

Many tours have sold out in recent years, so it is a good idea to make



Benton Harbor Resident Joe Marcus

reservations early.

Prices for the different tours have not yet been determined. Look for further information in Society mailings or contact Leah Axelrod at (708) 432-7003. □

Have Tape Recorder, Will Travel

One of the ongoing projects of the Society is to capture the history preserved in our midst through the recollections and stories of community leaders, business pioneers and other exceptional Chicago Jews. We invite you to take part in that effort by joining the oral history committee.

Conducting an oral history is a way to record and publicize history that can be as rewarding to the interviewer and the subject as it is to the Society and community. Many Society members are experienced takers of oral histories and are available to give you advice on how to prepare and conduct interviews.

Think for a moment about friends and neighbors with rich backgrounds. Let us know about them so we can

record their stories for future generations. Better yet, let us know about them and then work with us to record those stories yourself.

Such oral histories are invaluable documents for recording history. We make it a practice to publish excerpts of a different one from our files in each issue of *Chicago Jewish History* where we hope they are of some current interest, but there is no way of knowing what uses future historians will find for them.

The oral history project has been a priority of the Society the past year and we are anxious to include as many of our members as possible in the work and planning.

For information about how to get started conducting oral histories, contact Sid Sorkin, chairman of the oral history committee, at (708)541-2188. □

Consider Donating the "Gold" in Your Attic to the Society

One way you can consider helping the Society in our efforts to preserve and retell the history of the Jews of Chicago is to donate archival material that you have tucked away in old drawers, trunks, boxes, or attics.

Given the constraints of our own limited archival storage space, we unfortunately cannot take most documents relating to individual families. What we are looking for instead are documents relating to the history of the larger community. This might include synagogue directories, programs from Jewish events, records of Jewish organizations or photographs of Jewish sites. Contact the Society office if you think you have appropriate materials. □

Oral History Excerpt:

Ben Bentley Talks of Boxing and of Making a Name for Himself in Chicago

Lifelong Chicagoan Ben Bentley is one of the most colorful figures in the Chicago Sports World. A long-time ring announcer for boxing matches, he has been involved in sports in countless additional ways. He is perhaps best known today for serving as the moderator of two popular shows: "The Sportswriters" on WGN Radio and "The Sportswriters on TV" on cable's Sports Channel.

Bentley spoke before a Society open meeting on Feb., 20, 1994. The following is an excerpt from an oral history interview he granted to the Society on August 4, 1993. The interview was conducted by Emma Kowalenko and Walter Roth as part of the Society's ongoing Oral history project.

Kowalenko: May I have your full name and its spelling, please?

Bentley: My full name is Ben Bentley, B-e-n-t-l-e-y. Ben Bentley Goldberg, G-o-l-d-b-e-r-g. I tell you that because I'm not trying to hide where I came from. Bentley came -- I'll tell you all about it.

Kowalenko: That is actually one of the first questions, the Jewish and "American" names and surnames and how they all came. Can you describe those for us rather?

Bentley: Sure. Yes.

Kowalenko: Your first name would be Bentley?

Bentley: No, Ben Bentley -- Bentley was taken from a derivative of the Jewish religion Barney and they called me Ben Bentley. And the real name is Ben Bentley Goldberg. Actually, the name -- I used it and it stuck with me -- was when I was in the theatrical business. I was a comedy MC for many, many years when I came out of the service. And so, the agent told me, he says, "Benny, we don't use the Benny; it's be Ben. And you'll use the name Bentley. That's short to put up on a poster or a neon signing

'Appearing Here Tonight.'" So therein is where I got that name.

Kowalenko: Now can you tell us what year that would have been?

Bentley: Yes, that was in the 40s. That was ... I came out of the service of '45. I'd say from '46 to about '48.

Kowalenko: Was that in Chicago?

Bentley: No, I traveled all over. I lived in Chicago but I had an agent who had me booked in various places around the country...

Now, my father was named ... when they came to Chicago, it was actually Goldbergas, G-o-l-d-b-e-r-g-a-s. Goldbergas. And I think when they came to Ellis Island somebody told them we have Goldbergs, no Goldbergas. So it became Goldberg.

Kowalenko: Now, you say that your parents came here. Were you born here?

Bentley: I was born in Chicago, born and raised.

Kowalenko: But your parents came from Europe?

Bentley: My father came from Kolns, Lithuania. My mother came from a small town in Russia, the name that I have now since forgotten. It was a very little village like they had all over Russia. A shtetl, if you will.

Kowalenko: Did [your father] talk much about this town or ...?

Bentley: Absolutely. Absolutely. He had a great deal of pride coming from Kovno.

If I had the proper joke, I told it. But I grew up with those anti-semitism and I was a little on the fearful side, you know, to do Jewish material.

As you know, the Honorable Judge Marovitz, Abraham Marovitz, Abraham Lincoln Marovitz to be exact -- his parents came from the same town in Kovno that my father came from. He talked mostly about the chief rabbi who was recognized throughout Europe as one of the great, great rabbis. He talked about what a wonderful town, city it was until the pogroms started. Yes, I heard from my father on many, many occasions. We would talk and he would say, "Oh, by the way, you know what we did in Kovno?" And these things stuck with me all down through the years. Oh, my father must have come here in early '20s.

Kowalenko: What about your mom?

Bentley: My mother, yeah, my mother, yeah. She was a little girl too. A little girl, a young maiden. And she came from -- as I say, I cannot think of this town but a little shtetl in Russia.

Kowalenko: So also in the '20s.

Bentley: Yes.

Kowalenko: And did they meet in Chicago?

Bentley: Yes, yes. My father was living in Milwaukee at the time. And he came to Chicago and met my mother and thereon began a process of marriage.

Roth: What did your father do?

Bentley: My father... First of all, my dad came in the time when they tell me there was depression. And he was working on the Yiddish stage, if you will, as an actor on the Yiddish stage.

Roth: Milwaukee?

Bentley: And Chicago. It was Chicago where he got his start, where he worked with the bigger stars. That's how he learned [English], between my grandfolks, rest in peace -- I was able to, I could never talk English, I only had to talk Yiddish. And to my father, my father always talked English to me because, you know, but when he wanted to say something to my wife, it was in Yiddish. And they had rehearsals at my home. And they would do these rehearsals and naturally it was all in Yiddish. I used to pick up all these expressions and all these words and to this day, I'm proud I speak it very fluently. Very fluently. Yes...

Roth: Were you in any sports in high school?

Bentley: In high school? No. Would you believe it? None whatsoever.

Kowalenko: I was going to ask whether that's when it all started.

Bentley: No, no, no, no.

Kowalenko: Okay. So then this love of sports and boxing -- where would you say that began for you?

Bentley: It started in Honolulu, Hawaii when I was on my way home from the Army. I always loved boxing and I was arranging with another friend of mine who came from another city, Cleveland. And we put on what we put on what we called The Friday Night Fights. And we would go -- each captain, we would write, talk to each captain if there were any people in the company that wanted to be a fighter -- I mean, to box on our shows. And that's when I became interested in boxing. And Admiral Nimitz came down to our fight one night.

Roth: "Our fight" meaning you were staging it?

Bentley: Yeah, I was putting on fights.

Kowalenko: So you were arranging for the fights to happen. You were ...

Bentley: That's right. I was the matchmaker. I would set it up.

Kowalenko: Okay.

Bentley: I didn't fight.

Kowalenko: Then who were the fighters at that time?

Bentley: Oh, I couldn't think of the names.

Kowalenko: No, I don't mean names but I mean were they local people from Hawaii?

Bentley: No, no. They were more or less Army people...

Kowalenko: And then after that?

Bentley: I came back to Chicago and I was in the entertainment business as a comedy MC. I was doing that already in the service.

Kowalenko: You were?

Bentley: Yes. They put me in charge of the USO that came over. And I was handling them and I was the Master of Ceremony to bring 'em in and introduce them.

Roth: Then did you stay in the Jewish circuit or was it general?

Bentley: You mean the material I used?

Roth: Yeah.

Bentley: I used everything. I wasn't a funny comedian with accents. If I had the proper joke, I told it. But I grew up with those anti-semitism and I was a little on the fearful side, you know, to do Jewish material. No. My biggest thing was impressions. In those days, I did... I did a thing called Jolson, Cantor and Me, we're definitely the big three. And that was a routine that I did. And did the impressions for all of them. Then I did impressions of Edward G. Robinson, Lionel Barrymore, one or two others...

I introduced the other acts on the bill and then I did mine. And that was the show.

Kowalenko: That's fantastic. Now, the comedy MC routines that you did, can you give some ideas where, what theatres?

Bentley: Oh, I tell you, I was traveling around from Omaha. The furthest west I went, I think, was in Denver. I played a place in Denver. But I have a book home that has some of the locations that I played. But I played ... I was mostly with Detroit, Cleveland. Detroit, Cleveland, Cincinnati. In that particular area, I was working. I was not a big time MC, I want you to know. I mean I was among the lowest paid in those days, you know. And, of course, money was big. If you made a hundred and fifty a

week, you were a rich guy. Well, I wasn't too far from there. I made better than a hundred and fifty working in club but I had to pay my hotel, transportation, eat.

Kowalenko: Were you married at that time?

Bentley: No, I was not married.

Kowalenko: Now this was when ... straight when you came out of the Army, this started happening?

Bentley: Yes, yes...

Kowalenko: Then the boxing itself. You were a boxer?

Bentley: Amateur... but I grew to love the game when I followed Barney Ross, the champion of the Jewish people. Then it was Davey Day. And I used to follow all of them fighters.

Barney Ross... was a former lightweight and welterweight champion of the world. Came from good Jewish people. His father ran a grocery store here on the West Side. He eventually was shot -- the father. The two other sons were placed in a home. And Barney Ross' greatest thrill was when he became a fighter of notoriety and became making money, he took the kids out of the home.

Roth: Did you know him?

Bentley: Very well. God rest his soul...

Davey Day was another Jewish fighter that was headed for championship fights. But he had a funny personality off -- when he was out of the ring. And the same managers that had Barney Ross had him.

And Davey Day began to feel that they were giving more attention to Barney Ross -- which they should have. He was going to be champion! Champion. But then there was King Levinsky. There were a lot of ... quite a few Jewish fighters.

Kowalenko: I wanted to ask about ... go ahead.

Roth: I talked earlier a number of times about King Levinsky and was more interested in how much you knew about him?

Bentley: I knew him quite well. The Kingfish's downfall was his sister, Leaping Lena Levy. That caused, you know, a lot of consternation. But, you know, when you knew him and you were alone with him, he was down to earth, good Jewish guy.

And we're in a restaurant one time and he walked in. And we knew the owner. And The King asked me to come in and be with him and we sat down in a

booth. And two big burly guys walked in and one guy says to the other, "In the next booth," he says, "that's King Levinsky over there." And the other guy says, "Yeah, you can tell that big Jew, with his big nose" or something that, that ... And Barney [King, actually] heard it. When Barney [King] got up and he said -- one at a time -- and I jumped in 'cause knowing King -- I said, "King" ... and then the owner said, "King, you'll cause me to lose my license." And we both went out. We went somewhere else. He says, "I know you had my interest at heart." You know, yes.

Roth: You mentioned Barney.

Kowalenko: I think he meant Kingfish.

Roth: You meant Kingfish?

Bentley: Yeah, Kingfish, yeah.

Talking about Barney was so

My job was to put two fighters together that would make a good fight, one in one division, one in another. And you were able to develop fighters and see fighters in action.

close to me...

Roth: Did you referee too?

Bentley: No, no.

Roth: You just do... you were a matchmaker?

Bentley: Yes. At the Chicago Stadium, for the International Boxing Club... they sponsored the Wednesday night and Friday night fights. Wednesday night was Pabst Blue Ribbon; Friday night was Gillette. There was a big... and I became the matchmaker for the Wednesday night fights. New York had the Friday night fights...

Kowalenko: Now, can you just describe the functions of a matchmaker?

Bentley: The matchmaker's job was when a date was given to you, to make the proper matches. If they wanted... I handled what they called the Underneath Card.

Roth: Under?

Bentley: Underneath. That was the preliminaries. They called it the Underneath Card. And the main event was always on top. My job was to put two fighters together that would make a good fight, one in one division, one in another. And you were able to develop fighters and see fighters in action. But that was what I did. I handled -- It was tough because if you had to put a card together. The main event was set when they signed the contract. Now you had to go make the card up. □