

# THEN AND NOW:

## 10 DECADES OF JEWISH COMMUNITY IN WEST ROGERS PARK

West Rogers Park holds a unique status. Home to a kaleidoscope of cultures, it is the flagship Jewish neighborhood of Chicago and, now in its 10th decade, the longest-standing Jewish neighborhood in Chicago history. It is also, notably, the only Jewish neighborhood in Chicago to have experienced a resurgence after its population markedly declined.

Though smaller than it was in the “Golden Age” of the 1950s and ‘60s, the Jewish community in West Rogers Park today boasts more synagogues, Jewish schools, and adult learning programs than ever before. That the community continues to renew and revitalize itself can be attributed to creative and committed leadership, bold civic decision making, and the day-to-day affirmation of thousands of families and individuals.

Images and anecdotes for this exhibit were contributed by many people who have treasured memories of the neighborhood. Some of these individuals live here today, and some, like tens of thousands of Jews throughout Chicagoland and beyond—who picture West Rogers Park in their minds’ eye when they imagine “the old neighborhood” – moved away decades ago.

“Then and Now: 10 Decades of Jewish Community in West Rogers Park” chronicles the constancy and change, the values, and the resilience of this storied community. It is the fruit of a collaboration between Jewish Neighborhood Development Council of Chicago and the Chicago Jewish Historical Society, representing the commitment of both organizations to the neighborhood and to the Jewish community.

We hope these images will spark a memory, trigger a smile, kindle a feeling of pride, and touch the heart, wherever you grew up and wherever you live today.



Neil Gale, "Devon Avenue Westgate Shopping Center Manzelmann," c. 1950s.

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# DEVON AND WESTERN, THEN AND NOW



Rogers Park/West Ridge Historical Society, "Street Scene," c. 1934.

By the early 1960s, the Jewish population of West Rogers Park reached a peak of roughly 47,000, comprising about 75 percent of the neighborhood's residents. Many came from Chicago's West Side, as well as other city neighborhoods, and descended from East European immigrants who settled in Chicago around the turn of the 20th century. Many of the newcomers to West Rogers Park flocked into Georgian-style homes that were popping up west of California Avenue and north to the city limits.



Jeff Zoline, "Khan BBQ," 2016, jeffzolinephotos.com. Used with permission from the photographer

Jews started trickling into West Rogers Park in the 1930s, as streetcars on newly paved Western Avenue prefigured a boom in Chicago's emerging Far North Side neighborhood. West Rogers Park's early Jewish residents moved into bungalows and apartment buildings, mostly east of California and south of Devon avenues. Looking southward along the 6300 block of Western, the Nortown Theatre featured "air cooling" and drew big crowds during an era when few people had air conditioning.



Rogers Park/West Ridge Historical Society, "Nathan's Deli Devon & Western SW corner," c. 1950s.

Today, in 2022, the Jewish population totals about 25,000, about one-third of the neighborhood's residents. West Rogers Park – dubbed West Ridge by the City, though stubbornly not by most Jews – is one of the most diverse neighborhoods in Chicago. With almost 40 percent of people living in West Rogers Park born abroad, the area is alive with many languages, practices, and ways of life. Whether newly arrived or returning to "the old neighborhood," anyone can find their place in this vibrant, welcoming community.

# FIRST SYNAGOGUE, THEN AND NOW

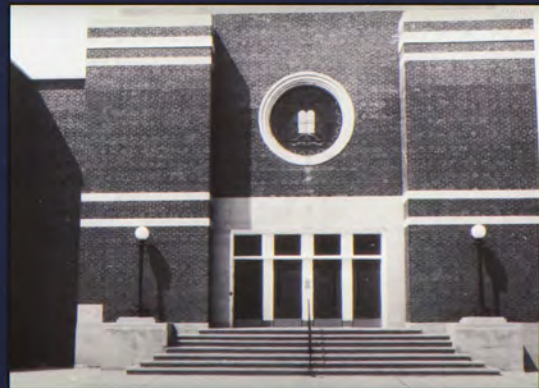


Stephen M. Levin, "Cantor Brandhandler," 2016.  
Robb Packer, "First Synagogue - Ner Tamid," c.

After years of holding services in a rented hall, West Rogers Park's early Jewish residents purchased empty land on the northeast corner of California and Rosemont avenues to build a house of worship. In 1938, they laid the cornerstone for Ner Tamid, West Rogers Park's first synagogue, a Conservative congregation. The congregation was named for the *ner tamid* or eternal flame, the lamp that burns perpetually above the ark in every synagogue.

From his arrival in 1954, Ner Tamid Cantor David Brandhandler (pictured here), a musician and writer of liturgical music, trained thousands of students at Ner Tamid Hebrew School for their bar and bat mitzvah observances. These rites of passage mark a young person's maturation into adulthood in the Jewish community.

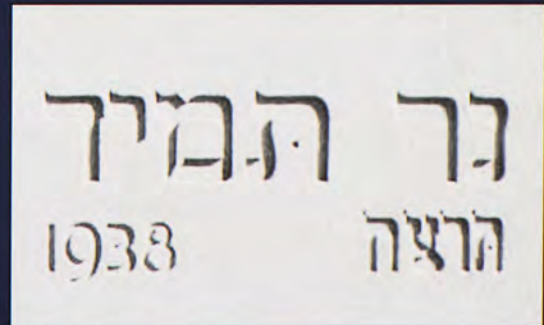
Ner Tamid's membership dwindled significantly as many adherents of Conservative Judaism moved to the suburbs. The Hebrew school closed in 1974. In 2007, the membership voted to put the building up for sale. Yet the tradition of educating young people remains – today the expanded Ner Tamid building houses Yeshivas Tiferses Tzvi, an Orthodox Jewish school for boys.



Robb Packer, "First Synagogue - Ner Tamid," c. 1938



Ellen Doppelt, "Yeshivas Tiferses Tzvi," 2022.



Robb Packer, "Cornerstone," 1938.

# SYNAGOGUE BOOM



Judith Kroichik Harris, "Temple Menorah Confirmation Class," 1962.

Temple Menorah, a Reform congregation, was founded at the corner of California and Sherwin avenues in 1946 by Jews who moved north to West Rogers Park from the South Side. In keeping with Reform practice at the time, Menorah offered confirmation as an alternative to bar and bat mitzvah education and ceremonies.

As the Jewish population of West Rogers Park swelled in the postwar years – reaching more than 47,000 people by 1963 – synagogues multiplied. In the early '60s, there were 12 synagogues, representing Conservative, Reform, egalitarian, Orthodox, and traditional approaches to religious life.

In 2022, there are 30 Orthodox synagogues, often called 'shuls,' in the neighborhood. Old and new, they vary in ways both obvious and subtle. In contrast, there is one egalitarian congregation, Mah Tov, in the neighborhood.



Cantor Susan Buchbinder, "Mah Tov New Building Dedication," 2021



Ellen Doppelt, "KINS," 2022.



Ellen Doppelt, "Agudas Yisroel of West Rogers Park," 2022.

# COMING OF AGE— BAR AND BAT MITZVAH



Rosa Wiaz Beegun, "Bat Mizvah Girl," 1959.

In Jewish tradition, when a boy (at 13) or a girl (at 12 or 13) becomes bar or bat mitzvah, he or she becomes responsible for his or her own actions. This ritual marks a young person's transition into adulthood.

Rosa Wiaz Beegun celebrated her bat mitzvah at Congregation K.I.N.S. of West Rogers Park in May 1959.

A child of Holocaust survivors, Beegun was born in Austria in 1947 in a displaced persons camp. After living with family in Paris, she and her parents, with assistance from Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) and a relative in Chicago, settled in West Rogers Park.

"My parents were very grateful to come to America," Beegun said.

At her bat mitzvah, Beegun read from the Torah (Hebrew Bible) and *haftorah* (Prophets). She gave a speech, followed by a luncheon at the synagogue.

Beegun said that the aspects of Judaism that are most important to her are "believing in a Higher Being, being honest, grateful, and a good person, and treating people well."

Sandford Gorchow (second from right) prepares to chant a portion of the Torah in celebration of his bar mitzvah, which took place at Congregation B'nai Jacob on Artesian and Granville avenues in March 1959. Standing with him at the bima, the platform on which the Torah is read, are (from left) Rabbi Joseph Garfinkle and Sandy's brothers, Murray, Arnold, and Jerry.



Sandy Gorchow, "Bar Mitzvah at B'nai Jacob," 1959.

# GROWING UP JEWISH IN THE '60S



Beverly Siegel, "Alonda's Cotillion," 1963.

Within two decades, the Jewish community in West Rogers Park was declining numerically, as many young people who grew up here chose to live elsewhere after college.

Today, the former Alondas live in Chicago and suburbs and from coast to coast, but only one lives in West Rogers Park. Meanwhile, Mather is one of Chicago's most diverse high schools, with 140 countries represented in the student body and over 75% of students speaking a language other than English at home.



Joseph Bright, "In our 'dugout' Talman and Rosemont," 1962

Bright attended Ner Tamid Hebrew School and graduated from Mather in 1968. He and his wife raised their sons in the suburbs.

## ALONDAS COTILLION

Mather High School was built to educate the postwar Baby Boomers whose families had flocked into West Rogers Park. The student body was overwhelmingly Jewish when Mather opened in 1959.

Mather was well-known for its social clubs, like the Alondas, pictured here at their cotillion – celebrating a group Sweet 16 party – at the Sheridan Hotel in 1962.



Ellen Doppelt, "Mather High School," 2022.

## BOYS IN THE DUGOUT

Joseph Bright (right) and his friends played baseball, running bases, and pinders behind their building at Talman and Rosemont. Once lights were installed in the alley, their parents let them play into the night.

The metal plate on the building was a door for coal drop-offs, but to the boys, the area near the coal shoot was their "dugout."

Bright believes the strategic thinking he cultivated by aiming his swings to keep softballs off garage roofs made a lasting impact. "Everyone there was a quick thinker," he said.

# LET'S GO ON DEVON!



Neil Gale, "Devon Avenue Westgate Shopping Center Manzelmann," c. 1950s.

The shopping on Devon Avenue in the '50s, '60s, and early '70s – from Western to Sacramento – was some of Chicago's best, rivaling Oak Street and downtown. Many of the shops were owned by Jewish merchants.

Seymour Paisin, L Star, Maurice Rothschild, Carol Corr, Schwartz's, Manzelmann on Devon, Rosenblum's – the list goes on. Popular "Jewish-style" restaurants and hotdog places, kosher and "kosher-style" bakeries, delicatessens, and food stores added to the appeal of the iconic street.

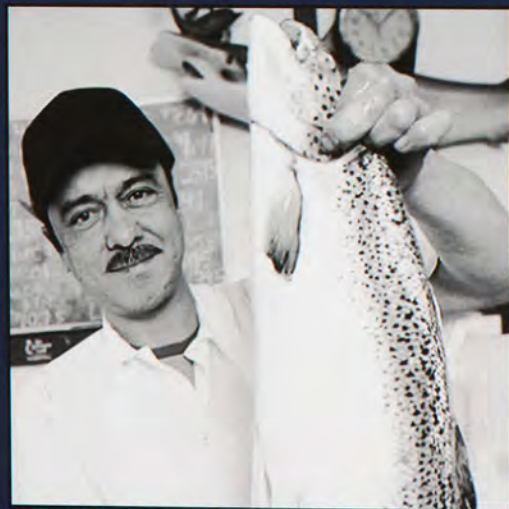
Shoppers and recreation seekers descended in droves to buy everything from elegant gowns to the latest in teen wear to herring and knishes.



Neil Gale, "Devon Lazar's Juvenile Store," c. 1960s.



Rogers Park/West Ridge Historical Society, "Four Cohns Shoes and Shapiro Jewelers," 1975



Arturo Venegas, "A Kosher Fish Story," 2007.

## JEWISH DEVON, 2022

The Jewish commercial presence on Devon today is limited to kosher food vendors – one grocery, two restaurants, a bakery, a kosher Dunkin' Donuts – and Chicago's only kosher fish store.

Arturo Venegas, proprietor of Robert's Fish Market, started working in the shop as a teenager newly arrived from Mexico. Venegas bought the store from his employer, original owner Robert Schuffler, 22 years ago. Selling only fish that meet kosher standards, Arturo, who is not Jewish himself, understands the

"nuance" of keeping kosher, said Rabbi Sholem Fishbane, administrator of kosher services for the Chicago Rabbinical Council. "He works with the community to enhance the Sabbath experience," Rabbi Fishbane added.

# JIMMY'S TEAMS



Jimmy Price, "JCC All-Stars," 1974.

"If you played baseball and lived in West Rogers Park in the '60s and '70s, you probably played at the J," said Jimmy Price (front row, far right), referring to the Bernard Horwich Jewish Community Center.

Some of the Jewish kids wore a *kippah* (religious head covering) under their baseball caps, others didn't, and some of the kids weren't Jewish. But as Jimmy recalls, "we all lived in this Jewish enclave."

Making the all-star team in those days was a really big deal, said Price, because its games were played at Thillens Stadium. Thillens Stadium, now maintained by the Park District as The Baseball Stadium at Devon and Kedzie, hosted televised Little League and softball games for almost six decades.



Douglas Wertheimer, "Thillens Baseball," 2011.

"The stands were full and entire families would come out to cheer on their kids," recounted Price. "There were a scoreboard and a concession stand, and if you hit a home run over the fence, you got to slowly trot around the bases like a big leaguer!"

Price now owns a baseball school in the Avondale neighborhood. "I'm in the business of making memories," he said. That's exactly what playing ball at the J and Thillens did for him.



# IT TAKES AN *ERUV* – AND ROOM FOR FAMILIES

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In 1992, Robert Matanky (second from right) negotiated a contract with the City of Chicago to allow construction of an *eruv* in West Rogers Park. Pictured here is Rabbi Zev Cohen (from left) and Rabbi Leonard Matanky presenting a plaque to Mayor Richard M. Daley (center) upon City Council approval. The late Alderman Bernard Stone (50th Ward) assisted the community's effort.

An *eruv* is a symbolic enclosure – something like a big, oddly shaped fence. According to *halacha*, Jewish religious law, an *eruv* makes it permissible for Jews to carry certain objects outside their homes on the Sabbath within the *eruv* perimeter. These objects can include food, water, house keys, or a baby in a carriage.

Hardly visible, an *eruv* can be made of adjacent objects, like a stretch of railroad track and a major street, connected by strands of wire strung on lamp poles.

An *eruv* in a neighborhood is a game changer for many Orthodox Jewish families because it facilitates social gatherings on the Sabbath, especially for those with children. The construction of the West Rogers Park *eruv* encouraged many young families to invest in homes in the neighborhood. Simultaneously, Alderman Stone advocated for zoning changes that permitted construction of bigger homes on city lots to accommodate larger families.



Robert Matanky, "City Council Approves Eruv," 1992.

# COMMUNITY FESTIVITIES



Diane Alexander White Photography, "Benny Goodman at Jewish Fest, Bernard Horwich Jewish Community Center," 1981.

## JEWISH FESTIVAL ROCKS WITH 'KING OF SWING'

The time: Sunday, June 28, 1981.

The place: the park behind the Bernard Horwich Jewish Community Center at Touhy and Sacramento avenues.

The scene: a massive festival sponsored by the City of Chicago, featuring famed Jewish clarinetist Benny Goodman (on stage) performing

with the Chicago Symphony String Quartet. That summer, the city hosted eight free ethnic "neighborhood festivals," bringing big-name acts to local parks and avenues.

"It was difficult to tell who was more thrilled at the Jewish Neighborhood Festival—Benny Goodman or the crowd of some 25,000 who were mesmerized by his music," exulted *Chicago Tribune* columnist Aaron Gold.

Goodman, himself the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, grew up poor in Chicago's Maxwell Street area and became one of America's most popular bandleaders. Nationally known Jewish comedian Henny Youngman also delivered a set that afternoon, rounding out an extraordinary day of entertainment and community pride.



Caryn Bark, "Pesach Table," 2020.

## THE PASSOVER SEDER – WHO'S COMING TO DINNER?

Comedienne and writer Caryn Bark has lived with her husband in a classic Chicago bungalow in West Rogers Park for almost 40 years. Raising their children, the couple, both Jewish, adopted some one-of-a-kind practices. The Passover tableau here, a sendup of the ancient Israelites crossing the Red Sea, is just one example of her eclectic approach.

For the Passover *seder*, a holiday meal at which the story of the Exodus from Egypt is retold, "my husband would dress up as Elijah," a pivotal figure in the story, Bark said. "My kids were disappointed when they learned that not everyone did that."

Bark said she "can't put a name" on the branch of Judaism she identifies with, but that "living among more religious Jews" in West Rogers Park has influenced her spiritual practice.

# A NEW GENERATION OF IMMIGRANTS

Between 1969 and 1990, some 23,000 Jews fleeing the Soviet Union settled in the Chicago area, primarily in West Rogers Park. Many came with conditions that required medical attention.

Mount Sinai Hospital, which had been founded in 1919 to serve Jewish immigrants and refugees who had settled on Chicago's West Side at the turn of the 20th century, opened Sinai Clinic in 1973, at 2901 W. Touhy Ave., to meet the health care needs of the new arrivals.

Physician Assistant Joan Schulhoff recalled that most days she saw "eight to 10 new patients, many of whom came in fresh off the plane."



Steve Donisch, "Mount Sinai Medical," 1996.

All told, Sinai Clinic provided health care to more than 80,000 people – including refugees from Bosnia, Somalia, Tibet, and Rwanda – before closing in 2017 due to a drastic decline in immigration.



ORT America, Chicago Region, "Zarem Golde/Chicago ORT Technical Institute," 1990.

## MEETING EVOLVING NEEDS

ORT Zarem/Golde Technical Institute was established in 1991 at 3050 W. Touhy Ave. to provide Russian Jews with job skills to rebuild their lives. By its closure in 2004, ORT had trained thousands of students of all faiths.

The ORT building had had a prior life. In 1957, a Jewish group bought land on Touhy and Albany avenues to build a Reform temple. By the

early 1970s, the congregation, Temple Beth-El, boasted a membership of more than 800 families. In the '80s, it moved to suburban Northbrook.

In 2006, an Orthodox Jewish group bought the ORT building to house a *shul*. Today, that congregation, Adas Yeshurun, is a thriving religious and community hub, serving many young families.

# BUILDING A HOME IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD



Ellen Doppelt, "Laurie with Dilkayas and her children," 2022.

## PAYING IT FORWARD

Growing up in West Rogers Park, Laurie Kaden (right), heard terrible stories about attacks her family suffered in Europe – *pogroms* – and the hardships her mother faced getting into America.

That childhood experience fueled a passion for helping immigrants that is grounded in Jewish history and tradition, said Kaden. In 2018, after her North Shore synagogue started collecting funds and household items for refugee resettlement, Kaden

began helping a Rohingya family who had fled their homeland in Myanmar, which the Rohingya still call Burma. Dilkayas (second from right) and her family waited seven years in Malaysia to enter America, eventually settling in West Rogers Park.

A retired social worker, Kaden has helped Dilkayas and her husband navigate bureaucracy to set doctor appointments and resolve green-card and income tax issues. She regularly drove Dilkayas to her midwife visits and even hunted down the source of lead in the bloodstream of the couple's baby.

Kaden visits the family about once a week.



Libenu, "First Group Home – Groundbreaking," 2012.

## EVERYONE BELONGS

In 2012, Michel Lis, then 24, donned a hard hat to break ground for West Rogers Park's first group home for young Jewish men with intellectual and developmental disabilities, under the auspices of Libenu, a Jewish nonprofit agency.

Today, Michel is one of eight men between the ages of 32 and 44 who live there.

"Everybody at Libenu really belongs to the Jewish community," said Lis, who serves as a *gabbai*, a volunteer synagogue aide, assisting with the Torah readings at a nearby congregation. He also takes part in social, recreational, and adult learning programs in the neighborhood.

Fueled by a growing awareness – and expectation – of inclusion, the West Rogers Park Jewish community has made significant strides in serving its residents with disabilities.

# DEVON AND MCCORMICK, THEN AND NOW

In 1949, Hollywood Kiddieland opened at 6301 N. McCormick Blvd., enchanting kids young and old with rides and excitement. It closed in 1974, when the owners lost their lease.

In 1989, Cineplex Odeon opened a six-screen multiplex at 6341 N. McCormick that towered like a beacon over Lincoln Village. It closed in 2005. For the next 10 years, the 3 ½-acre tract fanning out north to Devon Avenue housed an abandoned movie theater, parking lot, and car wash



Found object, contributed by Beverly Siegel, 2022.



Howard Rieger, "Stone Park Before," 2017.

that blighted the junction of the Chicago neighborhoods of West Rogers Park and Peterson Park and adjacent Lincolnwood.

In 2015, Jewish Neighborhood Development Council of Chicago spearheaded a drive to remediate the blight. JNDC secured a commitment from the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District, which controlled the land, to donate it to the city to become a park.

With the help and leadership of Alderman Debra Silverstein (50th Ward), Stone Park was dedicated in 2017. Named in memory of Alderman Bernard Stone, the park beautifies and uplifts West Rogers Park and surrounding communities. With the later addition of a footbridge at the south end of Lincoln Village, connecting bicycle trails on both sides of the North Shore Channel, the transformation of the southeast corner of Devon and McCormick completes a recreational amenity that runs from Green Bay Road in Evanston to Ainslie Avenue.



Ellen Doppelt, "Bernard Stone Park in 2022," 2022.