



CHICAGO JEWISH HISTORY

"If you want the present to be different from the past, study the past" — Baruch Spinoza

Chicago's Two Yiddish Dailies

By Alexandra C. Price

Editor's Note: The full version of this essay, "Finding "Yiddishland" in America: Chicago's Yiddish-Language Press and the Challenges of Americanization, 1918-1932," appeared in the Chicago Studies Annual 2020, a publication of the College of the University of Chicago (University of Chicago, 2022). It was originally presented to the Department of History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the bachelor's degree at the University of Chicago. The excerpt below is reprinted with the permission of its author, as well as with the university and the journal.

When Eastern European Jews first arrived in Chicago in the late 19th century, many of them had had little exposure to secular Yiddish literature; there were few such publications in the Russian Empire at the time due to strict governmental restrictions on minority publications.¹ Because of this, it took several years for the Yiddish-language press in the city to take off, and the 1880s were littered with failed publications that went under in a matter of year or months. As the immigrant population of Chicago increased, however, the Yiddish-language press became a central part of Eastern European Jewish life in the city, representing the voices of the newly arrived immigrants from Russia whose outlook and lifestyle contrasted starkly with those of German-Jewish and Anglo-Jewish populations living on the South and North sides, who were largely Americanized by the 1880s.² Most German-Jewish newspapers—of which there were relatively few—were religious in nature, with religious figures as their editors; Yiddish newspapers, by contrast, spanned the breadth of the ideological spectrum. Their publications were edited “by a diverse group of union leaders, printers, business owners, and journalists.”³ While Yiddish bound all of these individuals together, their understandings of Yiddish—of its function in the community and of its relative importance compared to Hebrew, for example—differed greatly.



An article from the *Daily Jewish Courier*

By 1920, there were two prominent competing Yiddish dailies in Chicago that make up the majority of the source material for this paper: the *Daily Jewish Courier*, which represented an Orthodox, Zionist perspective, and the Chicago edition of the *Jewish Daily Forward*—a regional branch of the famous New York daily—which was socialist and secular in outlook.⁴ The *Forward* opened its Chicago branch in 1919, but its New York counterpart was well-known in the city long before then as one of the primary periodicals representing the Jewish working class. According to an article printed in the Chicago *Forward* in 1929, there had been a campaign set up in the years before the *Forward* came to Chicago that had rallied to open a branch in the city in order to support the labor movement there.⁵ In his history of Chicago's Jews, Irving Cutler describes the *Forward's* reputation in the city: “[it was] known for its warm, often argumentative style, which produced coverage that was frequently punctuated with razor-sharp wit and barbs.”⁶

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PRESIDENT'S COLUMN



Dr. Rachelle Gold

Why do you love history, especially the history of our Chicago Jewish community? Is our history thrilling, engrossing, surprising, thought-provoking, enlightening, inspiring, and gratifying? My answer is a resounding “yes.” The rewards are multiplied by occurrences that strike me as magically—or divinely?—destined. Speaking personally, I encounter a serendipity and discover an inevitable relevance with our history.

I am devoting this column to the delight and personal connection I experienced while responding to recent research inquiries received by the Society. My hope is that you, too, will find joy and personal meaning in these stories...and in the many others it is our mission to bring you.

Jewish Medicine and Hospitals in Chicago

Within one month, two Chicago-area students asked for help in researching this subject. The first student, a Jewish studies major, chose “Jewish medicine and medical philanthropy in early Chicago” for an independent study project. The second student, a Jewish medical student working at Mount Sinai Hospital, unexpectedly learned of the hospital’s Jewish history by noticing a cement stone with Hebrew letters in the hospital walls. Eager to learn more, the medical student’s online search led her to a CJH article, “From Some to One to None? Jewish Hospitals in Chicago, 1857–2011” (Spring, 2011) by Daniel Koch, grandson of Morris Kurtzon, Mount Sinai Hospital’s founder and president (1919–1945). The student was inspired to commence a project to learn about the medical personnel who shaped the hospital in its early years. Her aim is to highlight the Jewish history of the hospital and strengthen the sense of community. Meanwhile, the Jewish studies student also discovered the Koch article.

I sent a list of additional references to both students, and I introduced them to each other. In a follow-up, the medical student excitedly told me that she made contact with a descendant of Morris Kurtzon, and she was proceeding with her project. The Jewish studies student reported that she located the references I suggested. I asked both students to keep us apprised of their progress. Their work may be featured in *CJH* in the future.

How did this experience touch me personally? As a clinical psychologist, I am interested in health care. It is deeply satisfying to help young adults learn about Jewish history and Chicago Jewish history. It is a treat to connect people with each other. My parents grew up on the West Side, the neighborhood where Mount Sinai Hospital is located, and probably received medical care there. One of the students is studying at my alma mater, Northwestern University. By rereading the Koch article, I learned much that I hadn’t known and became reacquainted with information I hadn’t remembered, generating amazement and Jewish pride.

***Romance of a People*, pageant on Jewish Day at the 1933 *Century of Progress World’s Fair* in Chicago**

Two researchers, Karen Goodman and Dr. Atay Citron, experts in Jewish cultural forms who have produced important scholarship about *Romance of a People*, contacted us independently. As CJHS members are aware, the Society staged a festive commemoration of the *Romance* on July 29, 2000, and reprinted the original program book with new introductory material. (See the year-end 2000 issue of *CJH* for detailed articles about the event and the program book reprint. I went to the commemoration with my mother, Harriet B. Gold, who, in her teens, attended the pageant with her family and wrote about it in her diary, which I possess.)

Goodman, a choreographer, teacher, and writer on Yiddish dance, is the author of the magnificent *CJH* article, “Nathan Vizonksy: Dancing Master of Jewish Chicago” (Fall, 2011). Vizonksy (1898–1968), the choreographer of the *Romance* pageant, was a renowned Chicago-based teacher, dancer, and advocate of Yiddish dance. Goodman is gathering more material about Vizonksy for an in-depth article that she and co-authors are writing for a book on Yiddish dance. She asked us for help in accessing Jewish newspapers from the years Vizonksy was active, 1928–1943.

Citron is Professor Emeritus in the Faculty of Humanities, Department of Theatre & Performance Studies, Haifa University. In his inquiry to us, he identified himself by quoting from then-CJHS President Walter Roth’s reference to him in the *Romance* program reprint: “...a young Israeli scholar...who was interested in making a documentary film on the anti Nazi pageants of the American Jews, asked my help in learning about any such



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pageants that had been staged in Chicago." Their conversation took place in the 1980s, when Citron was working on his doctorate; his dissertation (NYU, 1989) was entitled "Theatre and Pageantry in the Service of Jewish Nationalism in the United States 1933-1946." The first two chapters discuss the pageants held in Chicago - the *First All Chicago Chanukah Pageant* (December, 1932) and *Romance of a People*.

Citron, now entering retirement, plans to update his dissertation, translate it into Hebrew, and publish it in Israel. He asked us for a hard copy of our program reprint—he has a copy of the original program and a digital copy of the reprint—which may add useful information.

I could not completely fulfill Goodman's and Citron's requests. I referred Goodman to other institutions with digital archives of Jewish newspapers. The Society has no remaining copies of the *Romance* program reprint to offer Citron. However, my correspondence with each of these gracious and engaging scholars continued, producing marvelous results.

I shared with Goodman my love of Jewish dance, and she wrote me about her work in the field. I watched the documentary film about Yiddish dance she wrote and produced, "Come Let Us Dance" (available on YouTube). She recommended a definitive book on the subject by her close friend, the eminent Jewish dancer and dance scholar Judith Brin Ingber, *Seeing Israeli and Jewish Dance* (Wayne State University Press, 2011). I was lucky to acquire the out-of-print book, a like-new copy that happens to be autographed by Ingber! The book has a chapter about Felix Fibich (1917-2014), whom Ingber interviewed. Fibich was a choreographer and performer of Yiddish dance, an actor, and an important figure in the Yiddish theatre world. I am proud to have been a member in the 1970s of a dance group directed by Fibich, then dance director at the Bernard Horwich JCC. (I wrote about this in the Fall, 2018, issue of *CJH*.)



Citron also had some surprises for me. He sent me detailed information about his discovery of audio recordings of the *Romance* music. I was interested in obtaining his dissertation, but it was unavailable, so he emailed me digital copies of the two chapters of interest pertaining to the Chicago pageants. He suggested that I compose an article for *CJH* using this material. I may pursue this. Did he and Goodman know each other? It was natural to learn that they did.

As a final note, I want to add that it is my role at CJHS that allows me the privilege of engaging in these enlivening experiences. Please think about becoming more active in the Society so that you, too, can have such pleasures. Contact me at info@chicagojewishhistory.org.

Post-Passover Reflections on Addressing Antisemitism

The Passover Haggadah emphasizes that in every generation, the Jewish people have been attacked. To our dismay, our generation is no different. The lesson of history is that we cannot expect that the divine hand will send us a Moses every generation—and so we must take a hand in the efforts to defend the Jewish people from evil. We have repeatedly documented in our journal how Jews have acted on behalf of our people, and others who were degraded, in bad times. We must each do our part, in any way we can, by being informed, getting involved, and speaking out, to promote the security of the Jewish people. *Dr. Rachelle Gold*

Chicago's Two Yiddish Dailies

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The *Chicago Forward* participated in processes of Americanization rather explicitly, as it had in New York; in Abraham Cahan's own words, published in the *Chicago Forward* in 1927, "the *Forward* was called into being for a double purpose: (a) To organize the Jewish workers into trade unions and disseminate the principles of Socialism among them. (b) To act as an educational agency among the immigrant Jewish masses in the broadest sense of the word, and to spread among them high ideals of humanity."⁷ By encouraging its readers to embrace secularism and socialism, while also retaining a firm focus on Jewish readers through the choice of Yiddish and through news related to the state of the American Jewish immigrant community and workers, the *Forward* sought to influence identity construction for the growing American Jewish community. It recognized the importance of Yiddish to Jewish immigrant identity while pushing Jews to engage with the larger community rather than isolate themselves as they had done in the shtetls of Eastern Europe. The *Forward* wanted them to engage with the world as socialists, citizens, and workers—it chose Yiddish because it saw Yiddish as the secular Jewish language, a language of the working class, and a language that could speak to Jewish immigrants' hearts.

Over the years, however, the *Forward's* commitment to the Yiddish language expanded beyond the language's role as the working-class vernacular. Beginning in the 1920s and continuing into the 1930s, the *Forward* joined ranks with cultural organizations such as the Workmen's Circle, which were dedicated to preserving the Yiddish language and culture through education. The *Forward* began to promote evening classes such as "Jewish history" and "Yiddish reading" as a means of connecting Chicago's secular Yiddish-speaking community to a broader idea of "Yiddishland."⁸ This shift was a result both of the increasing pressures of assimilation and of the *Forward's* ties to broader, transnational Yiddish socialist movements, specifically the Bundist movement. The Bundists, who had originally formed Yiddish socialist parties across Eastern Europe, had also agitated for the right to what they called "cultural autonomy"—essentially, the ability to practice their culture and speak their language in peace. When many of them left Eastern Europe due to political turmoil, they brought this powerful ideology of identity centered on "*Yiddishkayt*" and "*doikayt*"⁹ with them to the United States, launching a revival of "Yiddish culture" in American Jewish immigrant communities (especially those aligned with the socialist cause).¹⁰ The *Forward* was deeply involved in these efforts.

The perspective of the *Daily Jewish Courier*, which branded itself as the voice of Chicago's Orthodox community, contrasted greatly with that of the *Forward*. Despite these differences, the *Courier*, too, simultaneously encouraged Americanization in some ways while articulating a traditionally Eastern European Jewish identity in others. Having started publishing in 1887, the *Courier* was among the oldest Yiddish periodicals printed in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s, and it was one of the few Jewish newspapers in Chicago that survived from the late 19th century into the 20th. Furthermore, it was the first Yiddish daily to be published—and to achieve success—outside of New York City.¹¹

From the start, the *Courier* attracted the attention of other Jewish newspapers. In 1894, *The Occident*, an English-language newspaper that associated itself with Reform Judaism (and proudly declared itself the "first Jewish reform paper to come into existence in the world"¹²), took note of the *Courier* in an article discussing four prominent Jewish newspapers in Chicago. Three of the four were published in English; only the *Courier* had the distinction of being printed in Yiddish, or, as *The Occident* put it: "in Hebrew characters in the Russian and Polish dialect."¹³ It circulated, according to *The Occident*, "among the 25,000 Russian and Polish Jews of the city,"¹⁴ making it the primary periodical for Chicago's Eastern European Jewish population. Throughout the 1920s, the *Courier* was also featured, albeit rather unfavorably, in the *Chicago Forward*. In 1921, the *Forward* accused the *Courier* of lying about its circulation—while the *Courier's* official 1921 circulation was 42,040, the *Forward* insisted that its true circulation was closer to 8,000.¹⁵ Regardless of what the circulation numbers really were, there is no doubt that the *Courier* was prominent among Chicago's Yiddish periodicals, and that it remained so—in the minds of its supporters and detractors—for the first half of the 20th century, as most other Yiddish newspapers failed.

The *Courier* published articles about education, international news, Yiddish cultural activities throughout the city, various religious institutions in Chicago, and much more. Alongside editorials, it published fiction, poetry, and advertisements. Like many Yiddish newspapers, the *Courier* was unique in the sheer extent of genres that it published, which allowed it to play an outsized role in the cultural life of Chicago's Orthodox community.

The *Courier's* editorial staff was proud to call itself a particularly Yiddish paper. In 1923, they wrote an editorial in English explaining what they considered to be the defining qualities of the Yiddish press. In this editorial, they claimed to be responding to the criticism that the Jewish press was “old-fashioned.”¹⁶ Other newspapers, they claimed, accused Yiddish newspapers of focusing too little on “the human side of things,” calling them dull because they “carry no social column, do not publish stories relating to crime and divorce scandals, and carry no bedroom stories and so forth.”¹⁷ The *Courier's* response was that they did not publish such stories simply because their readers would not enjoy them; their readers had different, unique tastes. Yiddish readers, they wrote, “want their newspaper to be a political, literary, social, economic, and religious world history of yesterday.”¹⁸ The editors pointed out that in shaping their content to the tastes of their readers, the Yiddish press was not unique. Many foreign presses catered to the interests and needs of their particular readership. The editors concluded: “If the Yiddish daily is old-fashioned, then one might say that the French, English, or Italian dailies are also old-fashioned because they are so fundamentally different from the average American daily, yet no one claims that they are old-fashioned, because they serve the purpose of their readers and fit their taste.”¹⁹ The arguments made by the *Courier's* editors were not, in fact, true of the Yiddish press as a whole--the *Forward* certainly couldn't be accused of lacking articles on cruder topics, such as crime, sex, and scandal.²⁰ What these assertions about the Yiddish press do show, however, is how the editors of the *Courier* envisioned the role of the Yiddish press in the community, and why it carried special significance for its readers. This self-image contrasts sharply with that of the socialist, “Americanized” New York *Forward*; the *Courier*, instead, catered to the tastes of Yiddish-speakers from the Old Country. It was a piece of “Yiddishland” in America.

While it was much more committed to the traditions and continuities of “Yiddishland” compared to the *Forward*, the *Courier* supported Americanization in its own way as well. While it emphasized Jewish news, taking a particular interest in the Zionist cause, it also encouraged Chicago's Jewish immigrants to take an active role in the political life of their new community. During World War I, the *Courier* highlighted the war effort, encouraged Jews to buy liberty bonds, and criticized federal anti-immigration legislation. In one 1918 article, the *Courier* encouraged readers to show their loyalty by participating in Fourth of July parades.²¹ Unlike the *Forward*, the *Courier* expected its readers to retain their commitment to the Jewish faith and traditions. Yet, it did not seek isolation, either. By educating its readers about American political and social life--and by even promoting patriotism in readers--the *Courier*, too, nurtured the process of becoming “at home” in America.

Both the *Courier* and the *Forward* facilitated Americanization while advancing their unique articulations of Jewish immigrant identity in the United States and the role that Yiddish should play in constituting this identity. The *Forward* urged Jewish immigrants to become more secular and socialist, engaging with their communities politically and economically. For the *Forward*, Yiddish was largely chosen for practical reasons--it was the language of the Jewish working class that the editors hoped to reach, and it had the added benefit of being a “secular” Jewish language--not the language of the Torah, but the language of the street and the home. Yet, in the 1920s and early 1930s, a redefined idea of Yiddish culture became increasingly important to the *Forward's* vision of the immigrant Jewish community, as evidenced by their evolving commitment to the transnational Yiddish socialist community. The *Courier*, on the other hand, maintained a more traditional, Orthodox standpoint on Jewish identity, and saw Yiddish as a central part of this identity. Yiddish was the language of the home and community, as well as a potential language for religious instruction. The *Courier* encouraged Americanization--a becoming “at home” in America--without desiring cultural assimilation; it saw its readers as individuals who lived distinctly Jewish (mostly Orthodox) lives, and many of the national and international political issues covered in the newspaper displayed these loyalties.²²

Footnotes

¹Irving Cutler, *The Jews of Chicago: From Shtetl to Suburb* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 138; Eddy Portnoy, *Bad Rabbi: And Other Strange but True Stories from the Yiddish Press* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 3-4.

²These groups of immigrants had arrived much earlier, in the mid-19th century, and were therefore largely assimilated by the time the Eastern European Jews arrived. The conflicts between the two groups ranged from religious disagreements to class antipathy, with the earlier arrivals generally looking down upon the working-class Jews from Eastern Europe.

³Cutler, *The Jews of Chicago*, 138.

⁴The *Chicago Forward* seems to have been relatively independent from the originally New York edition, publishing a significant amount of content about the local Chicago context, which comprises the source material of this paper. However, it is unfortunately difficult to tell to what extent the *Chicago Forward* reprinted materials from the New York context.

⁵*Forward*, “Ten Years of the Forward in Chicago Editorial,” translated and edited by the Chicago Public Library Omnibus Project, January 1, 1929, Chicago Foreign Language Press Survey: Jewish, II.B2.d1 IE.http://flps.newberry.org/article/5423972_5_0811/

⁶Cutler, *The Jews of Chicago*, 140.

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- ⁷*Forward*, "Our Thirtieth Anniversary by Abraham Cahan, Editor-in-Chief of *Forward*," translated and edited by the Chicago Public Library Omnibus Project, May 1, 1927, Chicago Foreign Language Press Survey: Jewish, II.B2.d1 IE, http://flps.newberry.org/article/5423972_5_0820/.
- ⁸*Forward*, "[Classes of the Educational Committee of the Workmen's Circle]," translated and edited by the Chicago Public Library Omnibus Project, October 6, 1920, Chicago Foreign Language Press Survey: Jewish, II.B2.f. http://flps.newberry.org/article/5423972_5_1508/
- ⁹"Yiddishness" and "here-ness"
- ¹⁰Frank Wolff, "The Home That Never Was: Rethinking Space and Memory in Late Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Jewish History," *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 38, no. 3 (145) (2013): 202-203.
- ¹¹Arthur A. Goren, "The Jewish Press in the U.S." *Kesher / רשף*, no. 6 (1989): 13e. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23901046>.
- ¹²*The Occident*, "Jewish Publications of Chicago," translated and edited by the Chicago Public Library Omnibus Project, April 6, 1894, Chicago Foreign Language Press Survey: Jewish, II.B2.d1.
- ¹³*The Occident*, "Jewish Publications of Chicago."
- ¹⁴*The Occident*, "Jewish Publications of Chicago."
- ¹⁵*Forward*, "[No headline]," translated and edited by the Chicago Public Library Omnibus Project, May 14, 1921, Chicago Foreign Language Press Survey: Jewish, II.B2.d1, <http://flps.newberry.org/article/542397250892/>; *Forward*, "The Truth about the *Courier* Circulation, translated and edited by the Chicago Public Library Omnibus Project, May 15, 1922, Chicago Foreign Language Press Survey: Jewish, II.B2.d1, <http://flps.newberry.org/article/542397220574/>
- ¹⁶*Reform Advocate*. "The Growth of Jewish Chicago: Forty-Two Years' Recollections." Translated and edited by the Chicago Public Library Omnibus Project. June 13, 1931. Chicago Foreign Language Press Survey: Jewish, II.B2.d1. http://flps.newberry.org/article/5423972_5_0796/.
- ¹⁷*Reform Advocate*, "The Growth of Jewish Chicago: Forty-Two Years' Recollections."
- ¹⁸*Daily Jewish Courier*, "Is the Jewish Press Old-Fashioned?" translated and edited by the Chicago Public Library Omnibus Project, May 27, 1923, Chicago Foreign Language Press Survey: Jewish, II.B2.d1. http://flps.newberry.org/article/5423972_5_0859/
- ¹⁹*Daily Jewish Courier*. "Is the Jewish Press Old-Fashioned?"
- ²⁰Portnoy, *Bad Rabbi*, 79, 131.
- ²¹*Daily Jewish Courier*, "On the Community Stage by J. Leibner Fourth of July Celebration," translated and edited by the Chicago Public Library Omnibus Project, June 23, 1918, Chicago Foreign Language Press Survey, Jewish: II.B3.a, http://flps.newberry.org/article/5423972_8_1_1391/
- ²²Specifically, the *Courier's* Zionist activism. The *Courier* was an active supporter of Zionism, running frequent fundraisers for Zionist causes and providing coverage on Zionist conferences that occurred in Chicago, which was a hub for Zionist activity at the time.

About the Author

Alexandra (Alex) Price is a graduate of the University of Chicago, where she received her bachelor's degree in history and Russian/Eastern European studies in 2020. Her academic interests include language, identity formation, and immigration, which she has studied in the post-Soviet, German, and American immigrant landscapes. Her undergraduate thesis project, Finding Yiddishland in America: Chicago's Yiddish-Language Press and the Challenges of Americanization, 1918-1932, allowed her to explore these interests in the unique context of early 20th-century, Yiddish-speaking Chicago. While Alex recently moved to Washington, D.C., she remains involved in the Chicago Jewish community as a member at KAM Isaiah Israel Congregation in Hyde Park, Chicago and continues to study Yiddish and Hebrew in her free time.



Program Recap: The Yiddish "Young Chicago" Poets

The Yiddish "Young Chicago" poets were the topic of the Society's first public program of 2024, presented February 25 at the Bernard Horwich JCC by CJHS member Dr. Jessica Kirzane, Yiddish instructor at the University of Chicago, author, translator, and editor-in-chief of *In geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies*.

Dr. Kirzane described Chicago's first Yiddish writers as more journalistic than literary, as witnessed by the many Chicago Yiddish papers published in Chicago. (See the article in this issue by Alexandra Price). A poetry community soon emerged. The poets entitled themselves "Yung Shikage" (Young Chicago) after the group of poets known as "di Yunge" (Young Folks) in New York, then a center of Yiddish literary activity, along with Warsaw and other cities.

The Chicago Yiddish poets were members of the working class; they did their writing after spending their days as laborers. In 1919, the group, organized under the name "Yunge Shrayber Farayn" (The Association of Young Writers of Chicago), published an anthology titled *In nebl (In the Fog)*, with an introduction by the renowned Yiddish writer Kalmen Marmor. A second volume, titled Yung Shikage, was published in 1922.

Dr. Kirzane highlighted the poems of a group of eight poets, among them Pessie Hersfeld Pomerantz, the

only woman and the mother of Chaikey Greenberg z'l, longtime CJHS board member and a Yiddish activist in her own right. In 1926, Ms. Pomerantz published *Karelin (String of Beads)*, the first of many books of her own poetry. *Karelin*, illustrated by Chicago Jewish artist Todros Geller, was praised by critics. Dr. Kirzane pointed out that Geller, teacher and mentor for a generation of Jewish artists, illustrated many Yiddish writers and bridged the literary and artistic communities. A close associate of Geller was Shlome Shvartz, poet, essayist, and critic, who had close ties to visual artists and the Art Institute.

Many members of "Young Chicago," after spending some years in Chicago, continued their careers elsewhere and became "deeply entwined with regional, national and global networks of Yiddish," said Dr. Kirzane. She added that in the 1930s, their work appeared in Chicago's Yiddish papers (*The Daily Jewish Courier*), a deluxe book edition by Chicago Jewish art and literature admirer L. M. Stein (1932), and in the journals *Ineynem*, *Brikn*, and *Oyfbroyz*.

Most of the Yiddish writings of "Young Chicago" are not translated. The books cited by Dr. Kirzane are in the collection of the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts, in digitized form, and many are at the University of Chicago's library. Using her own translations, she read her selected poems in English in her beautiful resonant Yiddish. Dr. Kirzane is working on a compilation of Chicago Yiddish poetry. The Chicago Jewish Historical Society is grateful for her mission to give our Chicago Yiddish poets the acclaim and exposure they deserve.

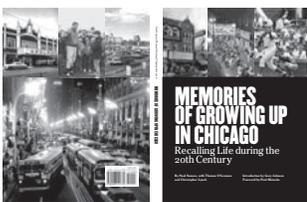


A full viewing of Dr. Kirzane's presentation, which is highly recommended, is available on the CJHS website: www.chicagojewishhistory.org. Dr. Kirzane would be happy to email her presentation slides, which are not viewable on the recording, to those who request them: jessica.kirzane@gmail.com.

June 2024 Program: Chicago History Maven Neal Samors Presents Book on Chicago's Neighborhoods

Neal Samors, an author, co-author, and publisher of more than 30 books about Chicago, will talk about his latest work, *Memories of Growing Up in Chicago: Recalling Life During the 20th Century*, on Sunday, June 30, 2 p.m., at Northbrook's Temple Beth-El. His presentation is co-sponsored by the CJHS and the Jewish Genealogical Society of Illinois (JGSI).

Samors' latest work, on which he collaborated with Thomas O'Gorman and Christopher Lynch, pays tribute to neighborhoods in every section of Chicago. It also includes reflections on growing up in adjoining suburbs, such as Skokie, Evanston, and Park Ridge.



The first-person voices in *Memories* are those of dozens of native Chicagoans, at least a third of whom are Jewish—Jo Baskin Minow, Shelley Berman, Richard Elrod, Sheldon Patinkin, Walter Jacobson, and Joel Weisman, among them. Other lesser-known Jewish contributors share stories of growing up in Humboldt Park, Avondale, and South Shore.

Samors said that he has been collecting the stories of Chicagoans for more than a quarter of a century, and that he was fortunate, over this time, to acquire first-person accounts of former public officials, including Illinois Attorney General Neil Hargetigan, the late Illinois Governor James Thompson, United States Senator and First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, and Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White, all of whom grew up in and around Chicago. Samors said he was able to interview Clinton, thanks to a personal congressional connection: He and United States Representative Jan Schakowsky, attended Chicago's Sullivan High School together.



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My Son, the Policeman: Tales from the *Shomrim* Society

After writing a profile of Will County Sheriff Robb Tadelman, the highest-ranking Jewish law enforcement officer in the State of Illinois (*Jewish Chicago: JUF News*, April 2024), *CJH* Editor Robert Nagler Miller decided to interview other local Jewish law enforcement officers about their experiences in a profession that is not known to attract a large number of Jews. He reached out to members of the Shomrim Society of Illinois, which, since 1959, has served as a professional organization for Jewish first responders, including police, sheriffs, firefighters, emergency medical technicians, and paramedics. The Illinois chapter is part of the National Conference of Shomrim Societies.

Nagler Miller asked Shomrim members about their experiences in the field. The responses of three members follow. Those of additional members, including Bruce Rottner, will be published in the Summer 2024 issue.

Elliot Cohen, retired, Cook County Sheriff's Police

How did you decide on a career in law enforcement?

I became interested in a career in law enforcement when I graduated college and I was hanging out with some guys who were already in different police departments. I had received a degree in secondary education, in history, and was a substitute in Chicago public schools for about one year.

Did your family support your decision, or was there any pushback—or both?

My father had recently passed away before I became a police officer. My mother never objected to my professional choice.

What Jewish values led you to your career?

I learned at a young age from my father, it's always better to do for people than people do for you. That's a Jewish thing.



Elliot Cohen (left) with Shomrim colleague Bruce Rottner

How did Jewish values inform your career?

As a Jew, I learned it was our responsibility to be decent and good to people. That's what I practiced during my 31 years in law enforcement.

Were there other members of your family who were law enforcement officers?

My father spent about three years as a civil process server for the Cook County Sheriff's Office, but he wasn't actively involved in any type of criminal investigations or routine police work.

Why did you join Shomrim, and what does being a Jewish law enforcement officer mean to you?

When a Chicago Police sergeant who was a member of my shul learned that I was sworn in, he brought me into the organization. I was 24 years old, and you didn't say no to an older Jewish guy, especially if he was already a policeman.

I was fortunate to gain the respect of many of my coworkers. Many of them came to me for advice.



Cohen and Rottner a few decades later

Did you experience any antisemitism among colleagues or in the line of duty?

In 31 years, the only time I experienced any anti-Jewish sentiment was from a sergeant who had a Jewish surname, but who wasn't Jewish. I really don't think he meant to say what he did, but he was an alcoholic who sometimes vented improperly. If I walked into his office and asked for his shirt and 20 bucks, he would have given it to me.

What have been some of the most meaningful experiences as a law enforcement officer?

I could relate many stories in reference to meaningful experiences as a Jewish law enforcement officer. One Friday night, when I was working, I went past the home where the Shabbos candles were burning in the window. I started walking up the driveway when an Orthodox-looking man and his sons came out of the home. The gentleman asked if there's any problem. I said, "No, I just stopped by to wish you a good Shabbos." The man, who was a rabbi, asked me if I had had dinner yet. I responded, "No." He insisted that I have dinner with him and his family. When I was leaving, one of the sons said, "This is the greatest Shabbos I ever had!"



Cohen on the job

Describe your Jewish background. Were your parents or grandparents' immigrants, and did they speak Yiddish?

We attended a traditional shul. Hebrew school was four days during the week and Sunday, and I had to attend services with my father on Shabbat.

Three grandparents were immigrants, but one grandmother was born in this country. Her family came from Austria before the Civil War.

My mother's first language was Yiddish. I understand a little bit. My father understood it, but very seldom spoke much.

When you look at your career in law enforcement, what stands out to you?

What stands out the most to me is how I came to love my job, even during the hard times. I'm so proud of the job that I did and the impact that I had on many people. It was the greatest job in the world, and being Jewish made it even better!

To this day, I believe that I'm the only police officer in the United States who signed all this tickets and reports in Hebrew and got complaints for writing "Mazel Tov" on the side of a ticket.



Harold "Sonny" Lukatsky, founding member of Shomrim Society of Illinois, retired, Chicago Police Department

How did you decide on a career in law enforcement?

I had many friends who were police officers, and they used to tell me benefits, such as the medical program, pension, and other things that were beneficial to becoming a police officer.

Did your family support your decision, or was there any pushback—or both?

My family was supportive of me becoming a police officer, except for my wife and my mother. They used to say, "What kind of life is that for a nice Jewish boy?" They thought I should be a doctor, lawyer, or accountant.

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My Son, the Policeman

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What Jewish values led you to your career?

I liked to help people; to serve and protect. I wanted to be on the brighter side of life, not the negative side.

Were there other members of your family who were law enforcement officers?

I had two female cousins. One was a CPD detective sergeant, and one was a patrol officer.

Why did you join Shomrim, and what does being a Jewish law enforcement officer mean to you?

I joined the Shomrim Society of Illinois in 1959 when a group of Jewish police officers got together and decided that the Chicago Police Department needed a Jewish organization. I became an original member. Today, there are only two original members: me (92 years old) and (retired) Sergeant Leroy Levy (91 years old). Both of us are past presidents of the Shomrim Society.

Being a Jewish law enforcement officer means a lot to me: to serve and protect the citizens of Illinois, to enforce the law, and to obey rules and regulations.

Did you experience any antisemitism among colleagues or in the line of duty?

I did not experience any antisemitism by my co-workers or in the line of duty.

What have been some of the most meaningful experiences as a law enforcement officer?

Most of my meaningful experiences have been in handling people who broke the law—from curfew violators to murderers. None of my cases had anything to do with my being Jewish.



Marc Buslik, Ph.D., (retired) Commander, Chicago Police Department; adjunct professor of criminology and public safety, Illinois Institute of Technology and University of Illinois Chicago, among other institutions

How did you decide on a career in law enforcement?

In college, my plan was to graduate and join the Peace Corps. I was the child of “Roosevelt Democrats,” and growing up in Chicago’s North Shore suburbs with my family led me to want to have a direct positive impact on society. I had some friends who lived in the city, and they talked me into taking the police exam, having convinced me that being a police officer could give me that same presumed feeling of making a contribution. I didn’t know any police officers, and I certainly had no family who were police officers.

Did your family support your decision, or was there any pushback—or both?

I don’t recall any real pushback. I think that there was natural concern for my safety and well-being, but I also think that they understood my desire to have a direct impact on society.

What Jewish values led you to your career?

Clearly, concern for others in society. Although I grew up “privileged” in many ways, I felt that the only way to truly enjoy those privileges was to share with others. Policing allowed me to take that interest and make it a real “street-level” experience. And, eventually, to be able to influence others—those with whom I worked, as well as my eventual students—in a positive way.



How did Jewish values inform your career?

I always worked hard, learned what my job was and how to do it well, and had compassion for others.

Were there other members of your family who were law enforcement officers?

Nope.

Why did you join Shomrim, and what does being a Jewish law enforcement officer mean to you?

One of our academy instructors was Jewish and found out that I was also. He solicited me for membership, pointing out that there weren't many of us compared to other ethnic and religious groups and that it would be important to be able to socialize with others of like mind and spirit.

Being a Jewish law enforcement officer has meant that I could share my values with others and demonstrate that Jews can have a positive impact on even this profession, one traditionally seen as blue-collar and "hands-on."

Did you experience any antisemitism among colleagues or in the line of duty?

I never experienced any direct antisemitism. However, I was fully aware that the police, like society generally, had those who were racist, misogynist, and homophobic, and held other biases, including antisemitism. I did experience one incident which validated my beliefs: My last name is not easily recognizable as that of a Jew.

Once, I was attending a training session with several other police officers, most of whom I did not know. At our lunch break, there was a discussion at the lunch table about some topic, and another officer used the term "those f*ing Jews." I looked at her, and said, "Really?" I got up and walked away. I learned later from one of the officers whom I did know that he and another officer chastised her, identified me as Jewish, let her know that her antisemitism was unacceptable, and then also walked away.

What have been some of the most meaningful experiences as a law enforcement officer?

Wow. After nearly 40 years and having experienced all that I have, that's tough to reduce to a few sentences. First, simply having been able to get myself promoted to the eventual rank of Commander, and therefore having been able to positively- I hope!-influence those with whom I worked and supervised. Second, the opportunity to have saved a young man's life when he threatened suicide over a broken romantic relationship. My sense of empathy as a Jew helped me talk with the man and successfully intervene.

Describe your Jewish background. Were your parents or grandparents immigrants, and did they speak Yiddish?

The neighborhood where I lived, in Highland Park, Illinois, was predominantly Jewish. My elementary, junior high, and high schools had a mix of demographics, but reflected the broader "Jewishness" of the community. We were raised on a Reform-level, eventually becoming more secular as I went out on my own. My father taught me Yiddish (which caused me to have trouble learning French in college!). And my bubbe, who made the best matzoh ball soup on the planet, taught me some wonderful Yiddish swear words. All four of my grandparents were immigrants: both my grandmothers from Ukraine, one grandfather from Russia, the other from Hungary. I'm second-generation American.

When you look at your career in law enforcement, what stands out to you?

Having had an almost unique career in the opportunities presented to me. I quickly learned that there is more to policing than just being "the police." As a result of my successes "on the job," I've been able to leverage my experiences and interests into an academic career and criminological work. And I came to realize-after my son passed away-how incredibly compassionate, kind, and humane police officers are.

Remembering Leah Axelrod



Longtime CJHS Board member Leah Axelrod, who served the Society with great distinction for many decades, died this past February at 94. CJHS mourns the passing of this beloved community fixture, who worked tirelessly and prodigiously on behalf of so many vital causes, and we extend heartfelt condolences to her family. We offer these tributes from fellow board members, as well as one of her children, Brad Axelrod. May her memory be for a blessing.

Leah and I were friends, colleagues, historians, and guides of Jewish and metropolitan Chicago for 48 years. Leah was a founding member of our Chicago Jewish Historical Society in 1976 and took an amazingly active role in the Society. She served on the Board for almost 50 years, was our President, and organized and directed the many tours of Jewish Chicago, Michigan, Indiana, and Wisconsin—all while raising her family, bringing up six children, partnering with a wonderful and supportive husband of 70 years, Les, and maintaining a Jewish home.

Leah operated 24/7 in her many communities. She was active in her synagogue, was a Life Member of Hadassah, and was also involved in the Highland Park Historical Society, the Illinois State Historical Society, and more. For many years, Leah was the driving force in front of and behind one of Chicagoland's premier tour companies, My Kind of Town Tours, which had as its mission educating people from every community about the history and culture of Chicagoland.

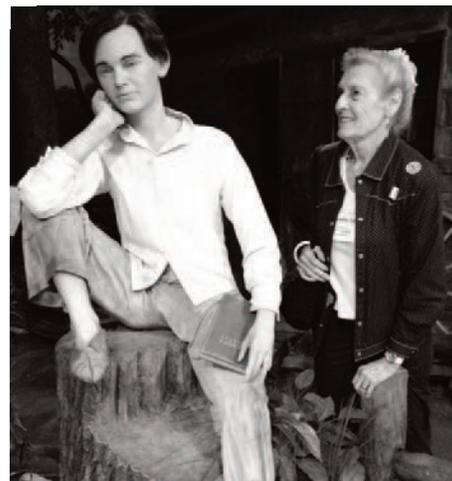
It was my pleasure to work alongside Leah and My Kind of Town. One of our favorite tours was exposing high school students to the Jewish, Islamic, and African-American communities, with a refreshment stop in the Mexican-American Pilsen neighborhood.

Leah Axelrod was one-of-a-kind. She was truly a balabusta. If there is an afterlife, she is busy organizing, directing, and preparing her fabulous holiday dishes for all to enjoy.

Dr. Edward Mazur

My initial and lasting image of Leah is of an elegant, charming, and commanding woman. She was “put together” in every sense of this expression. Leah was a formidable person with high standards who projected both strength and kindness. I admired her skills and calm as the Society’s tour director for many years. I was fortunate to be a guest on several of the tours, all of them outstanding. One that made a big impression was the 2015 visit to the Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield to view the “Lincoln and the Jews” exhibit. Everything went smoothly, thanks to her mastery of the many details involved in a tour of this complexity.

Leah was a founder of CJHS, a Life Member, and a board member throughout the Society’s existence. She was also a leader in other historical associations. She served as president of the Illinois State Historical Society during the Illinois Bicentennial year in 2018. CJHS



applied to be recognized as an official “community partner” by the Bicentennial Project. In order for us to qualify, Leah had the wonderful idea that we publish stories about Jewish families and communities in Illinois towns outside the Chicago area. She said, “Jews can be found in the early development of each community throughout the state.” Thus was born our “Beyond Chicago: Illinois Jewish Roots” series.

On a personal level, Leah’s encouragement helped me become more active in CJHS. She will remain a role model and source of inspiration.

Dr. Rachelle Gold

My mother, Leah Joy Axelrod, had a zest for life that brought others along with her for the ride. She lived a life based on family and community. Born and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, she was the third generation of her family in the United States, the daughter of an owner of a furniture store. My mother had two older brothers and a younger sister.

Growing up, my mom looked forward to summers with her first cousins on a lake near Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. The cousins were more like siblings than like cousins. That is why my siblings and I have very close relationships with our second cousins. Our families watched many hours of black-and-white home movies of my extended family having birthday and summer parties in the 1930s. After high school, she attended University of Wisconsin in Madison, studying dance. To give you an idea of how my mother lived life, she told me that she loved swimming so much that after class she would give her books to friends and swim back to the sorority in the lake in Madison.

Every summer, my mother would spend time with her close cousins in St. Louis...and every year for five years, she went on a group date with her cousins and their friends. As part of the date, she was always saddled with Les Axelrod. It was fine.



In November 1950, her mother told her that Les Axelrod would be joining from Great Lakes Naval Base. Ugh. The annual summer dates was one thing, but Thanksgiving? By February, they were engaged, and married three weeks later. They decided to have a larger family and settled on six children even before the first one was born. They did indeed have six children (I am the fifth), and they were married until my father died a few weeks before their 70th wedding anniversary.

My mother not only tended to the household, but decided she had to get out of the house, too. She began reading groups at the public library for preschoolers, drama classes for school age kids after school, and served as director of programming for a citywide summer day camp. She so loved her adopted city of Highland Park, Illinois, that she began a deep dive into its history. Well...that took her down an amazing path. She helped begin the Highland Park Historical Society, and consistent with her interest in children, she also created the Jr. Historical Society for children to learn about the city. Not only did she work for decades for that nonprofit organization, she took on founding and leadership positions in the Chicago Jewish Historical Society and the Illinois State Historical Society. She loved serving on boards, as long as they didn’t make her write. Her biggest challenge as president of the Illinois State Historical Society was writing the newsletter’s President’s column. She was active in the temple where my parents belonged for over 50 years, serving on the Sisterhood board and spearheading annual play productions that were fundraisers for the temple. She was active in Hadassah, a strong Zionist who was pleased to make multiple trips to Israel with my father, the most recent in 2016.

By the time I was in high school, she took her interests in history, Jewish people, ethnic groups, and architecture to a new level. She began working as a tour guide and eventually started her own company, My Kind of Town Tours. She guided groups on tours of Chicago and its surroundings, teaching about the migration of the Jewish community in Chicago and foods of different ethnic groups. She was always interested in a new restaurant from a different ethnic group. At age 90, and with great regret, she retired from her tour company.

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Remembering Leah Axelrod

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My mother was thrilled to have her family extended. As a mother-in-law, she embraced Robin, but insisted that she be called by her first name rather than “mother.” Her pride for her family extended to her daughter-in-law, asking about her work, activities, travels, and many boards on which Robin served. And as a grandmother, she was always there. My parents would attend as many performances as they could, whether it was at Young People’s Theater when Robert and Ari were in middle school or in their college performances in Syracuse and St. Louis... and all the performances in between. She was thrilled to watch Ari via Zoom from New York this past year.

Raising six kids could not have been an easy feat. She had to be everywhere at once and often was. Once, when presenting at a school, she looked down and realized that she was still wearing her apron, having walked over to school after making lunch for the family.

I might have been a mama’s boy. When I was in preschool, I was NOT going to have my mother leave me behind. I was the fifth child...and I was not going to be left at a strange place! No way. My mother had brought her green purse with her. She said, “I need to go home and make the beds, and I will come back for you and my purse later.” Of course, she would not be able to go anywhere without her purse. Even I knew that. I still remember looking over to the side of the room and seeing her green purse perched on a chair along the side of the wall. I played, and kept my eye on the purse, until my mother came back at pick up time. I did not find out until I was well into my 30s that the purse was empty.”

In recent years, she suffered multiple broken bones from car accidents, slips, and falls, and injuries sustained while actually in rehabilitation. She was a regular advertisement for a law firm showing its commercials mid-afternoon. (And one quick call-back to being a grandmother, she broke her arm once playing basketball with Robert and Ari before Passover seder. Even *I* didn’t play basketball.) After each break, she recovered. After each setback, she would reset and forge ahead.

We spoke regularly in recent years, almost every other day. We kept up on books that we were both reading, movies and television shows that we were watching, and news events. The move from the house she lived in for 58 years to an apartment was difficult, as was the move from the apartment to assisted living two years later.



Most recently, she finally had acclimated to her move to assisted living. She was in two different book clubs, attended movies every evening, and began attending the community meetings. She proudly told me that she convinced the kitchen to get crackers on the tables before meals so hungry residents might have something to eat while waiting to be served. She also decided it was time to have some matinee films for those who didn’t want to see movies only at 7 p.m. For my mother, there was always room for improvement...with a smile.

I felt that she had finally gotten used to assisted living when I called her a few months ago. She was on her way back in the shuttle to assisted living from lunch that was

at a restaurant that had Chinese or Greek or Japanese or Italian or some other ethnic food. She was being pushed into the lobby in a wheelchair (she really hated the wheelchair). She was mid-sentence about lunch when she said abruptly, “Oh, my. They are serving margaritas in the lobby. I’ve got to go.” Click.

My mother’s middle name, Joy, was a perfect name for her. She was the quintessential Pollyanna, and only saw the good in people. She always wished to learn, teach, share, and celebrate. And if you were not one who saw the positive, you’d better move out of her way, because she was on the path to find those positives.

Brad Axelrod

June Program with Neal Samors

continued from page 7

The book opens with Samors' own boyhood experiences in Chicago's East Rogers Park. Historic black-and-white photos of Chicago neighborhoods are featured throughout the coffee table-size book, which has been released by Samors' publishing house, Chicago Books Press, and is available as a print-on-demand publication in soft cover and hardcover at Amazon.

The joint CJHS-JGSI event is free. Those who cannot attend in person will be able to register in the near future for a Zoom format of the program. Following his talk, Samors will sign copies of his book, which will be available for purchase. Attendees can also schmooze with him during a refreshment hour, which will feature coffee, tea, and kosher pastries.

Prior to the 2 p.m. event, beginning at 12:30 p.m., the JGSI will offer assistance to those interested in tracing their Jewish roots. The JGSI will have on hand genealogy library materials, including its collection of maps. People may seek help with family history websites or ask genealogical questions. Walk-ins are welcome; however, registration is strongly encouraged. For more information on the JGSI, go to <https://jgsi.org> or call 312-666-0100.

Leadership Changes

Longtime CJHS Co-President Jerold Levin, one of the Society's founders, has stepped down from his current leadership post. Levin will remain on the Board and continue to participate actively in the organization's affairs. "Jerry has played a key role in the ongoing success of CJHS, and we are indebted to him for his efforts," said President Dr. Rachelle Gold.

Rabbi Moshe Simkovich, a CJHS Board member, was recently appointed Interim Vice President, and CJHS member Joel Rubin was just named to the Board. More about Rubin will appear in the summer issue of *CJH*.

New Members

Audrey Barbakoff
Bainbridge Island, WA

Ronald and Susan Borden
Highland Park, IL

Patricia Fertel
Asheville, NC

Jeffrey and Elaine Oberlander
Deerfield, IL

Devon Paddock
Lincolnwood, IL

Ellen Siever
Brookline, MA

Dr. Steven Weintraub
St. Louis, MO

Roberta Winter
Skokie, IL

Michael Zmora
Oak Park, IL

Research Queries

Dr. Cynthia Gensheimer seeks a copy of "Paradise Was Not Perfect Without Woman": World's Fair Women of 1893 and the Founding of the National Council of Jewish Women," which Julia Wood Kramer delivered at a meeting of the Chicago Jewish Historical Society, April 18, 1993. She writes, "I am a Denver-based historian, and I and others doing research on the earliest history of the NCJW are anxious to locate a copy of this important work." Email: cynthiagensheimer@gmail.com

Dr. Steven Weintraub writes, "In the late 1800s through the early 1900s, herring was the staple food of the Jewish immigrants on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. I found the following in one publication about the Lower East Side: 'Herring was probably the single most common food eaten by immigrant Jews, and in 1898 cost between two and four cents a pound. Very poor Jewish families live[d] for days on bread, herring and tea alone.' Was herring as readily available in Chicago at that time and was it a staple in Jewish homes? Any information on this would be greatly appreciated." Email: sjweintraub@gmail.com



A very happy 50th birthday to Chicago Israeli Folk Dancing, March 28

Look to the rock from which you were hewn

הביטו אל-צור הציבתם



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Our History and Mission

The Chicago Jewish Historical Society, founded in 1977, is in part an outgrowth of local Jewish participation in the United States Bicentennial Celebration of 1976. Forty-seven years later, our mission remains the discovery, collection, and

ABOUT THE SOCIETY

dissemination of information about the Jewish experience in the Chicago area through publications, open programs, tours, and outreach to youth and others interested in the preservation of Chicago Jewish history.

Tribute Cards for Celebrations or Memorials The card design features the Society's handsome logo. Pack of five cards and envelopes \$36. Individual cards can be mailed for you from our office at \$5 per card, postage included. Mail your order and check to CJHS, P.O. Box 597004, Chicago, IL 60659-7004. You may also order online at our website.

Back issues of *Chicago Jewish History* cost \$8 apiece. To request back issues, please email the Society at www.chicagojewishhistory.org

Visit our website www.chicagojewishhistory.org

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

Inquiries: info@chicagojewishhistory.org

Membership in the Society is open to all interested persons and organizations, and includes

- A subscription to our award-winning quarterly journal, *Chicago Jewish History*.
- Free admission to Society public programs. General admission is \$10 per person.
- Membership runs on a calendar year, from January through December. New members joining after July 1 are given an initial membership through December of the following year.

Life Membership	\$1,000
Annual Dues	
Historian	500
Scholar	250
Sponsor	100
Patron	65
Member	40
Student (with I.D.)	10



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