



chicago jewish historical society

# CHICAGO JEWISH HISTORY

*“My mother baked as a dance / the flour falling from the sifter  
in a rain of fine white pollen / The sugar was sweet snow.”*  
— Marge Piercy, *“The Scent of Apple Cake,”* from *Made in Detroit*

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

By Susan Elisabeth Subak

**M**artha Ingham Dickie arrived in Chicago in the summer of 1926, age 21, having left her hometown of Providence, Rhode Island, and her family of church-going Baptists. A classic beauty who also looked good in the curled bob popular at the time, she had been a student at Pembroke College, then the women’s college of Brown University, where she had been captain of the women’s tennis team and “invited to all the dances.” She had heard about a social work degree program from a recruiter with Northwestern University, who had visited Pembroke and explained that students could learn the folk dances of many cultures while working at Hull House and earning their degree. Martha’s previous plan, relayed in an oral history with Brown University, had been to attend medical school, but she put that idea aside. (Brown University, oral history, Barbara Anton, September 30, 1987; Tape 1)



Martha Sharp,  
1939

In Chicago, she began her program attending evening classes and working during the day. Her residence was in the settlement house, Chicago Commons, at Grand and Morgan. She recalled that the neighborhood had seemed dangerous, but that “nothing touched us because we were ‘the teachers’ educating their children. ... I think we had gang protection. I’m sure of it.” Her days were often full, organizing programs for girls and young women who, she recalled, were from some 26 countries. When the supervisor of the “Girl’s Work” program left due to illness, Martha took her place and assumed responsibilities for scores of girls. For lunch, she often took the bus to the cafeteria at Hull House and chose the table where Jane Addams was sitting. “She was an elderly lady, but absolutely delightful!” Martha recalled. (Brown University, oral history, Suzanne Goldberg, 1985, Part 1)

Martha’s decision to work at the secular Hull House had upset her parents to a great extent, contributing to a rupture that never healed. During this time, she found support from relatives of a college friend, a Unitarian minister and his wife, Livingston and Edna Stebbins, who were enthusiastic about the social work experience. They lived in Boston, but asked a young man they knew, Waitstill Hastings Sharp, if he would check to see how Martha was really getting on. He apparently liked the idea, and since he had regular business in Chicago as director of education for the American Unitarian Association, he had dinner with Martha. Waitstill was from a notable New England family descended from the Mayflower arrivals and the English stock at the Battle of Hastings. He teased Martha about her salty “West Side Chicago” language, and she later acknowledged feeling that “Chicago is very windy and very difficult.”

Martha’s tenure in the Hull House community lasted two years, at which time she accepted Waitstill’s marriage proposal and moved to Boston in 1928. Over the next decade, Martha studied comparative literature at Harvard and Waitstill completed a divinity degree. He was called to a Unitarian ministry in western Pennsylvania and, later, Wellesley, Massachusetts. Martha used her organizing skills to put on Christmas plays and the like, but she

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## PRESIDENT'S COLUMN



**Y**ou know the mission of the Chicago Jewish Historical Society well: to “discover, document, and share” the history of our community.

I want to encourage you to discover our history by seizing opportunities as we interact with others and go about our daily lives. We can uncover new information anywhere, anytime, if we pay attention and are curious. I will give you some examples of discoveries and questions for further thought that arose in unexpected situations.

**Dr. Rachelle Gold** I enjoy hosting or being a guest at Shabbat meals with family and old and new friends. I think that I know all about my old friends’ history, but in our conversations, they casually tell pieces of their history that are unknown to me. Interested and intrigued to know how my friends’ stories relate to my knowledge of Chicago’s Jewish history, I follow up with inquiries that elicit additional responses to consider. Does their information confirm, expand, or challenge my present knowledge? For example, a friend’s mother, an accomplished artist, studied at the Art Institute of Chicago, but like many of her female peers, she was not encouraged to attend an academic college. I know that many of Chicago’s Jewish female and male artists of the 1900s were educated at the Art Institute. So, I ask myself, in which educational settings and careers did Jews feel welcome in those years? In more recent years, how has this changed, and why?

At a different Shabbat meal, I spoke with new friends about our childhood neighborhoods. One person mentioned that his father was the last rabbi of a synagogue in the South Shore neighborhood before it moved north, under a new name, in the 1970s. I hope to interview him about his memories of those years. Another guest said that she grew up in Homewood–Flossmoor, where many South Side Jews settled after leaving South Side Chicago Jewish neighborhoods in the same period. I have asked her to contribute to an article planned for *CJH* about the Homewood–Flossmoor Jewish community.

Social gatherings are fertile grounds for learning. So are travels. As you learn about the places you are visiting, you may also learn more about Chicago and its Jewish community.

Enlightening Chicago Jewish connections can be found all over the country (and the world). Several years ago, I visited Spring Green, Wisconsin. While using the fitting room of “Nina’s Department & Variety Store,” I saw a sign about the store’s 100th anniversary and its multi-generational Jewish ownership. Of course, I had to meet and interview the owners, Joel and Judy Swartz Marcus, who had many personal and business connections to Chicago. Their stories added to knowledge about Jewish businesses and the activities and settlement of Jews in Chicago’s orbit in the Midwest. (I wrote about the store in the Summer 2018 issue of *CJH*. Sadly, the store closed in 2024.)

Last year, I visited Charleston, South Carolina. In preparation, I asked CJHS past president Rachel Heimovics to introduce me to people in Charleston who could teach me about the area’s Jewish history. Through her introductions, I met Max Daniel, Public Historian and Jewish Heritage Collection Coordinator at the College of Charleston. Max turned out to be a Chicago native with close family associations with Evanston’s Sephardic Congregation. I am familiar with the history of the congregation, but Max enlarged my knowledge and helped me involve Chicago historical institutions in trying to preserve the congregation’s historical records (including books of meeting minutes handwritten in Ladino).

Finally, to inspire you to look close to home for Chicago Jewish history, I present a recent experience with a rich and fundamental historical source, the Chicago synagogue. For the last two years, I wrote essays to honor the history of Congregation Ezras Israel for its annual “Memorial and Tribute Book.” Ezras Israel was my synagogue home in my childhood and teens, and in recent years, has reentered my religious life. I sought out members whose Ezras Israel roots went back to its 1890s founding in Humboldt Park. These multigenerational members and my research gave me a heightened appreciation of this particular synagogue and the overall place of synagogues in the Chicago Jewish community.

When you learn something new, keep exploring and asking so that you can learn more. Then contact the Chicago Jewish Historical Society so that we can help you share your discoveries. I promise you an exciting and gratifying experience throughout.



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# A Very Jewish-Chinese December 25 Gathering



This past December 25, the Society welcomed 50 members and friends for a sumptuous kosher Chinese buffet at the Great Chicago Food and Beverage Company, as well as an entertaining talk by food writer and celebrity Kevin Pang, who spoke about his introduction into the food business, his writing partnership with his father, Jeffrey — they coauthored the 2023 book, *A Very Chinese Cookbook: 100 Recipes from China and Not China (But Still Really Chinese)* — and the Jewish love of Chinese food.

Pang observed that he and Jewish friends dine on Chinese food in Chinatown and around the city and that his Chinese friends enjoy Jewish food. CJHS past president Dr. Edward Mazur added his perspective on the Jewish tradition of Chinese dining out on December 25. When many who observe the December 25 holiday close their businesses, stay home, and enjoy holiday meals with their families, Dr. Mazur said, many Jewish families go out on that day to dine in the few restaurants that remain open, including Chinese establishments.



## Author's Query

CJHS member Esther Mosak, who is also the Society's Membership and Database Administrator, is seeking information on the Jewish history of the Chicago south suburbs of Homewood-Flossmoor and Olympia Fields for an upcoming *CJH* article. If you grew up there, or if you have other relevant information about those communities, Esther would welcome speaking to you. Contact her directly at [esther.mosak@gmail.com](mailto:esther.mosak@gmail.com).

## It All Started in Chicago, Martha Sharp

continued from front page

also started projects with a political bent, surveying congregants and neighbors for their views on different topics in political affairs. She had started an “international club.” As time went on, it was primarily focused on following the actions of the Hitler regime.

In the autumn of 1938, at a nearby Unitarian congregation, First Church, in Belmont, Massachusetts, several senior officers of the American Unitarian Association were planning a response to the recent horrors of the German appropriation of the Sudetenland and of the Anschluss in Austria. Their minister, Henry Wilder Foote, was also on board, voicing these words in a sermon following Kristallnacht: “Coming centuries will record this anti-Semitic campaign on one of the blackest and most discreditable pages of history...” (Subak, *Rescue and Flight: American Relief Workers Who Defied the Nazis*, University of Nebraska Press, 2010, xxiv). Members of the Belmont congregation were listening. Robert and Elisabeth Dexter had recently returned from a trip to Prague and Vienna in Robert’s capacity as an ambassador on behalf of the American Unitarian denomination. In Vienna, they had met a Jewish couple, Ernest and Marianne Subak, and their 19-year-old son, Karl, the father of the author of this article. Karl had met the Dexters’ daughter, Harriet, at a British holiday camp the previous summer, and the young people were staying in touch by exchanging letters. Hearing Karl’s news of conditions in Vienna, Harriet had urged her parents to meet Karl and his parents and to help them to emigrate. The meeting between the Subaks and the Dexters went well, and returning from Europe that summer of 1938, the Dexters agreed to help the family and, moreover, to start a new organization (Subak, *R & F*, xxii). They intended that the organization would resemble the Quaker-run American Friends Service Committee and would focus on helping refugees in Prague, home to Europe’s largest community of Unitarians.



Waitstill Sharp

The Dexters had in mind that they would sponsor a young minister to live in Prague for some months. It turns out they did not have many takers, but when the President of the American Unitarian Association, Frederick May Eliot, eventually contacted the Sharps, Martha surprised everyone by supporting the idea and agreeing to join Waitstill overseas. She was already highly engaged with the news coming out of Czechoslovakia, and the Stebbins and others had offered to care of their young children (Brown University, 1987, Tape 2). They arrived in Europe in February 1939; within a few weeks, Prague was occupied by German troops. Many Czechs—including members of the family of Tomas Masaryk, the first democratic president of the country—felt that they could benefit from the protection of this young American couple. The late president’s daughter, Alice Masaryk, had also worked at Hull House. She became one of Martha’s important allies.

Martha also worked closely with the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia and with European and Canadian Quakers, and her accomplishments in the country have been documented in various accounts. Probably her most successful venture was escorting two dozen people targeted by German authorities, including some Jewish adults and children, to Great Britain. Needless to say, during her six months in Europe, Martha exhibited a great deal of diplomacy and courage in her activities there, and she stayed many weeks after Waitstill had left the country. She would have stayed longer had she not been warned that she faced imminent arrest.

In Czechoslovakia, Waitstill concerned himself with spending the American money entrusted to him by the Unitarians and other organizations on behalf of refugees. He augmented it by collecting Czech crowns from Jewish refugees in return for the foreign currency that they so desperately required. He negotiated a very hard bargain with the refugees, which is described in *Rescue and Flight* (and in Laura Brade’s article in the *Czech Journal of Contemporary History*, 2023, pp. 761–784). While some of the money may have helped Jewish refugees indirectly, he did not donate directly to any of the Jewish organizations working in the country. He chose conventional charities, like dental work for children and programs for the blind, but the bulk of the money went to lift the heavy mortgage of the rather spectacular palace of the Unitarian community in Prague. Whether Martha agreed with these choices, or even knew about them at the time, is not clear.

Over the next months, many Czech Jews fled to France, which had received many other refugees from Hitler and the Spanish Civil War. France capitulated to Germany in May 1940, and many refugees and stranded units of various defeated armies headed for the southern zone, Vichy, France. At the American Unitarian Association, the new refugee organization was now official and called the Unitarian Service Committee. The leadership had funds for a new office in Lisbon and Marseille and felt that only Martha and Waitstill could do the job of running a refu-

gee program there. Though they were both reluctant to return to Europe so soon, and resented what they saw as tangible pressure, they did agree to go.

Although the Sharps had found in Prague a well-established network to help refugees they were among the first of the Gentile groups to arrive in Lisbon and southern France. The representative of the Emergency Rescue Committee, Varian Fry, who like the Sharps, was in his mid-30s and Harvard educated, arrived in Lisbon shortly after the Sharps. At the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), often referred to as “the Joint,” Rabbi Joseph Schwartz had taken the helm of the Lisbon office. The European director of the Joint, Morris Troper, was also in Lisbon. Fry spent his first week in Europe being briefed by the experienced Americans at the Joint and setting up an arrangement with Waitstill Sharp that Fry’s refugee “clients” could rely on the Unitarian Service Committee office when they arrived in Lisbon. This collaboration among Fry, the Joint, and the Unitarian Service Committee lasted about two years and was vital to the success of all three organizations’ refugee programs. Fry was astute and ambitious, but he did not have the funds or the clout to sustain himself in France long-term in support of his lengthy list of client refugees. Many of Fry’s clients would have been stranded were it not for the ship guarantees that the Joint offered and the Unitarian Service Committee’s ability to stay in the good graces of the U.S. government. The U.S. State Department did not renew Fry’s passport in the summer of 1941, but the Unitarian staff were permitted to stay in Europe for the remainder of the war. The Unitarian Service Committee staff assisted with many logistical details and helped oversee the Residence Force near the Portuguese coast, where many refugees experienced a prolonged stay under relatively pleasant conditions.

Varian Fry’s and Martha Sharp’s activities took them on different paths during the early summer of 1940; within weeks, Martha had found another American collaborator, Helen Lowrie. They were spending much time in Vichy, the new capitol of the unoccupied zone, seeking exit permits for children and some parents. As was the case at her time with Hull House, Martha tended to seek out the most senior person in any given situation. She even met with Marshal Petain, the head of the Vichy government (Subak, *Times of Israel*, 2025). However, as the weeks went on, the paperwork needed for the refugees only grew more voluminous (e.g. Subak, 2010; Marino, 1999). Nonetheless, after several months of effort, they were able to bring together a party of about two dozen individuals and prepare them for emigration. Marshall Field III, heir to the department store fortune amassed by the Chicago dynasty, was now head of the U.S. Committee for the Care of European Children, and he was spending more time on its activities than on his own enterprises. He paid for many of the expenses of Martha’s group and helped Martha to obtain “corporate affidavits,” blocks of visas without specific names (Stephen Becker, *Marshall Field III: A Biography*, Simon and Schuster, p. 179).

Martha arrived in New York in late December 1940. Field’s generosity had been helpful for Martha, but one of the drawbacks of the organization was that it was primarily interested in helping non-Jewish children. Nonetheless, Martha’s emigration “party” was influential in southern France and helped lead the way for the exodus of several hundred Jewish children guided by Jewish organizations and European Quakers. Her replacement, Reverend Charles Joy, had much success in southern Europe and, later, guiding the War Refugee Board. Among the Unitarians, his achievements in saving Jewish lives during World War II was unsurpassed, but his effectiveness relied in part on the high reputation that Martha Sharp had established for the Unitarian organization and on her continued support for the Unitarian Service Committee throughout the remainder of the war.

Part II of Martha Sharp’s story will appear in the Spring 2022 edition of *CJH*, along with the author’s endnotes.



**About the Author:** Susan Subak blogs at *The Times of Israel* and is the author of *Rescue and Flight: American Relief Workers Who Defied the Nazis*, University of Nebraska Press, 342 pp; hardcover 2010, paperback 2025.

## An Ode to the Days of Banked Track Roller Derby ... and Its Jewish Origins

By Ray Asher

The Chicago Coliseum had several iterations. Its third structure, at 1513 S. Wabash, was built in 1899. It is ironic that the bricks of a Virginia prison would be used to construct the Coliseum. It was demolished in 1982, but the great research tool Wikipedia says that parts of the Coliseum remained standing until the early 1990s. A friend has a brick from that building. You may think, "Who would want that?"

This building held events for some pretty unsavory characters from Chicago's Old Levee district. ("Sin in the Second City" is a good read.) Colorful characters like Hinky Dink and Bathhouse John held political fundraisers here. Both Republican and Democratic National Conventions were held here, along with turn-of-the-century college indoor football. The Chicago Blackhawks played here in the late 1920s and early 30s.

But during the Great Depression, the building fell out of use. The Blackhawks were gone. Ownership, or control of the building, was, perhaps, held by persons for whom the observance of the law was reportedly optional.

Leo Seltzer was a promoter. Born to a Jewish family in Helena, Montana, and raised in Portland, Oregon, he and his wife, the former Rose Weinstein, moved their family to Chicago in 1933. It is unclear whether they moved to Skokie immediately, but their kids, Gloria and Jerry, graduated from Skokie's Niles East High School.

Looking to cash in on the Depression-era dance marathon craze and learning that a reported 93 percent of Americans had roller skates on their feet at some point in their lives, Leo wanted to create something that might fill the Coliseum. With pen and napkin in hand while sitting at a Diversey and Clark Street eatery known as Ricketts, he came up with "Colonel" Leo Seltzer's "Transcontinental Roller Derby." This would be styled as a marathon race, border to border, men and women athletes. The first event was held on August 13, 1935, at the Coliseum. Twenty-thousand people came out for the first Transcontinental Derby to watch two-person teams, each consisting of a man and a woman, skate 57,000 laps around a flat track, Keith Coppage wrote in *Roller Derby to Roller Jam: The Authorized Story of an Unauthorized Sport*:



The premiere of the Transcontinental Roller Derby at Chicago's Coliseum in 1935

"Small lights on a large map tracked the skaters' progress as they took turns whizzing around the ring, their mileage blinking along the route from New York to San Diego. The first team to complete the roughly 2,700 miles from coast to coast was declared the winner. On average, a single marathon took more than three weeks."

On July 18, 2010, Jerry wrote "In 1935, having acquired the Chicago Coliseum, and first using it for the walkathons and then his new game Roller Derby, Leo had to figure a way to keep the building occupied. It had a main arena of approximately 5,000 seats, including the balcony, and a smaller north hall that was ideal for weekly boxing and wrestling matches and could seat about 1,500 for these events. Both halls could be cleared and connected for trade shows. He also had an ownership in the Arcadia Skating rink on North Broadway in Chicago, where often new skaters trained. And he leased the Chicago Armory, around the corner from the Coliseum at 16th and State, which he later used for walkathons later, as well as fights and wrestling when there were trade shows in the main building."

Two years later, with an assist from noted writer Damon Runyon, Roller Derby morphed into a banked track contact sport that would become a staple in the early days of television. Leo's brother, Oscar, would run the Roller Derby Skate Company in Litchfield, Illinois. I had my own pair as a kid. Six bucks.

Roller Derby produced some household names in the early days of television. Some had colorful names, like Midge "Toughie" Brasuhn, who got a shout-out from Svengoolie in 1973. (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fp6WOLKWh0>)

Another was Loretta Little Iodine Behrens, a "redshirt" (bad guy) skater, who riled the fans up with her antics to earn the popular comic strip character nickname. Aunt Loretta, as she was known in our home, was a young Jewish teenager who left home to join the Derby. She skated from the late 1940s through the mid 1960s. See just how fast she could skate here, probably in the late 1950s: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XUzbTdZ2sPO>

Aunt Loretta told me that she let her opponent, the crowd favorite, win that race.

To promote the Derby in Chicago, Leo used discount tickets. They were sponsored by bakeries, beer and cigarette companies, and other businesses, and they were distributed by the hundreds of thousands through the Chicago metropolitan area. Leo also worked on getting interviews in newspapers and on radio stations and arranged for trackside radio-casts to promote upcoming games and events.



Leo Seltzer

Television viewership remained an unknown. TV sets were very expensive. Most people, if they watched it at all, would go to bars or stand in groups outside of electronics stores, where a television would play in the front window. On a hunch, Leo worked out an arrangement to televise a Roller Derby game from the Coliseum to gauge the reaction. The cameras, pre-modern electronics, were huge and cumbersome. But there was a subsequent upsurge in attendance at the games.

The Derby was a pioneer in championing diversity, intended or otherwise. Many of the skaters were part of the LGBT community, both male and female. Darlene Anderson was the first African-American Roller Derby skater in 1957.

A deaf man named Jay Levy reportedly taught his waitress-partner to talk with her hands. I hit a brick wall researching this skater, and I am happy to have input from readers. I found the following quote in a Google search, but I'm stuck: "After placing fourth in Miami (April, '36) with (deaf mute) Jay Levy, she won the next race in Louisville with Israel."

In an interview with a 97-year-old 1935 original Hazel Roop, David Block reported, "Roop remembered fellow skater Jay Levy, who was deaf. Because Levy could not hear the whistle blow, officials turned on strobe lights whenever a jam started, so that he would not be caught off guard."

Sammy Skobel was a household name among the male skaters. Sammy grew up on Chicago's Maxwell Street. Russian but not Jewish, Sammy told me that when he was a boy, he was the "Shabbos Goy" for his observant Jewish upstairs neighbors. Sammy skated from the mid 1940s through the mid 1960s. He won speed skating competitions and became known as "Slammin' Sammy" on the banked track.

Sammy walked from his Maxwell Street home to the Coliseum to try out for the Derby in 1945. He had been attending games for years, frequently without a ticket. With the help of binoculars, the right angle, and the right lighting, Sammy might be able to see some of the game. He was legally blind. He would eventually go on to become known as "the blind golfer" and "the blind skier."

So, how did Slammin' Sammy make the team if he was legally blind? In his book, *Semka*, he explained that before tryouts were completed, the skaters were provided with some forms to fill out. Sammy found some privacy in a phone booth and, with the help of a magnifying glass, and pressing his extremely large proboscis to paper, he filled out the forms. Days later, Sammy got cut. There were seven teams in the league, and the head trainer, Jock McGing, told Sammy that he did not understand why he had been cut. He was the best skater trying out.

Jock eventually found out why. He told Sammy, "Sid says he's sorry but you're just not the type of skater we need right now. He is looking for something different." Sid was Sid Cohen, the general manager of all the Roller Derby teams.

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## Roller Derby and Its Jewish Origins

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The following week, Sammy managed his way to Milwaukee and snuck into tryouts. A Derby official said, "Do not bother putting on your skates, Skobel, you are not to get on the track." Sammy asked why. "Sid Cohen says you are not to be allowed on the track, that's all," the official said.

Sammy went to confront Cohen. "He was a big guy, 6 feet 4 or more, and weighing about 250 pounds," Sammy recalled. "He was built like a boxer, with muscles bulging beneath his shirt sleeves. He had a red face with ragged features. I watched as he washed his hands. They were about twice the size of mine."

Cohen saw Sammy in the phone booth outside the Coliseum the previous week. He was not going to let a blind man skate in a dangerous game.

The third time was the proverbial charm. Sammy went to Chattanooga and found Jock McGing. Cohen was not around until a few days later. Cohen told McGing, "The first time that kid goofs up, I want him on a bus to Maxwell Street."

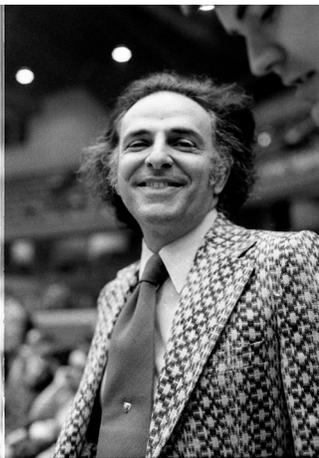
Sammy was at my son's bar mitzvah, the Shabbos goy once again. Sammy's son has a Coliseum brick. Sammy and some of my memorabilia were later featured in the Chicago Historical Society (now known as the Chicago History Museum) exhibit "Chicago Sports! You Shoulda Been There." In a 66-page report commissioned by the museum, exhibition consultants Serrell & Associates analyzed the exhibition, which ran from March 2003 to January 2004.

The exhibition included 55 "elements," including Walter Payton's Super Bowl ring and championship trophies from the Chicago Bulls. From a sampling of museumgoers Serrell interviewed, more patrons stopped at the Skobel/Roller Derby exhibit than the Comiskey Park foul pole and Blackhawks goal. Of the 55 "elements," the Derby exhibit ranked 30 in popularity. A Michael Jordan Jersey was ranked 29. Serrell wrote, "More people recalled learning about the roller derby than any other element in Chicago sports."

On page 41 of the report, titled "New Ideas Visitors Took Away," "the most often-mentioned new idea was about roller derby..."

- I did not know Chicago had its own roller derby team called the Pioneers.
- I never knew about Roller Derby. Never realized that was a real sport.
- I did not know roller derby had such a large following.

On page 43, under the heading of "What People Were Reminded of," several of those surveyed mentioned that "sports has [sic] been a sexist and racist industry throughout history with the exception of Roller Derby...." On page 64, in its summation, the author cited that "the most often-mentioned new idea visitors took away was about Roller Derby...."



Jerry Seltzer

Much of the non-sexist, non-racist attitude in Roller Derby is attributable to Skokie's own Jerry Seltzer. Jerry recognized the growing power of television, and soon 3 million people a year would be watching Roller Derby on TV.

In 1958, Jerry Seltzer, at the age of 26, bought out his father. After graduating Niles East, Jerry went to Stanford University before transferring to Northwestern University, from which he graduated.

I grew up in Calumet City and went to Hebrew school in Hammond, Indiana, three days a week: Monday, Wednesday, and Sunday. Classes were from were in the late afternoons or early evenings on weekdays. TV tapings for Chicago Pioneers Roller Derby were on Wednesdays at the Hammond, Indiana Civic Center. I met Jerry Seltzer after Hebrew school in 1972. He was doing color commentary next to a young Chet Coppock. Who knew that I would meet Aunt Loretta 23 years later?

Readers, you are going to know the answer to this question, but I am going to ask it rhetorically, anyway. What sport put over 50,000 spectators in Comiskey (White Sox) Park on September 15, 1972? That's right: the Roller Derby match between the Chicago Pioneers and the Los Angeles Thunderbirds. Take a look: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkL3wLG44vQ>

The Derby was at its zenith, and then the OPEC oil embargo hit. Jerry's business took a hit. That was the beginning of the end of the Roller Derby craze. Fans had less disposable income. The traveling circus that was the Derby had greater difficulty moving its tent from town to town.

After taking over the Derby at its California headquarters in the early 60s, Jerry returned with the Roller Derby to the Chicago Coliseum, "now operated by my father's former partner, Fred Morelli." The Coliseum was run-down, and ultimately, Jerry told Morelli that the building was "in such disrepair that it was unsafe." Jerry moved the Derby to the International Amphitheater.

Leo, now working for his son, strove to expand the television network. The Derby was syndicated throughout the country. Jerry was "taking care of [his uncle] Oscar in the Roller Derby Skate Company also by running commercials in all of our telecasts for the Street King Outdoor shoe skates."

Morelli sued the Derby, claiming the partnership had never been extinguished.

From there, it was a precipitous downhill slide. Today, there is one professional women's banked track Roller Derby team in Texas. The rest are flat track (about four hundred teams worldwide); they struggle to draw paying customers. Jerry Seltzer died in 2019. He'd be glad to know, though, that there are now [flat track] Roller Derby teams in Israel.



The author (right) with Sammy and Vee Skobel (seated and second from right), former skater Mary Lou Palermo (far left) and skater Elizabeth Perez outside the old Coliseum in 2017.

## Announcing the Cutler Fellowship

The Chicago Jewish Historical Society is pleased to announce the 2026 Dr. Irving Cutler Chicago Jewish History Fellowship, a three-month internship for undergraduate and graduate students interested in Jewish studies, history, public policy, urban studies, journalism, and related areas.

This prestigious fellowship honors Dr. Irving Cutler z"l, preeminent historian of the Chicago Jewish community and a vital board member of the Society for decades. Dr. Cutler was an urban geographer, professor, author of key reference books about Chicago Jewry, and a famous tour guide. His pioneering work laid the foundation for much of what we know about Jewish life in Chicago.

The fellowship offers a unique opportunity to conduct original, independent research on topics related to Chicago's Jewish history and to publish a research paper in the Chicago Jewish Historical Society's award-winning quarterly, *Chicago Jewish History*.

### Fellowship Details

- Duration: three months
- Focus: Research and write an article on a topic related

to Chicago Jewish history (topic to be approved by the Society)

- Outcome: Completion of a research article suitable for publication
- Stipend: \$1,500, paid upon completion and acceptance of the article for publication

### Eligibility

- Current university students, recent graduates, and graduate students
- Interest or background in Jewish studies, history, public policy, urban studies, journalism, or related fields
- Strong research and writing skills. Ability to work independently.

### To Apply

Please submit:

- A brief statement of interest (200–300 words)
- A resume or CV
- Two references (a supervisor or teacher)
- A writing sample (preferably historical or journalistic)

**Application deadline:** May 1, 2026

Send inquiries and applications to:

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

Write "Fellowship" in subject line.

## Community Voices: The Ark's Journey from 1971 to Today

By Arthur Shabashevich

On Sunday, December 7, The Ark partnered with the Chicago Jewish Historical Society to present a special program exploring The Ark's origins, evolution, and enduring role in Chicago's Jewish communal life. Held at The Ark's West Roger's Park location, the event brought together longtime supporters and community members for an afternoon devoted to reflection and shared history.

The program opened with welcoming remarks from CJHS President Rachelle Gold and The Ark's Chief Executive Officer, Marna Goldwin, who spoke about the importance of preserving institutional memory while growing and adapting to present day needs. The program centered on a panel discussion moderated by Nathan Bloch, a longtime Ark Trustee who served on the organization's Board of Directors for three decades. Bloch was joined by Allen Ray, an early Ark activist and Board President during the 1980s, and Mimi Seleski, The Ark's Medical Clinical Manager since 2001.

Panelists traced The Ark's founding in 1971 and its early leadership under Dr. Binyomin Sokol z"l and Rabbi Yehoshua Eichenstein z"l, placing the organization within the broader context of Jewish communal responses to poverty and unmet social service needs in Chicago. The discussion highlighted The Ark's multiple relocations on the North Side, reflecting shifts in neighborhood demographics, as well as the organization's ongoing expansion of services to address changing challenges facing Jewish households.



From left: Ark former Board President Allen Ray, Ark Medical Clinical Manager Mimi Seleski, Ark longtime Board member Nathan Bloch, Ark CEO Marna Goldwin, and CJHS President Dr. Rachelle Gold

Personal recollections were woven throughout the conversation, underscoring The Ark's impact across multiple generations. Audience members also shared their own memories during the Q&A, adding personal perspectives that complemented the historical discussion. Goldwin reflected that The Ark's mission since its founding remains rooted in dignity and Jewish values, principles that have guided the organization for more than five decades.

Following the program, guests were invited to view a curated display of historical photographs and memorabilia documenting The Ark's development over time. Participants also toured The Ark's newly renovated and expanded facility, getting a firsthand look at how its historic values continue to guide the services available to Chicago-land's Jewish community today.

The program offered a meaningful opportunity to consider how social service institutions evolve while remaining anchored in their founding ideals. By bringing together historical perspective and contemporary practice, the CJHS and Ark partnership illustrated how Chicago's Jewish history continues to be shaped through collective memory and sustained communal responsibility.

You can view the full video of the event at <https://arkchicago.org/cjhs/>.

### CJHS members...

### YASHER KOACH!

*The Hebrew phrase means "More Power to You."*

The electronic listserve for members of the Association of Jewish Libraries reprinted the Fall 2025 CJH President's Column of **Dr. Rachelle Gold**, which focused on CJHS member and librarian **Shoshanah Seidman**.

**Gene Levee** authored an article about his mother, artist Edith Kessler LeVe (1910–2006), in the November–December 2025 issue of *Illinois Heritage*, the magazine of the Illinois State Historical Society. Gene's article was part of a series on Illinois women artists.

**Matthew Schlerf** and **Sivan Spector** will be artists-in-residence at the Firehouse Art Studio, the oldest standing firehouse in Chicago. The building, erected in 1873, is located at the intersection of Roosevelt Road and Blue Island Avenue. Sivan writes, "We will be devising a site-specific, experimental theater show there this spring. ... It won't be Jewish, but it will be historical! The show will premiere in May 2026."

**Alissa Zeffren** was keynote speaker at the January midwinter Women's Learning Conference of NILI–Chicago Institute of Women's Learning. Alissa, the director of NILI, spoke on "Becoming a *Mikdash Me'at*: Building Sacred Space Within."

## Historic Walking Tour of Humboldt Park

By Dr. Rachelle Gold

Whether you had roots in Chicago's Humboldt Park neighborhood or were unfamiliar with it, CJHS's fantastic tour leader, Sivan Spector, conveyed to all participants a good sense of the Jewish community that existed there from the 1890s to the 1960s. (See her Winter 2025 *CJH* article, "Reflections on Learning About the Jewish History of Humboldt Park"; she notes that at its peak in the 1930s, the Humboldt Park Jewish population was 30,000, representing 30 to 40 percent of the neighborhood's population.) As a Humboldt Park resident, Sivan also transmitted the spirit of the neighborhood as it is today.



The tour began inside the park near the corner of California Ave. and Hirsch St. with an informative and heartfelt introduction by Humboldt Park native Dr. Edward Mazur, CJHS past president and vastly knowledgeable historian of Chicago and its Jewish community. Ed recounted his formative experiences in the neighborhood until age 14, when his family moved north. (Read his Summer 2018 *CJH* article, "A Return to the Crown of Zion," a moving account of his return to the neighborhood for the rededication ceremony of the Spaulding Avenue Church of God, previously Congregation Atereth Zion, where he had celebrated his Bar Mitzvah.) Ed distributed a map he created of the stores on the 2700 and 2800 blocks of Division Street, most Jewish-owned in his day.

The group then set out with Sivan on a loop that encompassed California Ave., commercial blocks on Division Street, and residential streets that were once the sites of Jewish residences, enterprises, and institutions, as well as synagogues. We visited these sites: the former Austro-Galician Synagogue at 1357 N. California Ave., now an Apostle Church; the Zion Infant Home & Nursery, now Hispanic Home for the Elderly; Herzl Community Home, now Casa Hernandez Community Center; former Jewish-owned business sites on Division St., including Steltzer's restaurant, Kahn's Butter and Eggs, Vision Theatre, and others on Ed's map; the Haddon Ave. Shul, now a satellite campus of Pedro Albizu Campos High School; Yavneh Talmud Torah, now a church; the former Von Humboldt School; and Tzemach Tzedek Synagogue, now transitioning from a church to apartments. The repurposed former Jewish buildings that we viewed were in good condition and many retained clear exterior markings of their Jewish past.

If you attended the tour or have memories of Humboldt Park, please get in touch with us to share your impressions. Email us at [info@chicagojewishhistory.org](mailto:info@chicagojewishhistory.org).

### Welcome New Members

Stefanie Altneu, Deerfield, IL  
 Harriet Berger Miller, Wheeling, IL  
 Diane Blumenthal, La Jolla, CA  
 Myrna Buckman, Park Ridge, IL  
 Carol Culberg, Munster, IN  
 Reni Dickman, Evanston, IL  
 Stan Diskin, Wilmette, IL  
 Cathy Fox, Buffalo Grove, IL  
 Belle Holman, Lincolnwood, IL  
 Vicky Gelfond, Mundelein, IL  
 Aileen & Marvin Gersing,  
 Delray Beach, FL  
 Jonathan Goldstine, Knoxville, TN  
 Phillip Gross, Chicago, IL

Mark Jacob, Evanston, IL  
 Carolyn Jannace, Chicago, IL  
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 David Nathaniel Seidman,  
 Evanston, IL  
 Deana Simon, Chicago, IL  
 Yelena Spector, Chicago, IL  
 Alan & Debra Steiner,  
 Buffalo Grove, IL  
 Dana Steingold, Buffalo Grove, IL  
 Ann Suloway, Bellingham, WA  
 Karen Weiss, Highland Park, IL

### Renew Now!

CJHS members, if you received a stamp on this current issue that reads "Last Issue, Renew Now," it means that your membership is lapsing and that you need to send in your dues for 2026. You can do so on our website: [www.chicagojewishhistory.org](http://www.chicagojewishhistory.org). Or, you can also send us a check in the mail: CJHS, P.O. Box 597004, Chicago, IL 60659-7004.

Thank you so much for your continued support, upon which we depend to survive and thrive.

## More Reflections on Buffalo Grove

By Stan Zoller

Sometime in the 1960s, Robert Zimmerman, a shaggy haired Jewish kid from Duluth, Minnesota, picked up his trusty guitar and let the world know “the times they are a-changin’”.

Thank you, Bob Dylan, for that prognostication.

And while Dylan was focusing on the antiwar and social climate in the nation as a whole, he could easily fit into the belief of many Jews at that time who saw changing times ahead, not just for the secular world as a whole, but for Judaism as well.

As Dana Steingold, noted in her article in the Fall 2025 CJHS newsletter, “The Jewishness of Buffalo Grove: An Appraisal,” it’s not, as the late basketball coach, Al McGuire, would say, all seashells and balloons, but it’s not all doom and gloom, either.

The reality is this — cue it, Bob — “the times they are a-changin’.”

As a retired journalist who continues to blog and as a civic advocate who has covered Buffalo Grove since 1980 and lived in the village of Big Bison since 2000, I agree that Steingold is right about the changes in the village.

Buffalo Grove, however, is a microcosm of what’s happening in organized religion as a whole, not just Judaism, in the United States. Interest and participation are dropping. The Archdiocese of Chicago reduced the number of parishes by 123 in 2022 mainly because of declining membership, fewer priests, and costly aging buildings.

It’s declining membership that strikes a chord with Judaism. According to a 2020 Pew Research Institute study, “... nearly nine-in-ten U.S. adults who were raised Jewish (88%) are still Jewish today. This includes 70% who identify with the Jewish religion and 18% who don’t identify with any religion but who consider themselves Jewish in some other way, such as culturally, ethnically or by family background.”

What impacts villages like Buffalo Grove are the level of interest and participation by Jews. According to Pew, “...a quarter of adults who are currently Jewish or were raised that way say they were brought up in Conservative Judaism, while 15% identify as Conservative Jews today. For every person who has joined Conservative Judaism, nearly three people who were raised in the Conservative movement have left it. This is reflected in Conservative synagogues that have seen membership drop. For example, Beth Judea in Long Grove, which draws substantially from Buffalo Grove, has a membership of 425 families today, compared with 475 in 2020.

Pew also reports that “by contrast, Reform Judaism – now the largest American Jewish denomination – has experienced a net gain due to religious switching; 28% of current or former U.S. Jews say they were raised as Reform Jews, while 33% currently identify with the Reform movement.

Pew also notes that Jews with no denominational affiliation also have experienced a net gain. About one in six current or former U.S. Jews (17%) say they were raised in no particular branch of Judaism, while 29% currently identify with no branch. For every person who has left this group (either to join another branch or to leave Judaism altogether), nearly three people have joined the ranks of U.S. Jews who do not affiliate with any particular Jewish denomination.” A key here is identification, not necessarily participation, which has hit Reform synagogues hard.

But what about Orthodox Judaism? Pew reports that one in 10 current or former U.S. Jews say they were raised in Orthodox Judaism, and 8% currently identify as Orthodox. Despite this small net loss from denominational switching, some social scientists project that the Orthodox share of the Jewish population is likely to increase in the future, because Orthodox Jews are younger and have a higher fertility rate than non-Orthodox Jews, on average.

It is interesting to see, using Buffalo Grove as a barometer, how things have shifted. While the village does not have any strictly kosher restaurants, most of the grocery stores have increased their kosher products. Also, a recently opened Wild Fork meat market carries a selection of kosher meat and other products. More substantial selections are available at the Jewel in Highland Park (dubbed the Kosher Jewel because of its large selection), as well as at Mizrahi Grill and Market, which has expanded in Highland Park at a new location that not only

includes a restaurant, but a well-stocked market that includes prepared foods. Both locations are an easy drive from Buffalo Grove.

At the crux of appraising Jewish life in Buffalo Grove is a lifestyle. While people are quick to point out that a small JCC facility closed in the village, that closing was due to the nearby opening of the JCC in Long Grove in 2014. The 37-acre site is home to the Elaine Frank Apachi Day Camp, Sunrise Day Camp-Chicago, Jacob Duman Early Childhood Center, and the Garoon Gateway to Science. In addition to the JCC, the Jewish Council for Youth Services' Northwest Family Center is housed in Buffalo Grove, offering care for infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children.

Steingold cited the Torah Academy of Buffalo Grove and its "steady enrollment." The Academy offers an Early Learning Center for children preK 3 - kindergarten, as well as education for students in grade K through eight. According to Rabbi Shimon Zehnwirth, founder and head of school, "Enrollment began in 2009 with 18 and slowly rose over the years, into the 20's for a few years, and in the last few years a bit more until we hit 50 students last year."

The changes in the Buffalo Grove Jewish community can be fueled by a number of things. A key is the number of "empty nesters," such as my wife and I, who still call Buffalo Grove home. We're a two-shul family. My wife belongs to Beth Judea in Long Grove, while I belong to Darchei Noam of Glenbrook (DNG), a modern Orthodox synagogue in Northbrook. Now in its 18th year, DNG has a vibrant community anchored by Rabbi Daniel Fox, who is in his 30s. The plethora of young families and children has led DNG to do something not many shuls have done lately: build an addition.

Is all of this a surprise? In the late 1970s and early 1980s, much was written about acculturation in Judaism and the waning numbers of practicing Jews. Both the late Charles Silberman in his *A Certain People* and, of all people, the late Rabbi Meir Kahane, in his book *Never Again!*, prognosticated the trend we are seeing today. The culprits? Everything from intermarriage to acculturation leading to a loss of Jewish identity.

So, what are the answers? That's anyone's guess.

But the reality is this, as that young Jewish guy from Minnesota sang, "the times they are a-changin'."

The key will be how Jews adapt.



Stan Zoller is a retired award-winning journalist and journalism advocate and educator. He has won a Peter Lisagor Award from the Chicago Headline Club and has been honored by the Journalism Education Association, the National Scholastic Press Association, and the Dow Jones News Fund. He and his wife, Laura, live in north suburban Buffalo Grove.

## A Spectacular Program: Part II

Theater authority Dr. Atay Citron will return to CJHS on Sunday, March 8, for the second in his two-part online series "Spectacular Outcry: The Anti-Nazi Spectacles of American Jews (1933-1946)."

Citron, a professor emeritus and former chair of the University of Haifa's Department of Theatre, will talk about Chicago writer Ben Hecht's two pageants: *We Will Never Die*, which was produced at New York's Madison Square Garden in 1943, and *A Flag Is Born*, a 1946 play starring Paul Muni, Celia Adler, and Marlon Brando that ran on Broadway for several months.

*We Will Never Die*, memorializing the 2 million Jews who had already died several years into World War II and the Holocaust, was a plea for Allied intervention to prevent further genocide. *A Flag Is Born* offered a pointed critique of the British policy preventing Holocaust



Marlon Brando in *A Flag Is Born*

survivors from immigrating to Palestine. Both productions were considered controversial, particularly by the mainstream Jewish community, and Citron will offer details about the polemics surrounding the pageants.

Register for the March 8 program, which will begin at 12 p.m. Central, at the CJHS website, [www.chicagojewishhistory.org](http://www.chicagojewishhistory.org), where you can also view Citron's February 1 program.

## The Role of Chicago Jewish Delis. Part I

By Zach Meyer

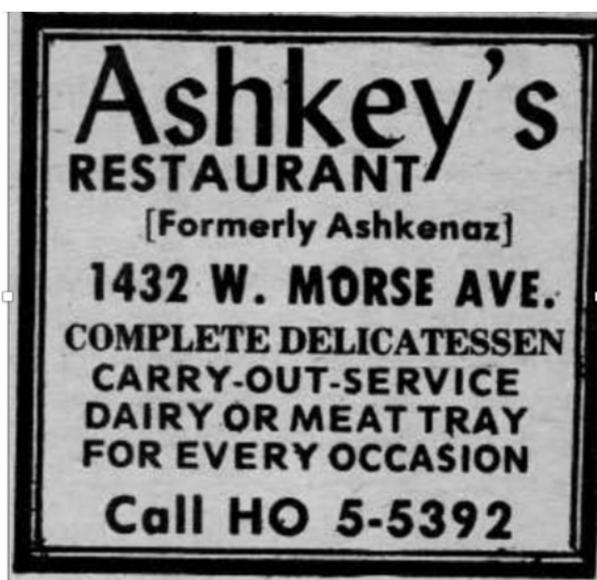
In Chicago, Jewish delicatessens served as far more than mere restaurants. These establishments functioned as vital community anchors that transcended their commercial purpose, creating spaces where cultural identity could be preserved, celebrated, and shared across diverse populations. Chicago's Jewish delis exemplify sociologist Ray Oldenburg's "third places" – communal spaces distinct from home and work where authentic social interaction could flourish.

The story of Chicago's Jewish delis reveals how food establishments can serve as powerful agents of inter- and intra-community building, operating simultaneously as guardians of cultural tradition and bridges between different cultural, ethnic, and racial groups. These delis created unique environments where secular expressions of Judaism coexisted alongside religious ones, where recent immigrants could find comfort in familiar flavors and languages, and where cross-cultural connections are formed through food. By examining the foods they served, the people they welcomed, and the relationships they fostered, we can understand how Chicago's Jewish delis functioned and their impact on the Chicago community.

### The Food

Chicago Jewish delis were a place outside of the home and work where Jews could be themselves: a place where they could express their Jewish identity. For some, Jewish identity was not expressed through religious practice, but through secular activities (Merwin, 2015). Delis allowed individuals to engage with Jewish customs and traditions secularly, and it was done by engaging with food.

Take Reichstein's Deli, originally at 1602. N. Wells St., which offered "stuffed cabbage, kishke...chopped liver...bagels... and challah on Friday evening" (*Chicago Jewish Sentinel*, January 4, 1973). As mouth-watering (or unappetizing) as it may sound, serving these traditionally Ashkenazi Jewish foods allowed individuals to partake in certain Jewish traditions. Reichstein's sold challah on Friday evenings, which seemed counterintuitive because those observing Shabbat and needing challah wouldn't be at Reichstein's at that time. Rather, they would be at home or shul for prayer. However, Reichstein's wasn't solely catering to those practicing Judaism in a strict religious sense: they also catered to Jews who engaged with or practiced Judaism in a more secular way. By consuming these foods at Reichstein's, they participated in a form of cultural Judaism that connected them to their heritage through taste, memory, and shared experience rather than through religious ritual. Further, this culinary engagement allowed individuals to express their Jewishness in an accessible, non-denominational way that didn't require religious belief or observance. By eating challah at Reichstein's, perhaps they were keeping the essence of Shabbat and Judaism alive.



Thus, consuming these traditional foods at the deli was a way of engaging in the historical and cultural practices of Judaism, albeit through secular means. To emphasize this point, take another advertisement in the *Chicago Jewish Sentinel* on October 14, 1976, about Ashkey's Restaurant. The ad reads, "...dairy or meat tray for every occasion." The deli abided by kosher dietary guidelines; however, it operated in a commercial, secular context rather than a strictly religious one. This allowed the customers to partake in a religious tradition, not in the context of conscious religious observance, but more so in the context of enjoying a catered, delicious meal. The advertisement itself signals that this establishment understood its role as more than just a deli—it was a place where Jewish cultural identity could be maintained and expressed through the simple act of choosing what to eat, making Judaism accessible through secular, everyday experiences rather than requiring deliberate, formal religious commitment. These delis were places

where Jews could engage with their Judaism in a nonreligious environment, a place where food served as a historical and communal connection.

It is also interesting to note the change in the name of the restaurant from “Ashkenaz” to “Ashkey’s.” Perhaps this was a strategic move made by the owners of the restaurant to broaden the target audience. Changing the name from the literal designation for Eastern and Central European Jews to a more ambiguous-sounding name may have been a way of encouraging those of different backgrounds to patronize the restaurant. Further, this move could have reflected the owners’ cultural acculturation efforts to better integrate into the local Chicago society.

Part II of Zach Meyer’s article will appear in the Spring 2026 issue of *CJH*.

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**About the author:** Zach Meyer is a senior at the University of Chicago. His article in *CJH* is based on his final assignment for the college class, “Chicago Jewish History,” taught by Dr. Jessica Kirzane, a scholar of Yiddish and a CJHS Board member. He writes, “As I grew up in the Chicagoland area, I reflected on my time going to Manny’s Deli, and my research topic was born: the role of Jewish delis in Chicago. I found that the Chicago deli scene often gets overshadowed by New York’s, and I wanted to showcase what Chicago had to offer!” A premed student concentrating in cognitive science, he plays on the university’s Division III football team. He also has a passion for studying history.

*Editor’s Note:* A young scholar has written passionately about some of Chicago’s Jewish delis. Now, it’s readers’ turns. What are your memories of local Jewish delis? Share your favorites with fellow CJHS members. Write to us at [www.info@chicagojewishhistory.org](mailto:www.info@chicagojewishhistory.org).

Look to the rock from which you were hewn

הביטו אל-צור הציבתם



# chicago jewish historical society

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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-eight 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. Mail your order and check to CJHS, P.O. Box 597004, Chicago, IL 60659-7004. You may also order online at our website.

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- A subscription to our award-winning quarterly journal, *Chicago Jewish History*.
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