

JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF CENTRAL JERSEY



Fall 2011

NEWSLETTER

Cheshvan/Kislev

JHSCJ Receives Grant from Middlesex County *Immigrants from the FSU to be Interviewed*

The Jewish Historical Society of Central Jersey is very pleased to have received a grant from the Middlesex County Board of Chosen Freeholders and the Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission to record oral histories and to develop a traveling exhibit on recent Jewish immigrants from the Former Soviet Union. We believe it is particularly important to acquire this first-person information now, while people's memories are still fresh and the materials to be exhibited are still in existence. The traveling exhibit will contribute to improving understanding and acceptance among the numerous traditions and backgrounds that make up Middlesex County's diverse population. Gathering these materials now will also help the JHSCJ obtain information for our own archive, making it available to future researchers who will almost certainly want to obtain this same information retrospectively.

Documents, photos, or other objects relating to life in the Former Soviet Union, or related to the immigration experience, are of particular importance to this project. We hope to obtain interviews, family photos, photos of

religious and cultural objects, and copies of interesting documents. We will arrange for the traveling exhibit to be displayed in temples, libraries, community centers, etc., and will create a brochure to commemorate the exhibit. We are pleased to have Stanley Bergman, former director of the Cahnman Preservation and Micro-filming Laboratory at the Center for Jewish History working with us to create our traveling exhibit. His experience in languages and document preservation will be of great value to us. He will also reach out to those who contribute their personal memorabilia and artifacts and teach them how to properly preserve these important items.

If you know of anyone who you think might want to participate in this project, either as an interviewee or in helping to create the exhibit, please ask them to contact us by telephone or email. Or, you can contact us on their behalf and provide us with their contact information, and we will get in touch with them. If you are interested in assisting with this project on any level, please contact the JHSCJ office. You will be making a significant contribution to the preservation of local history and to the work of the JHSCJ.



**Grant funding has been provided by
Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission,
Middlesex County Board of Chosen Freeholders
through a grant provided by
New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of Dept of State.**





President's Message

As mentioned on the first page of this Newsletter, we were very pleased to have received a grant from the Middlesex County Board of Chosen Freeholders and the Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission to document the experiences of immigrants from the Former Soviet Union. This grant will be of significant help in enabling us to achieve some of our Society's most fundamental purposes, namely documenting and publishing material relating to the Jewish Experience in Central New Jersey. If you are acquainted with any immigrants from the Former Soviet Union, please let them know about this important project. If you would like to help with the project, please call the JHSCJ office.



Archives Corner

As you read in our Summer Newsletter, our collection of archived material relative to the Central NJ Jewish Home/Wilf Campus has expanded from 5 boxes to 17 boxes. I have been busy updating the computer records for the collection, labeling the new boxes, and rearranging the shelves in our archive room to accommodate twelve more boxes. The final step will be to update our website to include the new acquisitions. It is exciting to see a new collection take its place on our shelves. If you would like to help with our collections, please call me. We have a lot of documents that need to be archived.

Deborah Cohn

As the year ends, we hope you will consider making a tax-deductible donation to the JHSCJ. Our administrative costs are minimal, and virtually your entire donation goes to helping the Society do its important work. Elsewhere in this Newsletter, we discuss maximizing the impact of your donation by transferring required withdrawals from a retirement account directly to the JHSCJ, which makes the withdrawn money tax-exempt. Also, the JHSCJ now participates in the Create a Jewish Legacy Program of the Jewish Federation of Greater Middlesex County. You can create permanently endowed legacy funds and other kinds of planned gifts **for the JHSCJ**, and have your donated funds held and managed by the Jewish Federation. Please contact the JHSCJ office for further information.

Finally, please note that Jewish Federation's annual fundraising Super Sunday will be on Sunday, November 20. We would like to have as many members of the JHSCJ as possible participate by making phone calls and/or by helping out in other ways at the Jewish Federation's offices in South River. See the Federation's Web site, www.jewishmiddlesex.org, for details. If you do participate, please identify yourself as a JHSCJ member and let us know that you were there!

Nathan Reiss

The Jewish Historical Society of Central Jersey continues to build its collection of original photographs, documents, and artifacts relating to Jewish life in Central New Jersey. We also accept letters, diaries, clothing, and original works of art and music with a local connection. The Jewish Historical Society assumes full responsibility for its long-term care and storage and commits itself to making this material accessible to the community. Please call Debbie Cohn at 732-249-4894 if you have something that you think we might be interested in for our collection.



**SUPPORTED BY THE
JEWISH FEDERATION
OF GREATER MIDDLESEX**

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Contributors:

Dr. Doris Kahn Gunsher
Dr. Nathan Reiss
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JHSCJ OFFICERS

President	Nathan M. Reiss
Vice President	Harvey Hauptman
Treasurer	Susan Marchand

ART FOR PETE'S SAKE

By Dr. Doris Kahn Gunsher

I enjoyed reading the article by Peggy Mombert in our recent Newsletter about the creation of the Wilf Campus Archive. As some of you may know, the Jewish Historical Society of Central Jersey was housed in the Central NJ Jewish Home for the Aged from May 1982 until July 1991. We occupied a tiny area of the small lounge. Our Archives consisted of a showcase and several boxes of sorted and unsorted memorabilia. Our relations with the staff of the Home, and especially Peggy, were most pleasant and helpful and we hated to leave. But one day, as I was going through one of the Archive boxes, I found a discarded apple core. It was then that I realized that it was time to find another location. Besides, our collection had started to grow and we needed more room.

After we moved to a home of our own, we had occasion to return to the CNJJHA for the annual meeting during our Bar Mitzvah year where, once again, the staff was extremely hospitable in allowing us to use their facilities and refreshments for a wonderful afternoon attended by our members as well as the residents. Peggy again played her part in making the meeting a great success. This brings to mind an earlier annual meeting held in the auditorium of the Home.

When I was elected president of the Jewish Historical Society, I thought that I should make our twice a year meetings interesting and different. For the first one, we had as our subject "The Jews in the Civil War." This proved to be well received, and so now I had to outdo my previous accomplishment. "How about an art show featuring local Jewish artists?" I asked. "Great idea," everyone said. The show, which was only to run one day, was truly a show. There was to be no sale involved, so it was not a fundraiser. To be a participant, one only needed to reside or work in the central New Jersey area and be Jewish.

Since the Society's headquarters were at the Central N.J. Jewish Home for the Aged, we got permission to hold the show in their auditorium. The main drawback to that was that they would not permit us to hang anything on the walls. We got around that by borrowing many easels and constructing a three-sided pegboard enclosure on which we could hang the pictures. Everything else would be either placed on tables or on the floor.

Weeks passed and we were well underway. We had received applications from sculptors, painters, and assorted crafts people. They sent us their bios, which we would display next to their works.

About a week or so before the day of the show, I received a call from a "Mr. Cohen" asking if he could display his paint-

ings. I told him that it was quite late and that there was no hanging space left. If he could display his work on a table or on the floor, he could participate. That was agreeable to him. He then asked if I would like to see his work. I said I would, only because I wanted to see how much room he needed. We made an afternoon appointment because he had to pick up his grandchild at nursery school. How nice! A little old Jewish grandpa!

I drove over to his house, which was not too far from mine, and parked across the street. As I was approaching his door, he put out some empty milk bottles and I got a glimpse of him. Oh my goodness, I knew him! He was the man who shared office space with a friend of mine. About a year earlier, our mutual friend had invited me to visit an art exhibit featuring the works of Mr. Cohen. It was an art exhibit that focused on works of a sexually explicit nature. What do I do? We couldn't display his work in the name of the Jewish Historical Society and certainly not at the Jewish Home for the Aged. And yet, I had already told him that he could participate.

He saw me as I was approaching and invited me in. All the time, I was thinking about how I could get out of this gracefully. He ushered me into the house and into the room where his works were resting on the floor. They were tremendous canvases painted in shades of white, black, and gray and they were paintings of Hassidic men dancing their ethnic dances. There was not one sexually explicit feature in any of them. I was so relieved that I immediately accepted his works for the show.

Mr. Cohen had lost the address where he was to send his biography, and asked me to come into the next room where he had a pencil and paper. With that, the phone rang, and he entered into a lengthy conversation with the caller. I was left standing in the room surrounded by the paintings that I had seen previously at his earlier art show.

I think of this situation on occasion and wonder what would have happened if he had not had the Hassidic paintings. How would the residents and visitors at the Jewish Home for the Aged accept an art display which included sexually explicit paintings? One thing for sure: if I ever had to live in a nursing home, I could never apply for admission to this one!

Dr. Doris Kahn Gunsher is one of the original members of the Jewish Historical Society of Central Jersey. She served as president from 1988 to 1992.

SPEAKERS BUREAU

Our thanks are extended to Phil Cantor and Nat Reiss, two busy members of the JHSCJ Speakers Bureau. In the past few months, Phil has spoken to the National Council of Jewish Women in Clearbrook, the JCC of Middlesex County, and at Temple Beth-El in Somerset. Nat traveled down to Philadelphia to present his talk on “Am I My Brother’s Cousin?” to the Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Philadelphia. As always, the honoraria received by these speakers were donated to the JHSCJ. Contact the JHSCJ Speakers Bureau the next time *your* organization is planning a program.

TRIBUTES

From	To	Occasion
Hazel Rabinowitz	Ruth Marcus Patt	Mazel tov on her new home
Roberta & Lawrence Fachler	Ruth Marcus Patt	Mazel tov on her new home
Edith Neimark	Sydell Seiden	In memory of Milton Seiden
Edith Neimark	Christine Becker	Best wishes for her good health
Renee and Herman Harris	Family of Joe Krafchick	In memory of Joe Krafchick

MEMBERSHIP NEWS

Welcome to our New Member

Sherry Salmansohn

Thank You for Renewing at the Patron Level

Ruth Bickhardt - William Gorelick - Harvey and Flip Hauptman - Lawrence Riemer - Ann Zar Taub

Jewish Dreams, continued from page 5
peon labor” and “the danger of banditry in the countryside.”

Equally tellingly, Jewish hesitation arose in response to the Mexican Catholic Church’s open hostility to a massive influx of Jews. In 1889, a Catholic political party representative characterized the possible introduction of non-Catholic immigrants from Europe “a social crime.” Rabbi Zielonka was moved to observe, “The hand of the Inquisition still hangs heavy over Mexico and the word ‘Jew’ is only whispered here and there.”

Despite these concerns and impediments, some 9,000 Eastern European and German-speaking Jews did emigrate to Mexico between 1887 and the 1930s, where they and their descendants have since lived in peace and prosperity. One can wonder, with the wisdom of hindsight, whether Schiff, de Hirsch and the other organizers of Jewish rescue—had they been able to predict the fate awaiting Russian Jewry in the late 1930s—might have accepted the Mexican government’s offers and taken their chances with Mexico’s weak economy and its church’s attitude toward Jews.

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THANK YOU

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Large Print Newsletter

If you have difficulty reading our Newsletter, please contact Debbie at the JHSCJ office. We will be happy to send you a large-format copy.

IRA Charitable Rollover Option

Did you know: through December, 2011, a provision known as the “Charitable IRA Rollover” allows taxpayers age 70½ or older to make tax-free transfers (of up to \$100,000 per year) directly from their IRA to charities. Such gifts transferred from your IRA to a charity will NOT be taxed, will NOT subject your Social Security income to higher tax levels, and WILL count toward your minimum required distribution. This law provides a unique opportunity to help the Jewish Historical Society of Central Jersey, as well as other charities that benefit from your philanthropy. Ask your tax advisor for more information about direct IRA transfers to charitable organizations.

Visit our website at www.jewishgen.org/jhscj for the expanding list of archival materials to be found in our collection.

Jewish Dreams of Mexico

The oldest documents in the American Jewish Historical Society's collections are trial transcripts of the Mexican Inquisition of the 1570s. For centuries, Mexico had a reputation for trying to purge Jewish influence from its culture. With the creation of the Mexican Republic in 1856, however, the Mexican government ended any official discrimination against religious minorities and separated the Catholic Church from affairs of state. In 1887, while thousands in the Jewish communities of Russia were killed in pogroms, and the ports of northern Europe filled with Jewish families hoping to escape to America, Mexican president Porfirio Diaz announced that his administration would welcome 5,000 Russian Jews if they would settle *terrenos baldios*—government owned, uncultivated lands. A Mexican newspaper, *El Partido Liberal*, editorialized, "Would Jewish colonization increase the wealth of the Mexican nation? If so, let them come."

Concerned for the plight of Russia's Jews and thinking it urgent to divert European Jewish emigrants from the tenement districts of great cities to agricultural settlements in less populated areas, America's leading Jewish philanthropist, Jacob Schiff, and the Baron Maurice de Hirsch of France viewed Mexico as a promising site for Russian Jewish resettlement. De Hirsch had already set up a fund to underwrite the costs of bringing European Jewish immigrants to American ports such as Galveston, Texas, from which they were sent to rural colonies in Arkansas, Kansas, North Dakota and other states. The fund also encouraged Jewish settlements in Argentina. De Hirsch wrote, "I must admit that the proportions which the emigration of Russian Jews has assumed, and the excessive immigration which begins to make itself felt in the United States, makes it incumbent upon us to look around for new outlets for the colonists."

Because of its government's welcoming attitude, de Hirsch and Schiff had high hopes for Mexico. Remarkably, de Hirsch contemplated resettling *every* Russian Jew to Mexico. He wrote:

"No doubt if it were only a question of transporting a limited number of colonists, the moneys needed would be found...but having to face eventually a colonization scheme which may embrace a population of five million souls (distributed, I must admit, over a great number of years), we must take

care so that capital which is in good faith invested [will receive a good return.]"

Schiff agreed with de Hirsch on the need to assure the viability of Mexico as a refuge and personally hired two investigators to assess the practicality of massive Jewish immigration to that nation. Three months later, Schiff received the results of the research and wrote to de Hirsch:

"Just received information on wages and labor conditions which do not seem very satisfactory. All wages are very low and the competition for [jobs as] skilled labor in the lower strata of the population is rather keen. This rather speaks against Mexico..."

Schiff and de Hirsch then turned their attention back to resettlement in the American West and Argentina.

De Hirsch contemplated resettling every Russian Jew to Mexico.

Despite Schiff's negative assessment, the Diaz government persisted in its hope of attracting Jewish settlement to Mexico. Diaz offered to donate an island off the coast of Mexico as a semi-autonomous Jewish colony. Writing in

his newspaper, *El Sabado* [Saturday], in 1889, Professor Fernando Rivas reflected his nation's official position:

"We do not know why Jews would remain in any country where they are suspected, hated and persecuted. Why not emigrate to this generous America where hospitality invites them...Mexico opens its ports to European, Asiatic or African immigration with neither racial nor religious distinction. Here the Church is independent of the State and there is absolute liberty of religion...Let the persecuted leave the inhumane lands and come to the land where the Eternal has planted the Tree of Liberty."

Despite such generous offers, the organized North American Jewish community continued to express reservations about Mexico as a place for resettlement. Rabbi Martin Zielonka of El Paso, Texas, on the Mexican border, wrote that "the establishment of a [Jewish] colony in this desert territory would be the same as exile...[and] I question very much whether the Jews of Europe could readily adapt themselves to the agricultural conditions of the eastern lowlands." Social worker Maurice Hexter thought that Jewish immigrants would face "the impossibility and danger of competing with

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Major featured articles and events from this newsletter are available on our web site: www.jewishgen.org/jhscj approximately two weeks before it reaches you by mail.

