

Jewish Community of Greater Buffalo and a program to save our local history

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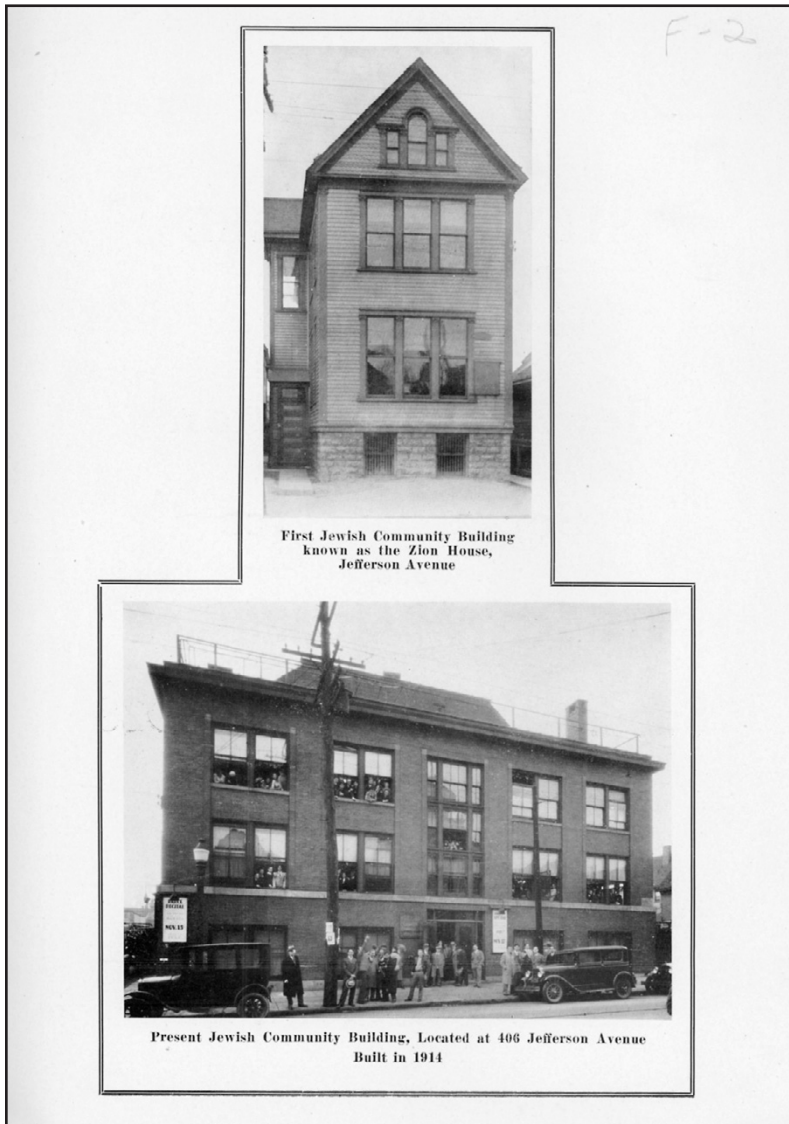
Archiving is an odd mix of the mundane and the magical. Five years ago, at the start of the Archives Project, it was the routine act of opening an old grey filing cabinet at the end of a long day sorting dusty papers in a room that was more storage room than archives, that the magical moment kicked in. I opened a drawer and then two others to find hundreds of photographs dating from the 1910s to the 1960s all vying for attention as they spilled out and over each other. One of those images I “met” that day was the photograph that appears on the front cover of Jewish History of Greater Buffalo. The image is of Temple Beth El religious school, primary and junior departments, taken in 1936 when the synagogue was located on Richmond Avenue, in Buffalo. This image, and the others, captured specific times in the synagogue’s history and in the lives of those pictured, and they invited the viewer into the life of Temple Beth El over the decades to understand what was meaningful to synagogue members in their association with Beth El over the years.

Buffalo has the good fortune of having more than one significant Jewish archives. It also has stellar photographs and document collections of Temple Beth Zion, the Jewish Federation of Greater Buffalo and the Jewish Community Centers and Summer Camps, all of which have large and wide ranging collections. The *Buffalo Jewish Review* donated all of its issues to the Jewish Buffalo Archives Project. Collectively they provided numerous images for the

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book and, while some were beloved images, many more had never been seen or published before. In addition, some of the more unusual and arresting images, came from individuals who had donated their own family materials. These donations are always of critical help to the Jewish Buffalo Archives Project as they often provide missing links in organizational papers as well as telling stories that are completely absent from institutional holdings. Each collection – family or organization – had its own flavor, its own unique story, yet once assembled together the connections between them abound. This is to be expected because of the size of the Buffalo Jewish population, which at its peak was between 20,000-30,000. Today, Jewish Buffalo is around 12,000 close to its number in the 1910s when most of the institutions of Jewish Buffalo, as we know them today, had formed or were forming in one version of themselves. This “golden” number of just over 10,000 individuals allows for the development of a significant range and diversity in Jewish religious affiliations and cultural organizations, then as now, but it is still small enough to connect across multiple sub-communities.

The Jewish Community of Greater Buffalo is a fast sprint through Greater Buffalo’s Jewish community from 1847 to 1976 as well as



Zion House and Jewish Community Building

glimpses into the Jewish communities of Niagara Falls, and a few extra photographs that bring the post 1970s story up to date. Each organization, each geographic area, synagogue, group and family included within this book, depicts both the familiar and less so, within its own meaning and its specific place within a broader Buffalo, national and international framework: through changing waves of immigration, movement from city to suburb and the continuing city anchors, as well as the story of changing ritual practice, Jewish cultural and philanthropic activity across the decades – all assembled together to tell a visual community history that connects across and within chapters.

How do you assemble a book that covers that amount of years with numerous organizations and people? How do you decide which images to choose and which stories to follow? Arcadia Publishing has designed an organizational structure of five to six chapters for its popular series of local history. The narratives of many in this series often follow a “progress show” style that traces “boom” to a seemingly inevitable “bust”, a storyline that I found ran contrary to a more nuanced understanding of Buffalo’s general story. What I found more useful was to track constant “change” throughout the book – not just size, but in organizational, religious and cultural diversity, and religious observance, and also in community priorities, leadership and community participation.

All images in the book encourage a reading of the national and international stories that shaped Jewish Buffalo, the City of Light itself, and broader American culture, and hopefully pique further interest in discovering the multidimensional, layered and expansive meaning behind each image. The two main images included in this article are a prime example of multiple readings that the captions, framing text and juxtaposition of other images provide for the reader.

The buildings image includes Zion House and the Jewish Community Building, both on Jefferson Avenue. Zion House, the top image, is a modest house purchased in 1896 by the Sisters of Zion and the Daughters of Israel, two

women’s groups that were associated with Temple Beth Zion, and the forerunners of the TBZ Sisterhood. This Zion House on Jefferson was the third settlement style house they had organized in order to provide an alternative community space to the local Christian Mission houses set up to lure incoming Jewish immigrants from the 1890s. The lower image, the Jewish Community Building on Jefferson, dates from 1914, and is a building long associated in the memory of many east-siders, as the cultural hub of the Jefferson corridor where sports, cub scouts, music, shows, clubs and friendship bloomed on the East Side for adults and youth alike. This is both of their specific stories in an abbreviated form. But these two images tell us much more. They are a visual expression of the settled German Jewish community meeting incoming East Europeans from Poland, Lithuania and Russia, from the 1880s to 1914 and, with this meeting, the complexity of those interactions in a period of tremendous numerical and organization growth with radical change.

Zion House also speaks to German Jewish philanthropy and responses to immigration, the volunteer work of women, Reform Judaism meeting Orthodoxy, and reactions of resistance, accommodation and acculturation. The Jewish Community Building image, speaks to new immigrants themselves and their American born children and a beloved institution shaped by Jewish east side residents where Jewish youth in particular, congregated across the micro-communities that developed on the east-side. From the basement with dance and sports activities, to the roof clinic “summer camp”, every inch of space was so well used, that within a decade of its construction it needed to be almost entirely refurbished, so worn out were the steps and surfaces.

From both of these images, we have a lineage to the story of the Holland Jewish Community Center on Delaware Avenue, a building that replaced the Jewish Community Building on Jefferson in the postwar period, when it was vacated in the mid 1940s and moved to temporary sites. The JCB wanderings came to an end in 1948 with the founding of a new center on tree-lined Delaware Avenue

in Buffalo’s premiere thoroughfare. The Benderson Jewish Community Center, as the suburban sibling of the Holland Center, also has an indirect place in this story, as it is an outgrowth of the city center and its connection to the suburban impulse to leave the city that accelerated in the postwar period.

The second image in this article, that of Pine Street shul members provides a window into the immigrant community that formed in a new country, while still holding fast to European roots and traditions. While this history book draws much of its collections from agencies, synagogues and other organizations, the small but vital family collections add an insiders view of the east-side with their family photographs.

The vibrancy present in the Jewish Community Building, was matched, if surely outpaced by the growth of numerous congregations on and around the Jefferson Avenue corridor where traditional synagogues aligned along their own style of workshop and hometown connections. The image of Hyman Arluck, (the smallest boy) and his father, Cantor Samuel Arluck (holding a siddur), at Brith Sholem, is striking for a number of reasons. Brith Sholem was reincorporated in 1882 from an existing synagogue founded in 1865, which itself was a split from the originally orthodox Temple Beth Zion. Brith Sholem changed to Lithuanian Orthodox in 1880s and from the 1890s was known as “Pine Street Shul” when in 1893 it located to 171 Pine St., between William and Clinton. This family image tells us about a Buffalo and American Jewish story of changing religious affiliations, but also a national cultural one. Hyman Arluck, as Harold Arlen would eventually compose some of the most well known twentieth century music in his score of “Over the Rainbow” and rise to national fame, but this image provides a window into his beginnings and the variety of affiliation on the East Side, that also included Beth Jacob Synagogue (Clinton Street), the Jefferson Avenue Shul, Anshe Lubavitz, Ahavas Achim and others and in the book we trace their mergers and moves across Buffalo. The east side was not only the Jewish Community Building or the orthodox shuls, it was also the numerous hometown associations, like the Sokolifkas, the Nashelskiers, and groups like the Hebrew Benevolent Loan Association and Workman Circle and delis, shops, bakeries, grocers galore, and you’ll find many of these images across the book. These are usually the only images that we have and we are in need of many more.

This brings me to the final story that is not pictured, but underpins the entire book. In addition to the numerous technical specifications that shaped the inclusion of images, there was a much more significant factor in the selection of any one photograph – whether it actually existed, and had been saved, and made available! This is the story of archival sustainability that requires community action by as many people as possible. Much of my time was spent going through not only our own photographic holdings, but various collections at the Buffalo Central Library, the Buffalo History Museum, Buffalo State College Archives, Niagara Falls Public Library, and Western New York Heritage, to extend what we had. In addition, I held a public, “bring and scan” program for community individuals who had photographs, and were not able to donate these images at this time, but allowed their use on a loan basis for the book. This was critical for closing more gaps and confirming my own long held thoughts, that the community in Buffalo and Niagara Falls still holds many precious materials in a whole

host of areas relating to business and family life and individual activity.

Although the East Side remains a critical area of archival need, there are other areas that need action, too. There is virtually no material, photographic or otherwise of the Humboldt Parkway Jewish communities, and we hope that this book, and articles like this will encourage search and donation of materials. We are also looking for materials around North Buffalo, and Jewish life in secular institutions, such as the Bennett High School, and other High Schools, as well as the associated Jewish fraternities and sororities. The Elmwood Avenue area, Beth Abraham, and its forerunners are under represented, as are many Orthodox institutions, such as the Saranac Shul, and an array of Jewish businesses for which we hope to find more materials over the next year. Niagara Falls is another area of critical need. While the Beth Israel,

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Niagara Falls archives were donated prior to the closing of the synagogue, the Tenth Street shul has no presence in the Archives collections. To date, small amounts of Temple Beth El materials have been donated by some members, and the Archives Project is working directly with Temple Beth El, Niagara Falls, to help them organize their extensive and significant archives. There are currently no commercial records of Jewish business life in Niagara Falls and we would welcome additions.

Given an incomplete record, this book then, is also meant as “a call” for everyone who has materials and is prepared to donate them, to act now, and in this way participate in the story of archival sustainability, as we work to create a complete as possible archives, that does not rely on the fragility of hope or luck, and one that is organized sustainably and in perpetuity. Ultimately this book and the images revel in the complexity and breadth of Jewish Buffalo and Niagara Falls. I hope that anyone with an interest in history, especially their local community history, will help me to broaden that record and join me in this endeavor to create a unique and unrivaled resource in our region for community use and academic research.

This article is an adaptation of Dr. Kotzin’s talk for the Jewish Book and Arts Fair in November 2013. Dr. Chana Revell Kotzin is the Director, Archivist and Historian of the Jewish Buffalo Archives Project, a special project of the Foundation for Jewish Philanthropies and the Bureau of Jewish Education in partnership with the University Archives, University at Buffalo. She is the author of Jewish Community of Greater Buffalo.

With a donation of \$25 or more, a complimentary copy of Jewish Community of Greater Buffalo, is available, with proceeds benefitting the Jewish Buffalo Archives Project. Please view the BJE’s website www.bjebuffalo.org, or call Mindy Ponivas at 716-204-5380.