

# Jewish women's organizational activity in Buffalo and Niagara Falls

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In the *BJR* Jan. 3 issue, I outlined several areas of outstanding need for archival materials in the Greater Buffalo and Niagara Falls that remain of critical interest to the Jewish Buffalo Archives Project. One of these ten identified areas was that of Jewish women's voluntary groups because these groups have played very significant roles in the cultural, educational and philanthropic development of the total community, not only in the personal and social lives of members. Their impacts have been significant but often overlooked, so a dedicated strategy to recovering this history is the duty of an archives collecting program. A later article at the end of this series will highlight the essential work of synagogue sisterhoods and women's temple auxiliaries as well as women's divisions within Jewish Federations and women's divisions within home town organizations (landsmanschaften), however this article will focus on women's organizations, founded and run by women.

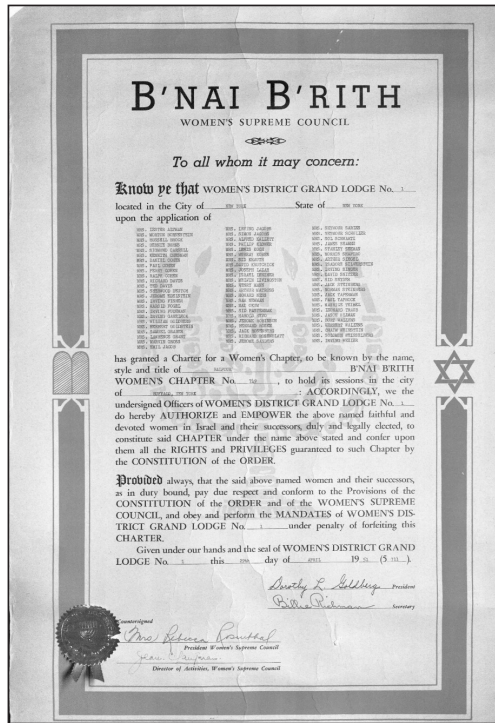
Buffalo and Niagara Falls had a large array of Jewish women's groups, and it is hard to do justice to them all in this article. The goal here is to shine a light on a sample of the groups that have existed and enriched our communities in impactful ways. Some of the earliest Jewish women's organizations, aside from sisterhoods or benevolent women's funding organizations were the parallel organizations that Jewish women formed from the 1860s and 1870s to mirror male fraternal organizations. These women's organizations often had self-help and philanthropic aspects, and as a group of organizations continued for well over 100 years, only going into step decline in the late 1970s. One of the earliest women's organization's of

this type that we know of, is the Sisters of Rebecca Lodge No. 12, that met once a month in Montefiore Hall, as well as a True Sisters Society, that was run as a sickness and benefit lodge. Both of these were independent of B'nai B'rith. Indeed, the first women's auxiliary organization that officially affiliated with Montefiore Lodge did not occur until 1922. From the 1950s, B'nai B'rith Women (BBW) had several active chapters in Buffalo that we know of through the gift of Annette Blanchard's papers: Aurora, #741; Balfour, #749; Boruch, #1040; Montefiore, #34; New Covenant, #602 and Tamar.

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Overtime, from the mid 1960s each chapter merged with another. At the end of the 1960s, Balfour merged with Montefiore, and this was one of the last remaining large chapters through the 1970s. It would be very helpful to expand the materials we have relating to B'nai B'rith Women, especially in its early years as well as its successor, Jewish Women International.

Other early women's groups (particularly popular from the 1890s) were sewing circles. Unfortunately, the only records we have of these sewing circles are by reference to their existence in other organizational materials, but sewing circles formed an incredible service to new immigrants and the Yishuv, and the nascent Israeli State. Signifi-



The B'nai B'rith Women's Charter. It can be found in the Annette Blanchard papers at UB's University Archives.

cantly, some of the later sewing circles developed into early Hadassah groups. The earlier sewing groups would spend countless hours sewing shirts, dresses, pants and knitting sweaters; literally putting clothes on the back of the poorest of immigrant children, men and women, who often arrived with literally one set of clothes. It is hard to imagine, in our time of relative prosperity despite a recession, how little new immigrants came with. Several changes of clothes were a luxury, and the time consuming task of cleaning clothes before the advent of modern appliances (which did not just need technological advances, but also prosperity), meant that changes of clothes were helpful beyond convenience. Indeed, clothes were used until they were completely worn out and were often functional rather than fashionable. In light of this, we are asking for materials from the community. Do you have any photographs of your grandmothers or great-grandmothers doing this work, or have any records relating to their activities?

Clubs with significant charitable functions were very active from the 1920s and included the Jewish Mother's Club and the Naomi Club. The Jewish Mother's Club was incorporated in 1919 to provide working or sick mothers with daytime care for their children. The Jewish Mothers Club Nursery and Temporary Home, as it was first called, opened its doors at 252 Adams Street. Supported by the Ladies' Manhattan Auxiliary and other East Side women by 1921, the Home was caring for Jewish children from eighteen months to twelve years of age and was staffed with five full time employees, plus volunteer workers and an attending physician. Costs were minimal and depended upon ability to pay, with the highest fee 50 cents a day. Local synagogue appeals and free gifts of food and clothing helped fund the homes expenses and the Home closed at the end of WWII. A few years after the Mother's Club was founded the Naomi Relief Club began in 1921 by young women who had just moved out of the East Side. The club raised funds chiefly by sponsoring card parties, New Year's Eve celebrations, and public concerts and specialized in lending emergency relief until another organization could take over. The group was eventually absorbed into organizing the Refugee Exchange Bureau (Opportunity Shop). Any materials you may have related to these clubs would be enormously helpful.

Not every organization has a continuous history as the National Council of Jewish Women in Buffalo demonstrates. The initial Buffalo Section of the National Council of Jewish Women was founded on December 27, 1895, with Cecil B. Wiener as president, prior to her rise to Judge, and her community roles in Jewish social service. This first NCJW grew rapidly and most of the women initially involved were also associated with Temple Beth Zion. In fact, this commonality of membership and mission with Sisters of Zion is what probably led to the demise of the first NCJW section before World War I, as their programs often overlapped. In the 1930s, another

group of the National Council of Jewish Women was formed in Buffalo, and was active through the 1940s, but it also struggled. In 1953, the NCJW reconstituted in Buffalo and focused its main activities on community service and educational activities on a non-sectarian basis of both Jews and non-Jews. Much of our knowledge about the NCJW activities is restricted to the 1980s, as these are the only period for which we have records, kindly donated by Muriel Goodman, and some additional materials from Ethel Melzer and Elinor Weiss. The wide range of activities that the NCJW pursued during this time is significant: from environmental concerns over acid rain, clean water and asbestos in schools, to the annual Women's Plea for Soviet Jewry, the Thrift Shop, support of programs through the Jewish Book Fair, volunteerism at Rosa Coplon and elsewhere as well as campaigns to register voters. In addition, the NCJW organized numerous public programs and lectures in areas as diverse as aging, dying and bereavement, domestic violence, working mothers, and parenting, as well as NCJW Council shabbats and Jewish literacy in many different ways. Do you have any materials across the

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span of NCJW chapters from the 1890s to the 1990s?

This article does not highlight the significant work of Hadassah of Buffalo which has its own current archives program, but other women's Zionist organizations were popular from the 1920s in Buffalo for which we are seeking records. Pioneer Women, founded in 1927 and absorbed an earlier Labor-Zionist women's group; the Many Shocat Women's Club, Pioneer Women raised money for nursery schools and day care centers for children of working mothers and vocational schools for girls in Israel. While two groups of Pioneer women existed in the 1950s (one chapter was Yiddish-speaking group, and a younger group was called Hanita), we have no records of their activities or the earlier Many Shocat Women's Club. Interest in Israel, and fundraising was not limited to labor Zionists as a women's Mizrahi group demonstrates. Known from the 1950s as the Deborah Chapter of the Mizrahi Women was originally organized in Buffalo sometime in the 1930s and led by Mrs. Ruth Orenstein, Mrs. Morris Steinhorn and Mrs. Henry Apfelgreen, and in the 1950s, Henriette Klein. Mizrahi Women's mission is to support both Israel and traditional Judaism. Do you have materials from any of these groups?

Distinct from Zionist and service organizations already highlighted, one of the longer running women's organizations has been the Jewish Liberal Arts Club that was organized in 1926 by a small group of women who wanted to create a cultural outlet for stay at home mothers. This organization also became a significant force for social and

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