

presented by the

ELGIN AREA
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

sponsored by the

SEIGLE FAMILY
FOUNDATION



An American Story Told Through Jewish Lives

the Jewish
Experience
in Elgin

Stories of
Immigration,
Identity,
and Assimilation

LORD & BRADFORD.
ATE, LOAN AND INSURANCE OFFICE.

L. ADLER.

CLOTHING, HATS, CAPS

TRULSON & RICHARDSON
DENTISTS

WILLIAMS & CO.

CLOTHING, HATS AND CAPS



An American Story Told Through Jewish Lives

In 1858 brothers Leopold and Joseph Adler arrived in Elgin, German immigrants and Elgin's first Jewish citizens. Their arrival starts a story which finishes nearly a century later with the building of a new synagogue, the establishment of a Jewish cemetery, and the fulfillment of a culture of individual achievement by Jews in all aspects of Elgin life.

This is an American story told through Jewish lives in a Midwestern community. It reflects the increased historical attention to Jewish-American experiences outside major urban areas and examines fundamental American issues about individualism, group identity, and relationships to the general community.



Samuel Strickman family, 1890



Sam Brenner, right, football player

Sam Brenner, top right,
baseball player



Isaac Cohien



Over the century covered by the exhibit, Jews constituted about 1% of Elgin's population. That century provided lives of remarkable diversity and confirmed that there is no one standard for defining an American Jewish life. Jews came to Elgin from many geographical backgrounds. Some arrived penniless, others had grown up among servants. Some likely arrived with scarcely a word of English, others came with Ivy League degrees. Some sold oysters, others struggled to keep a kosher home. Some were junk dealers, some were scholars...sometimes in the same family. Elgin Jews were a people of individuals.

THE JUNK MAN: **Samuel Strickman** was a native of Kishinev in Czarist Russia, the site in 1903 of Anti-Semitic atrocities which inaugurated the horrors of the twentieth century. He arrived in Elgin in 1887 and quickly established a reputation for honesty and fairness as a junk dealer. "I made my living and raised my family with the junk business and junk it is – not salvage," he recalled. Sam had only two hobbies, reading the newspaper and voting Republican. His son became one of Elgin's most popular Republican politicians.

THE ATHLETE: Ike Brenner grew up in Czarist Russia, far from games like football and baseball. But his American-born son **Sam Brenner** was a powerful halfback for Elgin High, starring in 1898 in the first night high school football game in Illinois. Sam's real game, though, was baseball. He coached the high school's first team in 1898 and was an Elgin favorite on semi-pro squads for nearly 15 years. His father, a prominent Elgin clothier, never quite accepted such pastimes. Elginites long remembered how fans in the midst of games jokingly called out "Sammy, your father's looking for you" to everyone's amusement.

THE ENTREPRENEUR: **Isaac Cohien** personified entrepreneurial energy. The Russian native arrived in Elgin as a young man in the 1880s and opened shops selling fruit, confections, ice cream, and clothes. He suffered a humiliating public bankruptcy but started over. Within a few years he was not only prosperous but honored by a local Catholic priest as one of Elgin's best citizens. Then he was ruined again, this time by fire. And once again he recovered, rebuilt on an even larger scale, and was remembered both as a savvy real estate investor and "big giver" to charitable causes.



Sarah Eppenstein



Joe Kreeger, Postmaster



Max Horwitt in laboratory

THE CHARITABLE SOCIETY WOMAN: **Sarah Eppenstein** was the daughter of a Milwaukee mayor and leading businessman. She came to Elgin in 1905 to marry Max Eppenstein, head of the Illinois Watch Case Company. Glamorous and talented, she distinguished Elgin's social life but soon focused her talents on Elgin charities. She had only 18 years to give to Elgin, but at the time of her death in her early 50s, her fundraising efforts and leadership of Associated Charities had made her perhaps the city's best known woman.

THE POLITICIAN: **Joe Kreeger** was the son of Russian immigrants. With his brothers he managed "Kreeger's on the Hill," Elgin's favorite shop for fruit, candy, cigars and gossip. Naturally popular, he gravitated to politics and was a leading local Democrat. In 1932 he became Elgin's postmaster, and in 1942, at the age of 69, he fought off criminals intent on kidnapping him and robbing the post office. He was esteemed for his character, personality and courage.

THE RESEARCHER: **Max K. Horwitt** was one of the wave of young Jewish professionals who came to the city in the 1930s. Many were attracted by the opportunity to start careers through the Elgin State Hospital's primary research programs. The son of immigrants and a Yale Ph.D., Dr. Horwitt founded and for 30 years managed the hospital's biochemical research laboratory. The laboratory conducted a series of experiments, the Elgin Projects, which disclosed fundamental information on the nutritional roles of riboflavin, niacin and tryptophan and established human nutritional requirements for Vitamin E.



Rabbi Emil Hirsch



Rabbi Harris I. Locke, 1903



Rabbi Rose blowing the shofar עַם שְׁחֹרָה for Rosh Hashana.



Bnei Bith Youth
Organization, 1961

Jews found Elgin a place where they could maintain Jewish identities, while achieving success as individuals in the general community. Their spiritual lives included all three major expressions of religious Judaism - Reform, Orthodox, and Conservative.

Many of Elgin's first Jewish families – the Adlers, Freilers and Eppensteins – turned to eminent rabbis of Reform Judaism, especially **Emil Hirsch** of Chicago. Rabbi Hirsch, a founder of the NAACP, advocated a Judaism of social ethics and charity over strict adherence to Hebrew liturgy and traditional rituals.

By the 1880s Jews of East European heritage were arriving in Elgin with their Orthodox practices. The establishment of a synagogue on Dexter Avenue and the presence of local rabbis, such as **Harris I. Locke**, helped Jewish families fulfill the demanding laws and rituals of an Orthodox Jewish life.

The years following World War II saw changes in Elgin's synagogue as it evolved from its Orthodox origins to a Conservative affiliation. **Rabbi Abraham Rose** played a major role in that transition. As Elgin's rabbi for 25 years, Rabbi Rose gave a strong direction to the synagogue and was a prominent voice for Judaism in Elgin.

The manner and extent to which individuals observed Jewish religious traditions varied, even within families. Many embraced traditions and practices based upon the Jewish calendar and holidays, dietary laws, languages, and organizations. Work ceased for High Holidays or the Saturday Sabbath, families labored to prepare the proper foods in the proper way for kosher observance, and children studied Hebrew at the synagogue while their parents conversed in East European Yiddish.

Elgin Jews found religious, cultural and social support in their synagogues and related organizations such as the synagogue's Sisterhood, its Men's Group, the men's lodge B'nai B'rith, the women's group Hadassah, and a **B'nai B'rith Youth Organization**. Through these organizations Elgin Jews expressed their concern for the welfare of Jews around the world. They raised funds for Jewish relief in Eastern Europe, endorsed the Zionist dream of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, and supported financially, intellectually and emotionally the State of Israel.



Sherman Hospital, 1895



Rose Adler

Adolph Bernstein
Kiwanis President, 1956



Irene Nerove Wirtschafter

The daughter of a Russian immigrant shoe salesman became the Navy's first Jewish woman captain.



Marshall Goldman

The grandson of a Russian immigrant junk dealer went to Harvard and became an expert on the Russian economy.



Bobby Rosengarden

The grandson of a Russian immigrant peddler played in Elgin High's band before embarking on a career as a jazz drummer recording with Duke Ellington, Miles Davis and Benny Goodman and leading the "Dick Cavett Show" band.



Max Adler as violinist, c. 1895

From the opening of the Adler Brothers Store in 1858, Jews eagerly participated in the Elgin community. This participation was always entrepreneurial, supporting a century of Elgin businesses with names like Brenner, Freiler, Mendelson, Abelman, Epstein, Fishburn, Yaffe, and Singer. Their participation extended to every dimension of Elgin life, often with an ecumenical dimension. In 1882 Jewish merchants contributed to a fund to help bring a Christian publishing company to Elgin. In 1914 Elgin Jews led efforts to raise funds for Elgin's Catholic hospital.

Such contributions fulfilled Judaism's traditional command of "tzedakah" - not simply a command of charity, but of doing justice by giving. **Max Adler**, Elgin native, Elgin High graduate and Sears Roebuck executive gave Chicago its Adler Planetarium. Tzedakah animated the lives of the Adlers long before any Sears Roebuck wealth. Max's mother **Rose Adler** was a devoted friend of Sherman Hospital and used her musically talented children, Max included, in concerts on the hospital's behalf. The Freiler and Eppenstein families also gave their time and money across the community. Jewish individuals were leaders in supporting Elgin's children's home, its Community Chest, public health initiatives, and in establishing a culture of tzedakah maintained to this day.

Adolph Bernstein's life portrays the rich and valued participation of Jewish individuals in post-World War II Elgin. Bernstein, a member of the YMCA's Board of Directors, chaired the publicity efforts for a fundraising campaign that supported a new building. He managed Fin 'n Feather Farm and its popular Milk Pail Restaurant while helping lead his synagogue, the Community Chest, the Association of Commerce, St. Joseph's Hospital, the Elgin Association for the Crippled, the Fox Valley Mental Health Society and the Kiwanis Club. When Elgin faced its biggest political question in the 1950s - the form of city government - leaders on both sides were Adolph Bernstein and Ben Rifken, native Elginites and sons of immigrant Jews.

The immigrant parents of Adolph Bernstein and Ben Rifken had found Elgin a good place to raise Americans. Many Jews settled in Elgin as families in a community of diversity with strong public schools and people who valued them. Their children engaged with other Elgin kids in scouting or sports at the YMCA. Elgin was a springboard into American life for such people as **Irene Wirtschafter**, **Marshall Goldman** and **Bobby Rosengarden**.



Rabbi Rose with Torah

Ground breaking, 1948



Congregation Kneseth Israel Synagogue, 1958



Jewish section at Bluff City Cemetery, Elgin, Illinois

In 1889 an Elgin newspaper reported the expected arrival of a rabbi to resume regular services for “our Jewish friends.” This reference to friendship well characterized the relationship of Elgin and its Jewish residents. For if there were differences with Elgin’s dominant Christian culture, there was still a friendship within the general community. It could appear in small matters. During High Holidays the local Western Union office delivered telegrams to observant Jews unsealed so they need not open envelopes and violate their laws against work on such holy days. And it appeared, too, in the city’s selection of a Chicago rabbi, Emil Hirsch, as its 1901 Memorial Day speaker or its support for local relief drives for European Jews in 1905, 1919 and 1948.

On August 17, 1948 Elgin’s mayor and Christian leaders joined **Rabbi Rose** and other Jewish leaders to **break ground for a new synagogue**. The 1958 completion of **Elgin’s first structure built specifically for Jewish worship** was a fitting capstone to a century of Jewish life in Elgin that had begun with the Adlers’ arrival. Still, there remained one final step for full affiliation to Elgin.

With rare exceptions Elgin Jews, no matter how long or rewarding their attachments to the city, had taken their final journeys for burial to cemeteries outside Elgin, especially the cemeteries of Jewish Waldheim in the suburb of Forest Park. Elgin had no place of burial consecrated within Jewish laws.

This was a matter obviously requiring attention for a community proud of its ability to build its new synagogue. On June 4, 1961, a **Jewish section** was consecrated as part of Bluff City Cemetery. Elgin Jews finally could rest in Elgin soil. A century’s journey and a people’s story were now complete.

Further Reading

Ascoli, Peter M. *Julius Rosenwald: The Man Who Built Sears Roebuck and Advanced the Cause of Black Education in the American South.*

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006. A biography of Max Adler's brother-in-law, Julius Rosenwald. Inspired by Rabbi Emil Hirsch's belief that tzedakah should advance social welfare, Rosenwald became one of America's greatest philanthropists.

Cutler, Irving. *Jewish Chicago: A Pictorial History.* Arcadia Publishing, 2000.

Cutler, Irving. *The Jews of Chicago: From Shtetl to Suburb.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996. The leading general history of Jews in Chicago.

Rottenberg, Dan, ed. *Middletown Jews: The Tenuous Survival of an American Jewish Community.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997. An oral history of the Jewish experience in the Middle Western community of Muncie, Indiana in the mid-twentieth century.

Sowell, Thomas. *Ethnic America: A History.* New York: Basic Books, 1981.

Sachar, Howard M. *A History of the Jews in America.* New York: Vintage, 1993. A one-volume narrative history of American Jews from a leading historian.

Weissbach, Lee Shai. *Jewish Life in Small-town America: A History.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

Bobby Rosengarden with Hank Jones (piano) and Milt Hinton (bass).
The Trio. Chiaroscuro Records. Recorded in 1977 and issued in 2003.

Bobby Rosengarden with Derek Smith (piano) and Milt Hinton (bass).
The Trio, 1994. Chiaroscuro Records.

Bobby frequently is heard on recordings of major performers. One of the most significant recordings is *Tony Bennett: At Carnegie Hall June 9, 1962: The Complete Concert* available from Sony. Bobby plays percussion, bongos, conga, and tympani for a concert that, according to NPR, cemented Bennett's "artistic credibility as not just a singer, but an international star."

The Elgin Area Historical Society is housed in an 1856 landmark building, Old Main. The Society and Museum provide a variety of programs for all ages on Elgin history since 1835. Exhibits include early Elgin, the Elgin road races, Elgin architecture, Hiawatha Pageant, and the Elgin Watch factory and industry.



The Seigle Family Foundation, established in 1980, distributes charitable contributions consistent with the philosophy of the Foundation. Founded by the former owners of Seigle's, the Foundation believes the public welfare and advancement of society rests upon the existence of basic support institutions. These include: quality accessible education and health care; respectable housing; stimulating cultural amenities; and effective social services. The strength and vitality of our neighborhoods and marketplaces depend on access to these services.

SEIGLE
Family Foundation



AT ADLER'S

You will find the **BEST SELECTION** and
LOWEST PRICES IN

MEN'S, BOYS' AND CHILDREN'S CLOTHING,

HATS, CAPS, UNDERWEAR, GLOVES, NECKWEAR, ETC.

Examine our goods and prices. We will guarantee
Satisfaction in every particular.

L. ADLER, ELGIN, ILLS.

TOWN'S BLOCK, FOUNTAIN SQUARE.

ELGIN AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

360 PARK STREET, ELGIN, ILLINOIS 60120

847.742.4248

www.elginhistory.org

©2006 Elgin Area Historical Society