

ROCKY MOUNTAIN CHAI-LITES

of the Rocky Mountain Jewish Historical Society Denver

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Rocky Mountain Jewish Historical Society

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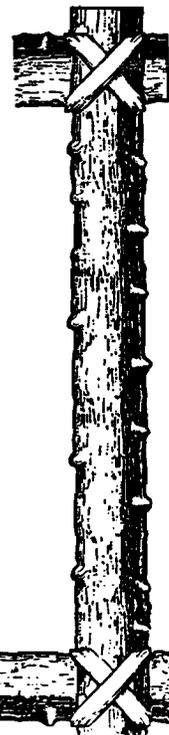
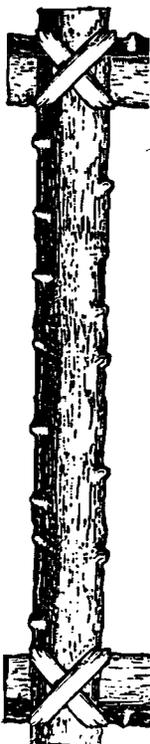
June 1992

ROCKY MOUNTAIN JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OFFICERS

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KUDOS TO THE STAFF, OFFICERS, BOARD, AND MEMBERS OF THE RMJHS AND BECK ARCHIVES FOR HELPING MAKE COLORADO JEWISH HISTORY WEEK SUCH A SUCCESS !!!

A fabulous Victorian dinner, highly acclaimed lectures, well-attended, attractive and informative exhibits, the release of two new publications, A COLORADO JEWISH FAMILY ALBUM and EXPLORING JEWISH COLORADO, a lively dramatic performance and a popular bus tour are only a few of the highlights that characterized COLORADO JEWISH HISTORY WEEK. Our sincere appreciation to the many volunteers who helped make these programs possible as well as a special thank you to all those in the Colorado community who supported the Album and those who participated in our many and varied programs during the week. As always, we are most grateful for your continuing support, and we look forward to your active participation in future programs !



**COLORADO
JEWISH
HISTORY
WEEK**

We are pleased to reprint an edited version of the address delivered by DR. JONATHAN SARNA, Braun Professor of American Jewish History at Brandeis University, at our recent Victorian dinner held during Colorado Jewish History Week.

PRESERVING OUR PAST, OUR FUTURE DEPENDS ON IT!

Our subject this evening-- especially the part about preserving our past--is much on my mind at this time, since our semester is over at Brandeis, and I have just finished marking final exams. I thought that you might be interested in knowing how some of our *students* preserve the past. These are culled from some of the gems that my colleagues have collected:

"Socrates was a famous Greek Teacher who went around giving people advice. They killed him. Socrates died from an overdose of wedlock."

Moving right along:

"Abraham Lincoln became America's greatest precedent. Lincoln's mother died in infancy, and he was born in a log cabin which he built with his own hands. When Lincoln was President, he wore only a tall silk hat."

And finally, in keeping with the theme of this evening:

"Queen Victoria was the longest queen. She sat on a 'thorn' for 63 years. Her era was a time of many great inventions and thoughts. The invention of the steamboat caused a network of rivers to spring up."

"Louis Pasteur Invented a Cure For Rabbis." [R. Lederer, *Anguished English*]

There is a certain laughter through tears in all of this, for these errors, and a host of less humorous ones, point to a problem of quite considerable dimensions in our day--widespread public ignorance of the facts of history. This is true in the general population, and it is no less true in Jewish circles. Even otherwise well-educated Jews know little about the span of Jewish history, the great names in Jewish history, the great themes in Jewish history. American Jewish history, my field, has been particularly neglected. Many American Jews have had very little sense of how the American Jewish community developed, how different immigrant waves impacted upon it, and how our community is like and unlike other great diaspora Jewish centers in the history of our people.

Today, Yom Yerushalayim, Jerusalem Day, the 25th anniversary of the Liberation of Jerusalem in the Six Day War of June 1967, is a particularly appropriate day to think about history--how it should be preserved, and why our future depends upon it. For in my opinion, no event in the past thirty years is more significant in terms of Jewish

history, than Jerusalem's reunification and all that has followed from it.

I myself had the good fortune to be in Jerusalem *before* it was reunited. My first trip to Israel was in 1965 with my parents and I still remember my sense of disappointment at what was essentially a sleepy city, far less significant than Tel Aviv and oppressively under siege. Everywhere I walked I came to a border and armed Jordanian troops looked down menacingly, machine guns in hand. Jerusalem's great Jewish sights--the Western Wall, the Jewish Quarter of the Old City, even the old grounds of the Hadassah Hospital and the Hebrew University on Mt. Scopus--all these were out of bounds and unreachable. I might glimpse the holy shrines from afar, but direct access was barred--and not just to me and to all Israelis, but also to anyone who had the stamp of Israel in his or her passport.

In the years since 1967, when of course Jerusalem was reunited and transformed, I have had many occasions to be thankful for the fact that these memories of Jerusalem prior to 1967 are etched indelibly in my mind, because in a very personal way this "preserved past"--this picture that I retain of Jerusalem divided--shapes my sense of what Jerusalem's future course must be. There is a clear relationship in my mind between memory and destiny. The recollection of Jerusalem divided triggers within me, and I am sure within many of you, a powerful determination to ensure that Jerusalem will

never be divided again.

But what of the past that more and more of us do not personally recollect? Or that our children will not recollect. *How do we keep memories alive in the absence of direct personal experience?* This is the central challenge that all of us involved in historical societies, in archives and in museums are attempting to confront. Remember that in only forty years' time (2032) there will be nobody alive who will be able to speak at first hand --from memory--about 3 pivotal events in contemporary Jewish life: the great immigration, of East European Jews to America, the death and destruction of European Jewry in the Holocaust, and the creation of the State of Israel. Even today, the vast majority of world Jewry, and I must include myself, have no conscious memories of these events; we only know other people who experienced them. And in 40 years those other people won't be here.

We already have some inkling of the dangers that lie in store when survivors' are no longer alive to bear witness. I don't just mean the funny errors that stem from student confusion. I am far more concerned about the unspeakable obscenities of those who deny that the Holocaust ever happened, or those who distort the State of Israel's early history in an effort to destroy it, or even those who now rewrite the history of Black-Jewish relations forgetting all the good that the alliance once accomplished. As memories fade, these already strident voices will undoubt-

edly grow louder and more shrill. For demagogues always thrive on historical ignorance.

What can we do? Our obligation it seems to me, is to do all that we can to preserve the past while it is still directly accessible to us. Where written records survive, let them be placed in the Beck Archives. Where artifacts survive, let them be displayed in the Mizel Museum. Where individuals survive who participated in history-making events, let them record their memories for posterity, so that their voices may be heard long after they themselves have passed from the scene. Remember that history, to a very great extent, belongs to those who preserve their records. Letters, tapes and artifacts may not fully compensate for the absence of living survivors, but future generations will cherish them, both as sacred links to the past, and as the best possible answer to those who would rewrite our past without reference to facts at all.

Now I do not mean to imply that we preserve our past solely for defensive reasons, to prevent mean-spirited distortions. Clearly, history has a positive function as well. The great Norwegian-American novelist, Ole Edvart Rolvaag, who did much to ensure that the Norwegian heritage in America has been preserved, put forth a thesis that I think applies to Jews as well. "When a people becomes interested in its past life [and] seeks to acquire knowledge in order to better understand itself," he wrote,

"it always experiences an awakening of new life."
[quoted in Blegen, Norwegian Migration to America, II, p. 596] Since in order to move forward we need to learn from our past, the study of history, Rolvaag reminds us, is actually a creative act, itself a means of inspiring individuals and communities to forge ahead. Take, for example, the establishment, exactly a century ago, of the American Jewish Historical Society, founded in 1892. It is not accident, I think, that the Historical Society was founded precisely on the eve of American Jewry's great leap forward--the community's emergence as the new center of diaspora Jewish life. The founders of the Historical Society, many of them leading figures in American Jewish life (like Cyrus Adler and Oscar Straus), understood that in order to transform and revitalize American Jewry, they needed to help the community develop a sense of its own heritage and identity. Whatever the quality of their initial research and no matter how apologetic some of their other aims may have been, their central insight as to the importance of establishing and cultivating the field of American Jewish history has proved 100% correct. By creating the Historical Society they were making a statement about the significance of American Jewish history, and the importance of drawing inspiration from it, at the very moment when American Jews were striving mightily, through other organizations, to absorb millions of new immigrants, to revitalize Jewish education, and to

promote the development of a native American Jewish culture. In short, just as Rolvaag indicated, the new interest in studying American Jewry's past, a century ago, went hand in hand with the awakening of new life within the American Jewish community itself.

I would like to think that the remarkable growth and development, in our own day, of local and regional Jewish historical societies in America--the Rocky Mountain Jewish Historical Society being among the most active and successful of these--I would like to think that this development again adumbrates an awakening of new life within the American Jewish community. It would seem to me that the act of recovering the forgotten histories of Jews in the many regions and municipalities of the United States, the effort to understand why Jews settled where they did, how they transformed themselves over time, how they struggled to overcome problems and challenges posed by American society, and how they emerged to become part of one of the greatest Jewish communities in

all of Jewish history--this engagement with the past, it would seem to me, might very well stimulate new ideas, new approaches and new directions for American Jewish life in the decades ahead. Historical experience suggests that Jews who are actively concerned with preserving our past tend to be the same Jewish who are actively concerned with securing our future. I suspect that this will prove no less true in our generation than before. Certainly it seems to be true here in Denver.

Nor is this surprising, for, as everybody knows, past and future form part of a single continuum across time. When we neglect or distort our past, we endanger our future (and, as we have seen there are some very great potential dangers clouding the horizon). When, by contrast, we preserve and engage our past--collecting it, recalling it, researching it, teasing out its lessons--then we possess the tools to properly *shape* our future. May we find the strength to shape it wisely, creatively and successfully.

Dr. Jonathan Sarna
May 31, 1992

COMING IN NOVEMBER

 THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY will highlight

"THE JEWISH PRESENCE IN COLORADO POLITICS"

 a panel discussion, which will feature former and present Jewish politicians as well as an historical overview.

Watch for further details on this timely and exciting program!