

# ROCHESTER HISTORY

## *Rochester, Refugees, and the Jewish Community, 1930 to 1950*

by Mary Posman



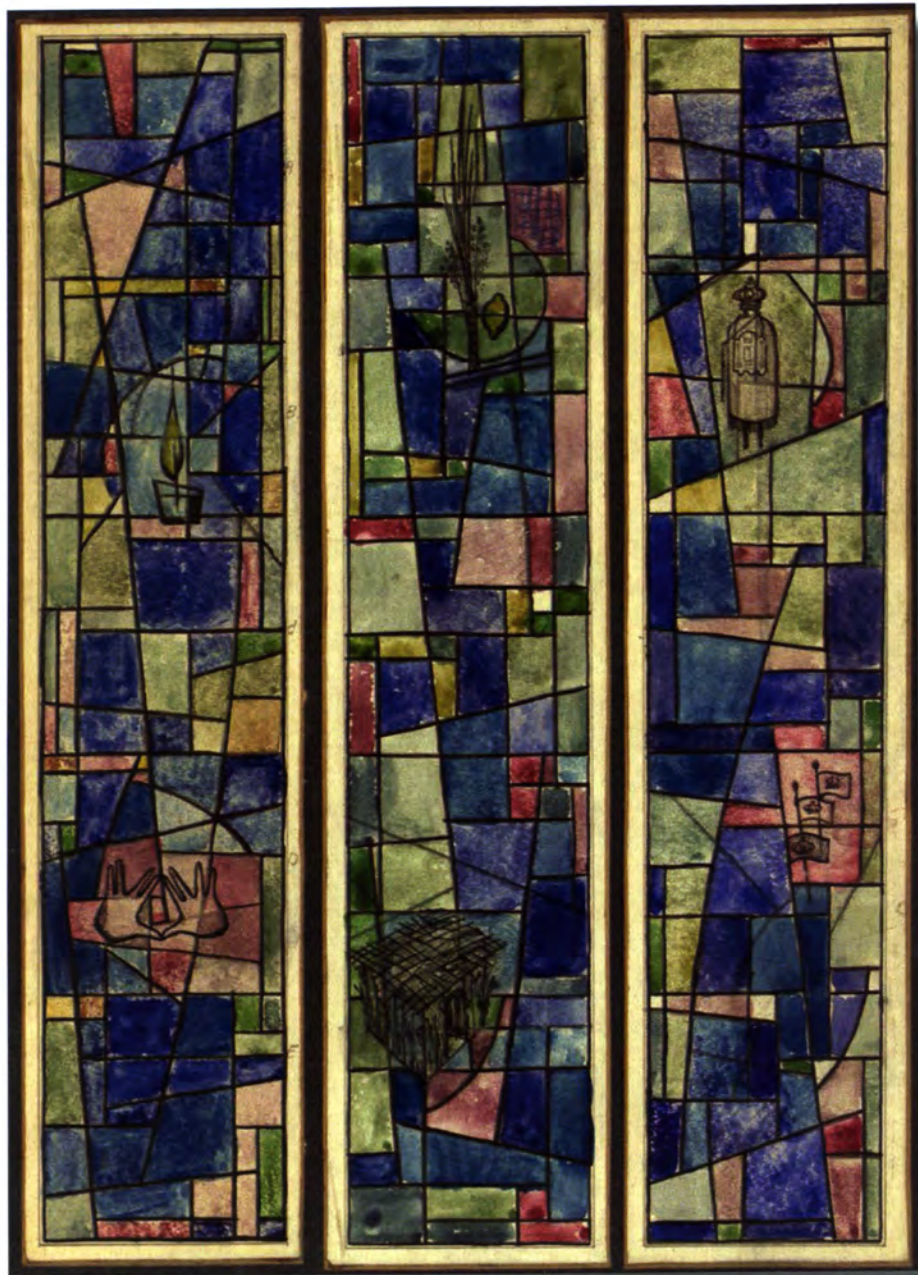
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*Design for stained glass window representing Jewish holy days.  
Drawing by J. & R. Lamb Studios. From the Library of Congress, Prints and  
Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ppmsca-17089.*

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*Front cover: Remnants of the Jewish community of Frankfurt, Germany, in 1948.  
From the Philip S. Bernstein Papers, Department of Rare Books, Special Collections,  
and Preservation, University of Rochester.*

*Background image on front & back covers: Design for stained glass window for Hollis Hills Jewish Center  
in Long Island, NY, 1958. Drawing by Jan Hendrik Ooms, J. & R. Lamb Studios. From the Library of  
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# ROCHESTER HISTORY

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Dear *Rochester History* Reader,

Rochester has a long history of progressive activism and a population that embraces humanitarian efforts in many forms. In this issue of *Rochester History*, Mary Posman explores the Rochester response to the increasing anti-Semitism in Hitler's Germany and Eastern Europe. Of special interest is Posman's research on Rabbi Philip S. Bernstein, who traveled throughout Germany and Eastern Europe prior to the Second World War and raised awareness in Rochester and the United States of the growing threat to the European Jewish population. Also highlighted in this issue are the efforts of the Rochester community to welcome and aid Jews fleeing Germany before, during, and after the war. Similar efforts are visible today as Rochester welcomes refugees fleeing oppressive regimes in Africa and Southeast Asia.

Patricia Uttaro, Library Director



## About *Rochester History*

*Rochester History* is a scholarly journal that provides informative and entertaining articles about the history and culture of Rochester, Monroe County, and the Genesee Valley. In January 1939, Assistant City Historian Blake McKelvey published the first quarterly edition of *Rochester History*. Subjects researched and written by him and other scholars were edited, published, and distributed by McKelvey with the goal of expanding the knowledge of local history. Studying local history as a microcosm of U.S. history has brought insight and understanding to scholars and researchers around the globe.

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# Rochester, Refugees, and the Jewish Community, 1930 to 1950

by Mary Posman

Adolf Hitler's rise to power in Germany in 1933 marked the beginning of an era of persecution of Jewish people in Europe. As the specter of Nazism spread across the continent, many Jews fled their homelands in search of safer ground. Over the course of the decade, approximately 90,000 Jewish refugees made their way to the United States. This, however, was only a small fraction of the numbers who sought asylum and were turned away due to the country's increasingly restrictive immigration policy.

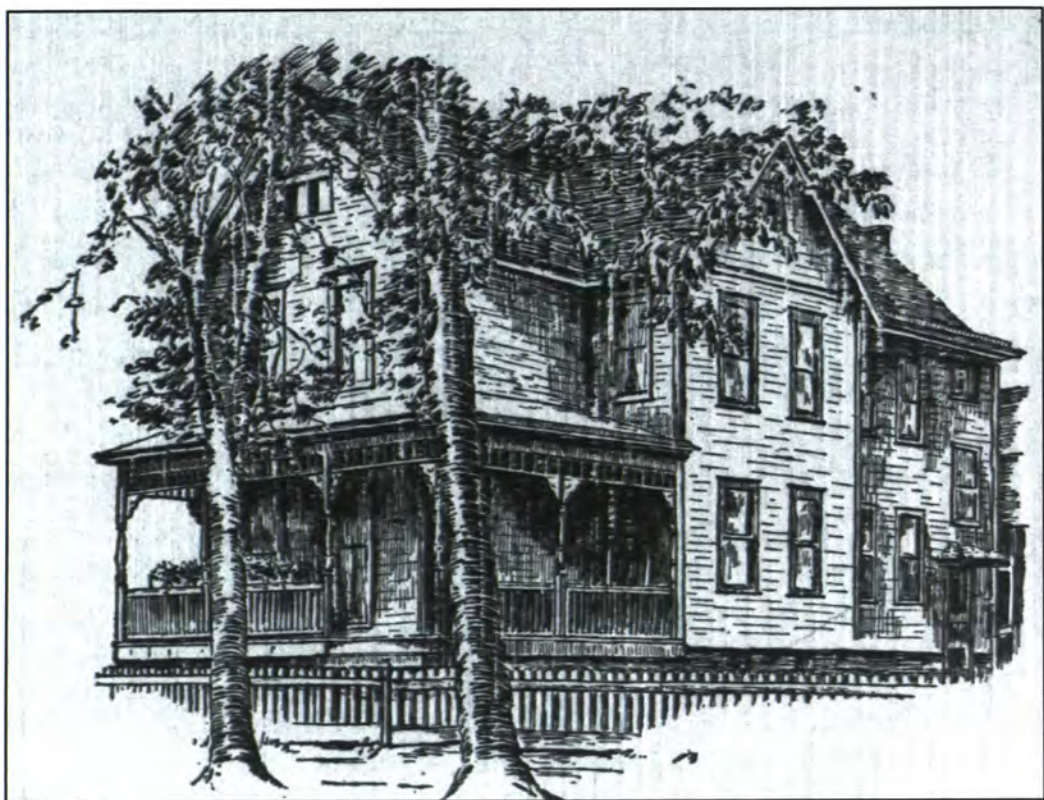
The failure of the Roosevelt administration to help European Jews escape Nazi oppression has met with much condemnation, both at the time and in subsequent assessments. Many people believe that the lack of national action stemmed from a general culture of ignorance and apathy among the American people. This notion, however, does not hold true for members of the Jewish community in Rochester. At a time when the nation seemed generally unmoved (at best) or anti-Semitic (at worst), supporters here pulled together to form a variety of organizations to combat hatred, advocate for changes in immigration policy, and ease the assimilation of refugees. During the 1930s and 1940s, the concern and activism of the Rochester community facilitated the successful immigration of nearly 1,000 Jews escaping Nazi tyranny. Although this number may seem small for a city whose population averaged over 300,000, it reflects a substantial effort from Rochesterians on behalf of Europe's Jews, belying the claim that Americans were largely indifferent to their plight.

This article explores how a small city in western New York became a destination for European Jews seeking safety in the World War II era. With its reputation for progressive activism, growing industries, and economic opportunity, Rochester's ability to shelter refugees is not altogether surprising. During the war years, members of the community were able to stay well-informed about events in Europe through the efforts of local religious leaders, weekly Jewish periodicals, and fleeting reports in city newspapers, which were particularly significant to recent immigrants with family still in Europe. This information, combined with strong leadership and interfaith cooperation from individuals like Rabbi Philip S. Bernstein, made Rochester a welcoming haven for Jewish immigrants between 1930 and 1950.

## Building a Supportive Community

By the 1930s, Rochester was home to a large Jewish population with a long history of community support for incoming members. The first Jews came to the city from Germany in





*Illustration of Baden Street Settlement, ca. 1926. From Baden Street Settlement:1901-1926.  
From the Rochester Public Library Local History Division.*

the mid-1840s. Flourishing economically and socially, German-descended Jews constituted the city's fourth largest minority group by 1870.<sup>1</sup> In the late 1880s and early 1900s, fresh waves of Jewish immigrants came to town, attracted by a wide array of job opportunities. Largely fleeing inhospitable conditions in Russia and Eastern Europe, this later group lacked the economic resources of their German-descended counterparts, many of whom feared a lowering of their own status through association with the new arrivals.<sup>2</sup> Despite the tensions and anxieties within it, Rochester's diverse Jewish community attempted to overcome division by establishing programs and organizations to help new immigrants who were struggling, both culturally and economically, with the transition to life in America.

Beginning in the 1880s, established residents formed welcoming committees to greet new arrivals at the train station. They helped them to find housing and sponsored English classes to help them assimilate.<sup>3</sup> The United Jewish Charities of Rochester, established in 1882 and predominantly run by German Jews, provided assistance to families in need.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in 1901, women from the German-Jewish Temple B'rith Kodesh established the Baden Street Settlement, Rochester's first settlement house. Modeled after historic establishments like Chicago's Hull

House and New York City's Henry Street Settlement, the Baden Street center provided a range of programs to support immigrants and their families, including social and cultural events like dances and music recitals as well as classes to develop useful skills like sewing and carpentry.<sup>5</sup> These organizations aided immigrants of all nationalities; however, they were strongly influenced by German Jews and therefore catered to their customs and beliefs. As time passed and more Eastern European Jews arrived, they began developing their own organizations, such as the Hebrew Benevolent Society at Beth Israel (1887); the Independent Hebrew Friends Association (1888); and the Hebrew Charity Association (1893).<sup>6</sup> These organizations illustrated Eastern European immigrants' desire to sustain their culture and traditions in their new, German-dominated community.

In addition to efforts within the Jewish community, non-Jewish Rochesterians also expressed a willingness to help immigrants across cultural lines. The city government paid close attention to issues of education and housing that were of great concern in immigrant neighborhoods and funded studies to gain a better understating of immigrants' needs. As a result of these studies, the city designed a series of programs over the course of the early 1900s that provided employment counseling, special loan organizations, and public night school classes for adult immigrants in an effort to ease their transition and make their lives in Rochester as successful as possible.<sup>7</sup>

At the community level, Jewish and Christian religious leaders made a concerted effort to encourage cooperation and mutual respect between faiths. In 1870 the Reverend Newton Mann from the First Unitarian Church gave a lecture at the B'rith Kodesh Temple, marking the first interfaith meeting in Rochester. Shortly thereafter, members of these religious institutions participated in the first interfaith Thanksgiving Day service, which enjoyed great community support. The success of these events led to continued interfaith meetings and an annual tradition that would last nearly 20 years.<sup>8</sup>

This early progress and precedent of community support laid the groundwork for future cooperation that would be essential to the efforts of Rochesterians dealing with Jewish refugees in the years surrounding the Second World War.



*Building used by the Beth Israel congregation, ca. 1887 to 1973; it was also known as the Leopold Street Shule. From the collection of the Rochester City Hall Photo Lab.*



## Rabbi Bernstein and the Call to Action

In addition to its history of community cooperation, Rochester's ability to aid refugees in the 1930s and 1940s was largely derived from its access to information leading up to and during the war. While critics have claimed that Americans were shamefully ignorant of the extent of the Nazi's persecution of European Jews, this was not true of Rochester's Jewish community. Alarming reports of Nazi excess began reaching the city in the early 1930s, and rather than being apathetic, Rochesterians were eager to respond.

One of Rochester's leading advocates for aiding European Jews was the influential religious leader Rabbi Philip S. Bernstein. The son of Lithuanian immigrants, Bernstein was born in Rochester in 1901. As a child growing up in Rochester and, for a time, New York City, Bernstein was encouraged by his religiously Orthodox mother

to participate thoroughly in Jewish life. He led Young Judea clubs and was active in the Jewish Young Men and Women's Association. While a student at Syracuse University, he joined a Jewish fraternity and taught Hebrew Sunday School classes for a local congregation.<sup>9</sup>

Deciding in his young adulthood to enter the rabbinate, Bernstein applied and was accepted to the Jewish Institute of Religion (JIR) in New York City. This was a critical time in Bernstein's life; it solidified his allegiance to a new and more inclusive branch of Reform Judaism, which valued the diversity found in American Jewish life and emphasized the need for social justice and political activism. In addition to shaping his theological stance, Bernstein's decision to attend the JIR also introduced him to the influential and dynamic Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, who became his close friend and mentor.<sup>10</sup> Wise was an important national Jewish leader, who would later try to use his influence and friendship with President Franklin D. Roosevelt to shape America's reaction to Europe's refugee crisis. Bernstein's association with Wise and the JIR ultimately informed how he approached the rabbinate and cemented his dedication to political activism and social work throughout his career.

Having completed his education at the JIR, Bernstein returned to Rochester in May 1926 to take a job at Temple B'rith Kodesh. After a brief apprenticeship he became chief rabbi,



*Rabbi Philip S. Bernstein, ca. 1946. From the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Abraham Atsmon.*

*Note: The views or opinions expressed in this article and the context in which the images are used, do not necessarily reflect the views or policy of, nor imply approval or endorsement by, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum.*



a position that allowed him to pursue “the essential questions—politics, pacifism, and the future of the Jewish people.”<sup>11</sup> A liberal leader who was highly engaged with the world around him, Bernstein sought to educate his congregation, and the wider community, on current events. He was caring and compassionate and considered it his job to help his listeners “to be better citizens, better persons, and better Jews.”<sup>12</sup>

As early as 1930, Bernstein was supplying his congregation with accounts of the troubles brewing in Europe. Due to relationships he had formed while in New York City, Bernstein was able to travel abroad that summer to investigate the situation on behalf of the American Jewish Congress, a civil rights organization dedicated to protecting the social and political interests of Jews throughout the world. This trip took Bernstein to Germany and Romania, where he was alarmed to discover strong anti-Semitic rhetoric, social marginalization, and violent pogroms. Upon returning to Rochester, Bernstein embarked on a widespread campaign to raise awareness, through public sermons and published articles, of the incredible danger he saw developing overseas.<sup>13</sup>

Initially, Bernstein’s concern was focused on Romania and the tacit consent of the Romanian government for anti-Jewish displays. Because the Nazis still remained on the margins of German society, the anti-Semitism Bernstein encountered in that country in 1930 was less violent and widespread than that found in Romania. Yet Bernstein was not oblivious to the growing threat of Hitler and the Nazi Party. He saw the personal impact of their hatred in the wariness and fear of the German Jews whom he met. While early signs of discrimination and violence were alarming in their own right, Bernstein’s sense of the dangers posed by Nazism was



*A young Philip Bernstein (far left) with boyhood friends outside the Leopold Street Shule, 1915.  
From the Philip S. Bernstein Papers, Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation,  
University of Rochester.*



*Temple B'rith Kodesh at the northwest corner of Gibbs Street and Grove Street, 1919. From the Rochester Public Library Local History Division.*

confirmed after Hitler became chancellor in 1933. That spring, Bernstein went on a national speaking tour, sponsored by the American Jewish Congress, to warn the American people of the atrocities occurring under Nazi rule.<sup>14</sup>

The conviction that something truly terrible would happen to Jewish life at the hand of the Nazis caused Bernstein to travel back to Germany the following summer to re-evaluate the situation firsthand. After this second trip, Bernstein

was left with little hope for the future of German Jewry. He was dumbfounded by the power and irrationality of Nazi hatred. As he explained to his congregation in October 1933, the level of hostility towards Jews was unbelievable and pervasive. Propagated by Nazi leaders who promised that “the Third Empire will treat Jews like plant lice,” anti-Semitism left no aspect of society untouched, a fact that greatly troubled Bernstein.<sup>15</sup>

For some of Bernstein’s listeners, it was at first difficult to accept the extent of Nazi anti-Semitism, especially when American tourists were returning from trips to Germany claiming that nothing was out of the ordinary. Recognizing the magnitude of the information he was imparting to his audiences, Bernstein understood people’s doubts and acknowledged his own initial disbelief at the hateful turn that the culturally rich nation of Germany had taken. “I could not believe it,” he admitted in a sermon, “for I did not want to believe it.”<sup>16</sup> Belying claims of normalcy, Bernstein explained that the Nazis were very clever about their discrimination and carefully shrouded it in legality and nationalism. To impress upon his listeners the seriousness of the situation and to crystalize their concern, he shared with them specific examples he had encountered of the violence against and oppression of German Jews.

Bernstein told his Rochester congregation about a woman he had met in Munich who had described to him the death of her son at the hands of Nazi officials. Sent to a concentration camp for his pacifistic leanings and Social Democratic political affiliations, the son’s Jewish background assured his harsh treatment. He did not survive the experience. When the woman was informed of her son’s death, she was told that he had been shot while trying to escape. The woman, however, did not believe this account. Opening his coffin to see for herself, she discovered that her son had actually been strangled.<sup>17</sup>





Nazi propaganda posters with German captions that read: (L) "Whoever wears this symbol is an enemy of our people." From the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Michel Reynders. (R) "The Jewish spirit undermines the healthy powers of the German people." From the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Marion Davy.

Another horrific story that Bernstein shared with his congregation was that of a prominent rabbi in Munich. This rabbi, whose name was left out of Bernstein's sermon, had been taken from his home in the middle of the night by a group of Nazi Stormtroopers, who terrified his family and left his home in shambles. The soldiers drove the rabbi to the outskirts of the city, where they held him at gunpoint and repeatedly threatened him with death. Although they did not end up killing him, they did severely beat him.<sup>18</sup>

Because of testimonies like these, Bernstein was convinced that the Nazis were determined to force Jews out of German culture, a fear he hoped to impress upon his fellow Americans. Bernstein's appeals were particularly convincing because he had not acquired his information through hearsay or secondary sources. His stories came straight from those who had lived them; he had actually seen the hateful propaganda posters

scattered throughout Munich and witnessed for himself the feverish acceptance of this hatred by many Germans.<sup>19</sup> Throughout the 1930s Bernstein made multiple trips to Germany, where he continued to collect firsthand accounts of Nazi oppression. Over the course of his journeys he witnessed an escalation of violence that he was determined to bring it to light. "For the Jews of Germany," he reported in the weekly journal *The Nation* in September 1937, "the choice is between emigration and death."<sup>20</sup>

Presenting a bleak yet realistic view of



Program covers for sermons given by Rabbi Philip S. Bernstein at Temple B'rith Kodesh, 1938. From the Rochester Public Library Local History Division.



*Rabbi Philip S. Bernstein (right) with General Joseph T. McNarney (left), Commander of U.S. Forces in Europe, and General Dwight D. Eisenhower (center), Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, 1946. From the Philip S. Bernstein Papers, Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, University of Rochester.*

the situation to his followers, Bernstein was instrumental in raising Rochesterians' awareness of the plight of Europe's Jews.

Bernstein's efforts gained him notice on the national level, as well. Recognized for his writing, public speeches, and through his affiliation with the American Jewish Congress, Bernstein was appointed Executive Director of the Committee on Army and Navy Religious Activities during the war. His success in this role earned him the position of Advisor on Jewish Affairs to General Joseph

T. McNarney and other military commanders of U.S. occupied zones in Germany and Austria in 1946.<sup>21</sup> In this capacity he worked extensively in the Displaced Persons (DP) camps of Europe, seeking to re-establish Jewish life in Germany and to restore hope and dignity to those housed in the camps. This involved getting the U.S. Army to recognize the Central Committee of Liberated Jews as the official body representing the interests of the DPs, an achievement of which he was particularly proud.<sup>22</sup>

Though Bernstein was physically removed from Rochester during and after the war, he never truly left his congregation. While serving as Advisor on Jewish Affairs, Bernstein frequently wrote to his family and friends about the dire circumstances in the DP camps, emphasizing the continued need for material aid.<sup>23</sup> In return, members of the Rochester community, both Jews and non-Jews alike, contacted him to discover ways they could support his efforts in Europe. For example the Purdys, a local Christian family, wrote to Bernstein in the spring of 1946, hoping he could connect them with a European Jewish family that they could help. "The fact that a specific family in America wishes the Jewish family well," they hoped, "could help a little to restore their faith in humanity."<sup>24</sup> This example speaks to Bernstein's role as an intermediary between Rochesterians and the international community, as well as his success at building interfaith dialogue and support. This recognition of Bernstein as a leader of national and international Jewish life demonstrates how



*Rabbi Philip S. Bernstein photographs a group of children in an unidentified DP camp, ca. 1946. From the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Herbert Friedman.*



his passion and determination greatly affected the Rochester community and inspired support for Jewish refugees.

In addition to Rabbi Bernstein's efforts, there was a Jewish newspaper in Rochester, *The Jewish Ledger*, which sought to keep members of the community

informed about national and international issues concerning Jews at home and abroad. At the time the *Ledger* began publication in 1924, Rochester already had five daily papers and two weeklies. The *Ledger* was able to thrive in a seemingly saturated market, however, because it held the unique position of being a Jewish newspaper published in English. Given the emergence of an engaged, American-born Jewish population that wanted to stay involved in Jewish affairs, editors Albert I. Klineman and Herbert Grossman keenly recognized the demand for such a newspaper. Their mission was to provide relevant information about local, national, and international Jewish affairs, as well as to facilitate communication and understanding between Jews and non-Jews in the Rochester area.<sup>25</sup>

*The Jewish Ledger* was not only an important organizational tool for the local community, it also provided critical information about the mounting Nazi atrocities occurring in Germany in the mid to late 1930s. With articles such as "Mass Murder Reported in Polish Towns" (November 10, 1939), "Jews Flee Vienna to avoid Removal to 'Reservation'" (November 17, 1939), and "50,000 Kiev Jews Machine-Gunned by Nazis" (December 3, 1943), it was brutally clear to *Ledger* readers that Nazi discrimination was transforming into a plan of organized annihilation.<sup>26</sup> The paper provided a broader base than Bernstein's sermons at Temple B'rith Kodesh and allowed Rochesterians outside of that institution to access information about Jewish experiences in Germany. While it is impossible to know exactly how many people were affected by *The Jewish Ledger*'s reports and Rabbi Bernstein's sermons and articles, their collective reach was undoubtedly extensive.



*General Joseph T. McNarney signs the charter of recognition of the Central Committee of Liberated Jews in Bavaria, September 7, 1946. From the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Herbert Friedman.*

## Rochester Responds

Although information regarding the threats posed by the Nazis became available to Rochester's Jewish community as early as 1930, it took time for these issues to reach and seriously capture the attention of the wider, non-Jewish population. Eventually, it became clear

that the violent and oppressive nature of Nazi rule was not a fleeting phenomenon, but a central characteristic of the party. By August 1935, heightened awareness among Rochesterians prompted 100 influential Jewish and non-Jewish leaders to sign a petition formally condemning Nazi extremism. They presented this petition to Secretary of State Cordell Hull and also distributed it to several Senators and Congressional Representatives.<sup>27</sup>

While the petition implicitly addressed the hardships facing German Jews, it is important to note that it did not specifically refer to the increasing social and legal discrimination against this group. Instead it expressed a broad condemnation for the “persecution of various races and groups” within Germany.<sup>28</sup> The decision not to focus on the persecution of Jews illustrates several important social and political realities of the time. For one, Nazi authorities did not limit their attacks exclusively to Jewish people; they targeted other minority groups, like homosexuals and people with physical disabilities, as well. The main reason for the petition’s lack of specificity, however, was its need to gain support, both locally and nationally. In order to be most persuasive, the document needed to emphasize that Nazi rule threatened the safety of all, not just Jews. The individuals who signed the petition represented a fairly broad cross-section of Rochester, with high officials such as a Monroe County Judge, the Vice-Mayor of the city, leading manufacturers and businessmen, and Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant religious leaders lending their support.<sup>29</sup> Though the petition had little real impact on national policy, it demonstrated to the Rochester community that its leaders recognized the dangers of Nazism and were willing to speak out against it.

Even as Rochester’s leaders protested Nazi policies, discrimination against Jews



*A photograph of Bernstein's with the following caption, possibly in his hand, written on the back: "These were saved! Children from the 'Exodus.'" From the Philip S. Bernstein Papers, Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, University of Rochester.*

was spreading across Europe. Both Poland and Romania had long histories of anti-Semitism, which made Nazi propaganda particularly appealing there. With the spread of anti-Semitism and increasing violence, Jews in these countries began seeking asylum elsewhere. The mass exodus of Jews trying to flee Germany, Poland, and Romania in the late 1930s caused a bottleneck, as few countries were willing to accept



## VOL. XXIII—NO. 23

ROCHESTER, NEW YORK, FRIDAY, JUNE 16, 1937

PRICE 5 CENTS

## Ask U. S. Aid Polish Jews

## PLAIN TALK

By AL SEGAL

### On Being No Zionist

Miss Natalie Temmerhagen of Crystal Lake inquired: "Are you a Zionist?" Miss Temmerhagen had ascertained that I am no partisan of Zion . . . no Laborite, no Republican, no Minersite, nothing.

In fact, I am no Zionist. I am no Zionist because I don't like kishute to wear. For the same reason I avoid the stultifying status of being a Democrat, Republican, Socialist or Communist; it's unfair to the mind to put it in the harness of any party.

I have voted for Norman  
Thomas and Roosevelt and have  
found some Republican candidates  
for governor to my liking.

When I was younger I was anti-Klanet; but to show the mind definitely against a party is an offensive to intelligence as to show it, which it and drive it all the way with a party.

Is the History Home College  
 about a century-old project the  
 building was built for it is not

**Calls Conference To Consolidate Anti-Nazi Forces**



IN A BUREAU OF ECONOMICS

With the prospect of achieving a broad amalgamation of Jewish and Gentile groups in the movement against Nazism, most of the Jewish youth working in the city planning and participation in

BERLIN—Bismarck / Der Führer

When a reading is required, those minutes are found necessary to guarantee them. Non-official visits are forbidden within a kilometer of the retreat at Berchtesgaden. Private cars are not allowed to travel more than 100 meters around the area. Even cars permitted within this area, whose occupants have already been thoroughly inspected at the entrance, must stop for a 15-minute surveillance. And at the only point from which the Hitler home is visible from a distance—private chauffeurs are forbidden to stop. In the vicinity of the house, all private homes are bought up by the Government to preclude the possibility of undesirable neighbors. Only 100 km are on an regular basis on grounds of the Hitler family. The family is working from dozens of so-called control posts on the grounds.

\_\_\_\_\_

## 20A Convention To Protect Proposed Cartoon Plan

## Leaders Urge Gov't Intercede in Pogroms And Lift Entry Bars

### All Jewish Papers Confiscated In Poland For Protesting Court Encouragement Of Violence

## Spoofs Nazis



the government of the United States at the earliest possible opportunity a memorandum concerning the recent repression in the Polish government in respect to its Jewish population, and recognizing the deep concerns of American Jewry (and the plight of their brethren in Poland) was authorized by House delegation allowing the emergency committee in Poland organized by the American Jewish Congress.

The conference, which attracted delegates from New York to each national delegation, opened in the United States, to be met by the grand neighbor "in person."

*Headlines from The Jewish Ledger, June 18, 1937.*

*From the Rochester Public Library Local History Division.*

large numbers of immigrants. *The Jewish Ledger* called attention to the need for countries to make exceptions to the existing, limited immigration laws and accept refugees. While the paper expressed particular condemnation of the restrictive immigration policies advanced by “fascist influences” in regions like South America, it also recognized that democracies were not without blame.<sup>30</sup> *The Ledger* remained focused on the limited options that Jewish refugees had and urged American Jews to donate to refugee aid committees and apply political pressure for increased immigration options.

For its part, the United States had a series of complex and restrictive immigration policies dating back to 1924. A strict quota system set narrow limits on how many foreigners could gain admittance in a given year. Different countries were subject to different quotas and southern and eastern Europe did not fare well, especially during the depression in the 1930s, when American anti-Semitism, anti-Communism, and a general wariness of poor people heightened discrimination against these populations.<sup>31</sup> Additional restrictions imposed by the U.S. State Department usually prevented even the meager quotas from being met. For example, given the number of visas allowed for countries under Nazi rule, it would have been possible to admit roughly 212,000 refugees between 1938 and 1941; however, due to the tight U.S. immigration policies, only 150,000 were able to gain entrance during this period, despite the intensity of the crisis.<sup>32</sup> After 1941, the Nazis closed off emigration entirely, bringing the trickle of German Jewish immigration to a near halt for the duration of the war.<sup>33</sup>

One of the most limiting aspects of the U.S. immigration policy was the public charge clause. Tightened by President Hoover in 1930, this clause required visa applicants to prove that they had the means to support themselves or to acquire affidavits guaranteeing support

from friends and family in the United States.<sup>34</sup> The ability to provide evidence that one would not become a public burden was particularly difficult for German Jews because the Nazis placed numerous restrictions on the amount of wealth they could take out of the country. By 1938, Jewish emigrants could take only 10 percent of their assets with them, forcing people to leave Germany with little more than the clothes on their backs.<sup>35</sup> Subtract from this the cost of bribes necessary to gain cooperation from individual Nazi guards and officials and the expenses of immigration itself and it becomes clear how dependent Jewish refugees could be. Under these conditions the public charge clause proved a nearly insurmountable hurdle. Such obstacles ultimately prevented tens of thousands of persecuted Jews from gaining sanctuary in the United States.

The barriers imposed by the public charge clause proved to be especially problematic for the Rochester community. Nowhere was this more evident than Temple B'rith Kodesh's attempts to bring the German Jewish liturgical composer Heinrich Schalit to the United States. After meeting Schalit in Munich in 1930, Bernstein was determined to have him work as the musical director at B'rith Kodesh, but it took years to create a position and salary for him. In 1933, Bernstein was finally able to offer Schalit a two-year position at a salary of \$125 per month. Even with this guarantee of employment, Schalit's visa application was denied by the American consulate because his eyesight was poor and the consulate feared that if his job with B'rith Kodesh fell through, his eyesight would prevent him from acquiring another position. This was the first in a series of frustrating rejections by the American consulate that would last until 1940, when Schalit, by way of Italy, was at last granted entrance to the U.S.<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately, Schalit's experience was not unique. The public clause policy was clearly troublesome and prevented the rescue of many talented individuals in need of refuge.

With the restrictive immigration policies enacted by the federal government, members of the Rochester community had to be persistent and creative in their efforts to help Jewish refugees. While some applicants could circumvent the public charge clause by obtaining affidavits from friends and family living in the United States, not all refugees had access to individuals who could guarantee their financial support. To help those without existing contacts in the city, members of Rochester's Jewish community agreed to provide a "contract for community responsibility," offering support to refugees who otherwise would not have been able to immigrate. In essence, the affidavit committee, an affiliate of the Jewish Welfare Council, assumed financial responsibility for refugees if their friends and family could not. The success of this community plan was clear within its first year, when it was used to assist the successful immigration of 55 refugees.<sup>37</sup>

Led by Rabbi Bernstein, B'rith Kodesh President Manuel Goldman, and members of



the Jewish Community Council, Rochester's community affidavit was among the first of its kind in the nation.<sup>38</sup> Prior to this policy, refugees found their way to Rochester largely through personal connections and the efforts of volunteer aid committees here and in New York City. Although the community affidavit was an important initiative, it was not approved by the government until late 1938. At that point the refugee crisis was well underway. Had the affidavit been implemented earlier, there is no telling how many people it might have helped.

## **Integrating Refugees: Successes and Challenges**

Jewish refugees who made it into the United States reached their final destinations through a combination of formal and informal networks that transferred them to locations that held the most promise for employment. Rabbi Bernstein's connections to New York City proved particularly helpful in facilitating the relocation of refugees to the Rochester area. Receiving information on prospective immigrants from the Greater New York Coordinating Committee for German Refugees, Bernstein would try to find jobs for them in town.<sup>39</sup> He usually took a personal interest in the well-being of the refugees sent to him. In some instances he met them at the train station, helped them find housing, and even provided them with money for transportation costs.<sup>40</sup>

While important, such individual acts of kindness were often not enough. The ability to earn a living was critical to Jewish refugees, particularly as worsening conditions in Germany caused them to arrive in the U.S. with increasingly few resources. To address this need, organizations began to emerge that dealt solely with issues of employment and resettlement. For instance, the Rochester Coordinating Committee established two divisions in the late 1930s, immigration and resettlement, that worked to ease the arrival and transition of Jewish refugees. An additional sub-committee, the Jewish Employment Council, was formed in February 1939 to help these refugees find jobs. The Employment Council contacted Jewish employers in Rochester, roughly 400 at the time, to see if they would offer positions to those who were qualified. The Coordinating Committee also carried out personality and skill examinations in order to make sure that refugees were compatible with the type of positions and firms with which they were being matched. The Committee's efforts proved successful; it placed about 40 people in jobs during its first year of operation. Even more impressive was the fact that after a year, all of these workers were still employed.<sup>41</sup>

Education was another area in which refugees needed, and found, support. In addition to employment and placement services, the Rochester Coordinating Committee organized vocational training and workshops for unemployed refugees to teach them manufacturing skills,



*Postcard depicting the Jewish Young Men's and Women's Association on Andrews Street, n.d.  
From the Rochester Public Library  
Local History Division.*

which they could put to use in the men's clothing industry.<sup>42</sup> The Rochester public schools offered night classes, where refugees could learn or improve their English or even earn a high school diploma.<sup>43</sup> Some adults enrolled as full-time students in Rochester high schools.<sup>44</sup> The Jewish Social Service Bureau and the Baden Street Settlement offered English lessons and Regents exams tutoring for those who could not attend public classes due to scheduling, distance, or other impediments.<sup>45</sup> Through education, and especially English language classes, refugees

were able to gain a better understanding of American culture and assimilate to life in Rochester.

Along with jobs and education, many were also concerned about the social and emotional well-being of refugees. The Rochester Coordinating Committee sought to establish support groups, particularly for those struggling to find steady employment. These support groups introduced recent refugees to those who had been in Rochester for a number of years and had successfully adjusted to life in the community.<sup>46</sup> Even though Rochester's Jewish population was at times tense and fractured, members of the community were largely able to overcome their differences in order to assist newcomers. One great source of assistance was the Jewish Community Council (JCC), which was founded in 1937 and sought to coordinate the goals of all members of the Jewish community.<sup>47</sup> The Naturalization Committee of the JCC issued frequent reminders to refugees about the naturalization process, providing information about fees and deadlines and offering assistance to those going through the process.<sup>48</sup> The JCC's primary purpose, however, was to investigate and combat anti-Semitism in the city.

Though it was not as common nor as potent as in some areas of the country, Rochester did struggle with anti-Semitism. Pockets of institutionalized discrimination limited the number of Jews accepted into higher education and professional positions. The University of Rochester, for example, enforced admissions quotas for Jewish students throughout the 35-year presidency of Rush Rhees (1900-1935).<sup>49</sup> Bess Cohen, a Russian Jewish immigrant who came to the U.S. in 1905, recalled her negative experiences with the university while earning her undergraduate degree. Aware of the quota system when she applied, Cohen was immediately put off when her "Jewishness" became the main subject of her interview.<sup>50</sup> Once admitted, she continued to



find her experience to be unpleasant. Recalling her college years, Cohen remembered that she “hated the school for that reason [making her feel acutely aware of being Jewish]. I always felt awkward. And at the time there were very few Jews.”<sup>51</sup> Discrimination in academia was a common problem for Jews across the nation, one that largely dissipated after WWII when the number of Jewish students attending college increased due to the assistance provided by the GI Bill.


Similarly, there was a level of discrimination in the hiring practices of some companies in Rochester. Kodak, like the University of Rochester, had a reputation of anti-Semitism, though official policies of discrimination could not be verified.<sup>52</sup> Suspicions were based on the fact that Kodak did not hire Jews until the late 1920s. Although it seems that Kodak welcomed Jewish employees, including refugees, during the 30s and 40s, some of these employees experienced lingering hostility from their co-workers.<sup>53</sup> These feelings and experiences were hardly universal, but they do suggest a degree of anti-Semitism in Rochester during this period.

Members of Rochester’s Jewish community became particularly concerned with rising levels of anti-Semitism in the late 1930s, connecting it to the rising Nazi propaganda in Europe and the influx of Jewish refugees in the area. Anti-Semitic pamphlets began circulating in the city at this time, spreading derogatory lies about Jews and encouraging non-Jews to unite against the threat they allegedly posed.<sup>54</sup> One such pamphlet was entitled “Why are Jews Persecuted for their Religion?” This document, the origins of which remain mysterious, pulled passages of Jewish scriptures out of context, twisted them, and then used them to “prove” that “Jewish people are not to be trusted” and should be denied the ability to become citizens or hold public office.<sup>55</sup>

Anti-Semitism persisted at an alarming level in Rochester as the radio broadcasts of Father Charles E. Coughlin gained popularity. Coughlin was a Roman Catholic priest who used his on-air sermons to propagate class, race, and religious hatred under the guise of “Christian teachings.”<sup>56</sup> By the late 1930s, his increasingly radical anti-Semitism led him to champion both Nazi policies and the increased levels of violence against German Jews.<sup>57</sup> Despite his loyal following, Coughlin was a controversial figure who, ironically, united many Christians and Jews in staunch opposition to the destructive nature of his broadcasts. In 1938, Rochester’s JCC joined forces with Roman Catholic priests and Protestant clergymen to convince a local radio station to cease airing Coughlin’s broadcasts.<sup>58</sup>

As we have seen, the history of interfaith cooperation among Jews and Christians in Rochester goes back to the 1870s, if not earlier. This supportive relationship was formalized in 1934, when some of the city’s leading religious figures, including Rabbi Bernstein, established the Interfaith Good-Will Committee to combat prejudice by building cooperation and understanding between Rochester’s Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish communities.<sup>59</sup> Though

PRIEST OR



Charles E. Coughlin

RACKETEER?

**YOU** ARE INVITED TO ACT AS JUROR ON OCCASION OF THE  
PUBLIC TRIAL

OF REVEREND CHARLES E. COUGHLIN, THE  
INSPIRATIONAL LEADER OF THE "CHRISTIAN FRONT"  
which will take place

THURSDAY EVE. MARCH 21<sup>ST</sup>.  
*at the*  
BAPTIST TEMPLE

JOHN L. SPIVAK

AMERICA'S ACE REPORTER & WRITER  
WILL ACT AS PROSECUTOR. HE WILL PRESENT  
DOCUMENTARY PROOF, NOW BEFORE THE FEDERAL  
BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, WHICH INDICTS  
COUGHLIN AS AMERICA'S NO. 1 ANTI-SEMITIC,  
SWINDLER, TAX EVADER, ETC., ETC.

ADVANCE TICKETS, 25¢      AT DOOR, 35¢

MAKE SURE YOU ARE ABLE TO ATTEND THIS TIMELY EVENT IN  
ROCHESTER. ORDER YOUR TICKETS IN ADVANCE. FROM THE  
JEWISH PEOPLE'S COMMITTEE, 175 ROSEDALE STREET, OR  
TELEPHONE MORRIS 5494 J.

*"Priest or Racketeer?"*

*Advertisement for the "public trial" of Charles E. Coughlin,  
sponsored by the Jewish People's Committee, n.d. From the  
Rochester Public Library Local History Division.*

it is unclear why the committee was formed at this particular time, it is likely that the Rochester community was influenced by national efforts of interfaith coordination such as the Good Will Pilgrimage. This was a speaking tour in which a minister, a priest, and a rabbi traveled from town to town, answering questions about their faiths in order to combat ignorance and encourage tolerance.<sup>60</sup> Bernstein was intimately involved with the Good Will Pilgrimage. He participated in the national tour in 1934, an experience that he greatly enjoyed.<sup>61</sup> Given his connection to this national campaign, it is reasonable to believe that Bernstein encouraged the development of a similar project in Rochester. Throughout the war years, the Interfaith Good-Will Committee worked to eliminate prejudice and bigotry, recognizing that "aggressive intolerance

abroad" had negatively affected the environment in Rochester.<sup>62</sup> Such cross-faith collaboration played a large role in the city's ability to combat anti-Semitism and accept hundreds of Jewish refugees over the course of the 1930s and 1940s.

Another example of Rochester's interfaith cooperation was the Open Door, a restaurant, bakery, and craft store that showcased the work and culture of Jewish refugees while providing skills training and placement services. Established as a non-sectarian shop on Monroe Avenue in the fall of 1940, the Open Door provided an array of employment opportunities. Refugees not only worked as cooks, managers, and servers in the restaurant, they also received training in skills needed to work outside of the shop as seamstresses, cooks, and nannies. After refugees completed their job training, the Open Door worked with Christian and Jewish organizations to place them in positions throughout the city. Although it appears that the program largely



served women, the Open Door also offered technical training to men to help them become more employable in Rochester's clothing industry.<sup>63</sup>

The cooperation between Christians and Jews was critical to the success of the Open Door, which relied on roughly 200 Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish volunteers to manage the store and help train and place refugees.<sup>64</sup> Originally funded with only \$750, the Open Door soon grossed profits over \$2,000, which was used to pay workers and run training and placement services.<sup>65</sup> After two years in operation, at least 35 refugees were able to "find an outlet for their talents" at the Open Door, enabling them to provide for themselves and their families.<sup>66</sup> The success of this program allowed many refugees not only to earn a living, but also to develop a community of support and friendship among the business's owners, workers, and volunteers.

Although Rochesterians made a noble effort to help Jewish immigrants entering the city in the years surrounding the Second World War, they were not able to reach everyone. Repeating the immigration pattern of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, European Jews came to the United States in distinctive waves during the 1930s and 1940s. The first groups to arrive were primarily German; some had connections in the city that allowed them to obtain affidavits and financial support, facilitating their transition. In contrast, those who came after the war as Holocaust survivors and displaced persons (DPs) were largely Eastern European. These groups were much poorer, more marginalized, and had no family or supportive connections in the community. As a result, they were much harder to help.

Bonded together in their isolation, Rochester-area survivors and DPs formed their own community, organizing picnics, summer retreats, and other gatherings for themselves and their children. Rejecting the refugee label, they preferred to call themselves "greeners," a name that acknowledged their newcomer status while eliminating the stigma and sympathy often associated with other terms.<sup>67</sup> As interest in the Holocaust grew, they became better integrated into the wider Jewish population. In the 1980s, they were involved in building a Holocaust memorial in the courtyard of the Jewish Community Center on Edgewood Avenue in Brighton. This site has become the gathering place for the local Yom HaShoah ceremony, an annual event that commemorates the approximately six million Jews who died in the Holocaust.<sup>68</sup>

Rochester's ability to welcome Jewish refugees in the 1930s and 1940s depended on the community's commitment to uncovering the truth about the problems in Europe and its determination to do something about it. Despite the various challenges they faced, organizations like the Rochester Coordinating Committee, the Jewish Social Services Bureau, the Baden Street Settlement, the Jewish Welfare Council, and the Jewish Community Council combined with entities like *The Jewish Ledger*, the Open Door, and the Interfaith Good-Will Committee

to offer information, programs, and services that supported Jewish immigrants. Although the contribution of charismatic leaders like Rabbi Bernstein were certainly important, their work would not have had the same impact without this wider community of support.

## **An Exceptional City?**

Between 1930 and 1950, Rochester welcomed nearly 1,000 Jewish refugees seeking a safe haven from the atrocities committed by the Nazis in Europe. Admittedly, this is not an overwhelming figure; it barely scratched the surface of the refugee problem in the years surrounding the Second World War. When considered in its national context, however, Rochester's willingness and ability to accommodate even this small number appears to be a rather impressive accomplishment.

The 1930s were a time of intense economic despair, high unemployment rates, and anti-alien sentiment in America. Given the challenges they faced at home, many citizens and government officials wished to remain isolated from problems happening elsewhere in the world. Recent memories of the First World War fueled the desire to avoid international entanglements. Despite the growth of Nazi power, the vast majority of Americans—82 percent, according to a poll conducted by the Research Corporation for the American Jewish Committee in 1938—opposed allowing a large number of Jewish refugees into the United States.<sup>69</sup>

Anti-Semitism certainly played its part in shaping American attitudes toward European Jews. By 1939, there were 135 fascist groups in the United States, most of which condoned the hateful policies of the Nazis. These anti-Semitic influences included the German-American Bund, which sought to combat the supposed "Jewocracy" that they feared was developing in this country; the Silver Legion of America, which was a paramilitary group led by 1936 presidential candidate and Hitler admirer William Dudley Pelley; and perhaps the most (in)famous and influential figure of all, Father Charles E. Coughlin. While none of these entities was considered mainstream, they collectively claimed hundreds of thousands of followers. This was not an insignificant number.<sup>70</sup>

Within this context of national hostility to Jewish immigrants, Rochester serves as an example of how a community can pull together to overcome adversity. In a time of isolationism and hyper-nationalism, it is indeed impressive that so many Rochesterians were able to look beyond their city's limits and reach out to those in need. Led in large part by Rabbi Philip Bernstein, the community proved its ability to work within the limitations of federal policy to facilitate the arrival and assimilation of hundreds of Jewish refugees. If nothing else, this effort illustrates how in a dark moment of terror, apathy, and accusations, there was still light, hope, and people willing to help one another.



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## About the Author

Mary Posman is a recent graduate of William Smith College and is currently earning her Master's in History at Boston College. This article is based on research done for a larger honors thesis that was completed by the author in April 2012 at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. She would like to thank the Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation at the University of Rochester as well as the Center of Holocaust Awareness and Information for all of their help and support. A special thanks goes to Lori Birrell and Nancy Martin for their help navigating the Bernstein Papers.

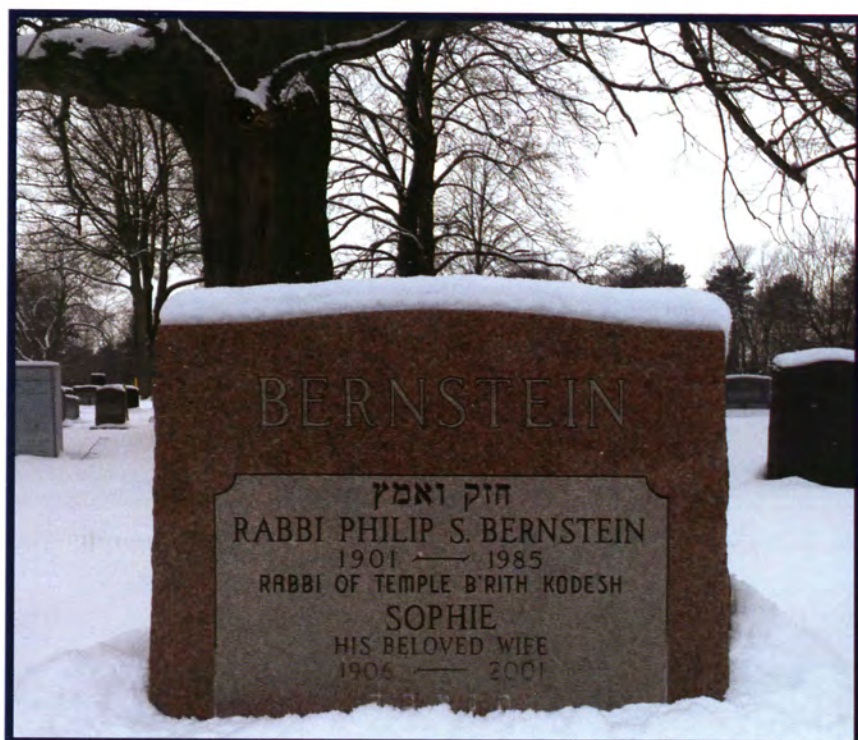


*Unveiling of the Holocaust Memorial at the Jewish Community Center on Edgewood Avenue, in Brighton.  
Courtesy of the JCC of Greater Rochester.*

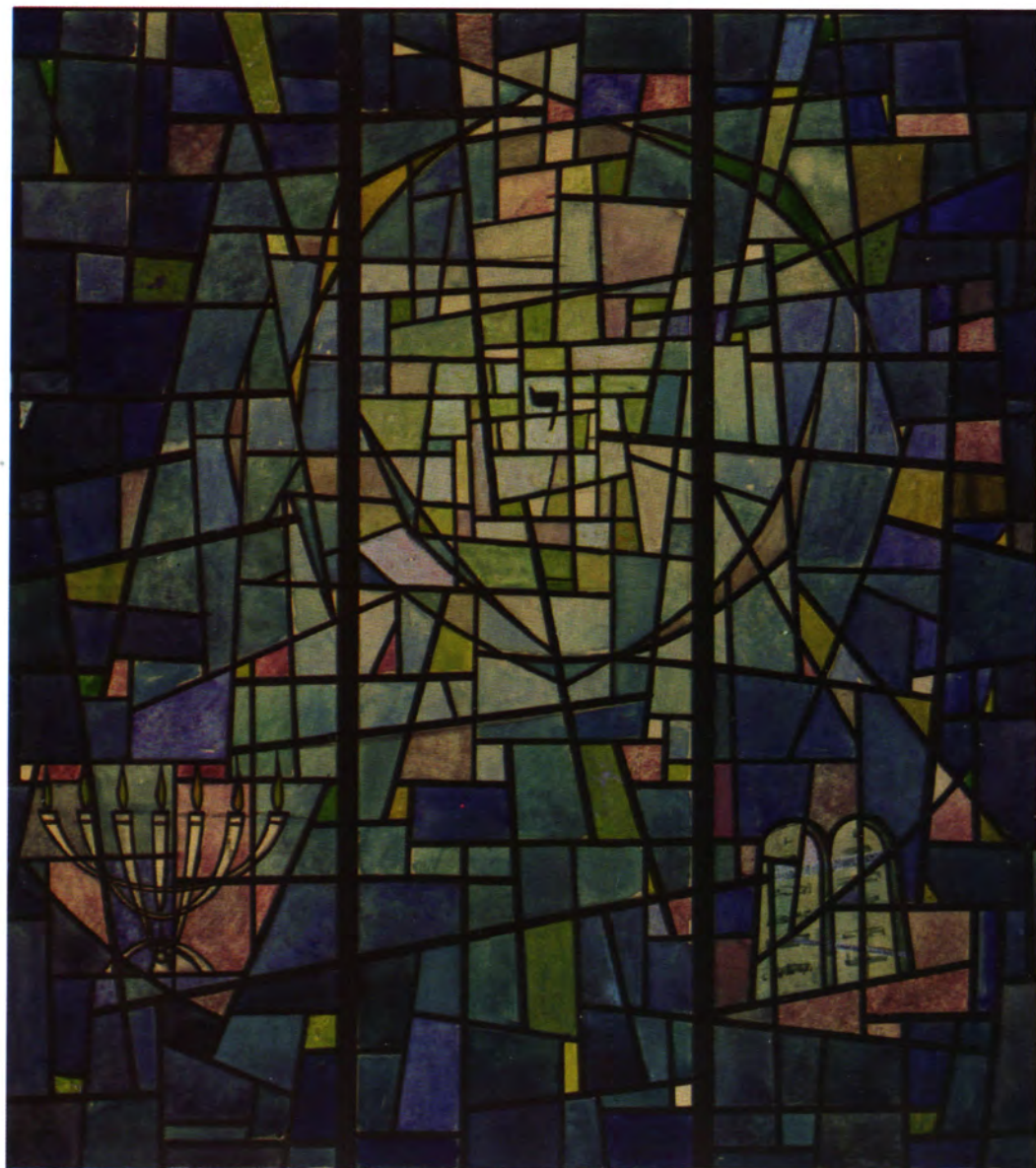


*Ceremony held at the Holocaust Memorial at the Jewish Community Center on Edgewood Avenue, in  
Brighton, n.d. Courtesy of the JCC of Greater Rochester.*





*Tombstone marking the graves of Rabbi Philip S. Bernstein and his wife, Sophie. Mount Hope Cemetery, Rochester, NY. Courtesy of Michelle Finn, Deputy Historian, City of Rochester.*



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