



## POST-WORLD WAR II RESOURCES

### Essay

# Jewish History in Indianapolis

by Jane Hedeem

Jewish migration to Indiana began as early as the 1760s when a small group of Philadelphia businessmen came to Indiana to establish frontier trading and land ventures. These businessmen brought goods from the colonies along the Eastern Seaboard to frontier settlements and trading posts. Jewish settlers soon followed, establishing homes along the Ohio and Wabash Rivers. Indiana's Jewish community during this time was fractured and scattered, making it difficult to practice their faith, since a minyan (group of ten or more adult Jewish males) is required to hold public prayer services. This also led to intermarriages between Jews and Christians.<sup>1</sup>

Beginning in 1825 a steady wave of Jewish immigrants came to Indiana. This influx was largely German-speaking Jews from central Europe who had left their homeland due to economic hardship and civil inequality. German Jews were part of a cultural group called Ashkenazim (Ash·ke·naz·im).<sup>2</sup> Ashkenazic Jews originally came from France, Germany, and eastern Europe. This group speaks Yiddish,

a combination of Hebrew and German.<sup>3</sup>

Traditionally, Ashkenazic Jews have not mixed with non-Jewish groups.

In 1849 the first German-speaking Jews arrived in Indianapolis, laying the framework for a thriving Jewish community in the city. In 1856 they established Indianapolis's first synagogue, the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation.<sup>4</sup> In 1863 German Jews built the city's first Jewish school in Indianapolis.<sup>5</sup>

Many German Jews were peddlers who took advantage of the growing city as the perfect market in which to sell their goods. German Jews were also tailors. From these fairly humble beginnings and through hard work and an entrepreneurial spirit, many Jewish peddlers went on to establish dry goods stores, groceries, or scrap dealerships, while Jewish tailors eventually became

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1. Carolyn S. Blackwell, "Jews," in *Peopling Indiana*, Robert M. Taylor, Jr. and Connie A. McBirney, eds. (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1996), 314.

2. *Ibid.*, 315–16.

3. "Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews, Judaism 101, accessed September 1, 2011, <http://www.jewfaq.org/ashkeseph.htm>.

4. "Marion County History," in *DHPA Jewish Historical Resources* (Marion County), Indiana Department of Natural Resources, accessed September 1, 2011, <http://www.in.gov/dnr/historic/3974.htm>, 5.

5. Judith E. Endelman, *The Jewish Community of Indianapolis, 1849 to the Present* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), 80.

owners of department or clothing stores.<sup>6</sup> According to historian Carolyn Blackwell:

Jewish merchants soon dominated the city's clothing business, operating 10 of 18 clothing stores in 1860. By the 1880s, one half of the German Jews were shopkeepers, retailers and wholesalers; others were involved in peddling, tailoring, and assorted professions.<sup>7</sup>

German Jews moved north as they became more affluent and better assimilated to American life, but Indianapolis's south side neighborhoods continued to see an influx of new Jewish immigrants.<sup>8</sup>

Beginning in the late 1880s, Polish, Hungarian, and Russian Jews, as well as Jews from other eastern European nations, came to Indianapolis in significant numbers. Eastern European Jews usually worked as artisans, garment workers, carpenters, and cabinet-makers for automobile or furniture manufacturers, or as hucksters and pushcart vendors.<sup>9</sup> They settled on Indianapolis's near south side as German Jews vacated the area in favor of residential neighborhoods along North Meridian Street south of Fall Creek.

The Indianapolis near south side continued to flourish as a center of Jewish life in the city. The city's eastern European Jews established homes, businesses, places of worship, and community organizations in neighborhoods bounded by Washington Street on the north, Union Street to the east, Morris Street on the south, and Capitol Avenue to the west.<sup>10</sup>

Ethnic communities soon began to found their own congregations in the city. The Sharah Tefella congregation (founded in 1870) served the Polish community, Congregation Ohev Zedeck (founded

in 1884) served the Hungarian community, and Knesses Israel (founded in 1889) served the Russian community. These congregations were all Orthodox, meaning they strictly observed Jewish law and customs and "supported the concept of an eventual return to Zion and the possibility of creating a Jewish state."<sup>11</sup> In contrast, German Jews established the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation, which was a Reform synagogue. IHC members viewed Judaism as a religion and believed that Jewish Americans should be loyal to the United States instead of working to establish a separate Jewish nation.<sup>12</sup> A fourth congregation served Jewish immigrants on Indianapolis's south side. In 1903 a group of local businessmen founded the United Hebrew Congregation because they did not like how segregated the different ethnic congregations had become.

In 1906 the first Sephardic Jews arrived in Indianapolis from Turkish Macedonia.<sup>13</sup> These Jews were originally from Spain, Portugal, North Africa, and the Middle East. They spoke Ladino, a language based on Spanish and Hebrew. Historically, Sephardic Jews tended to be more integrated into non-Jewish communities.<sup>14</sup> By 1913 this group had founded Congregation Sephard of Monastir. Ashkenazic Jews did not view Sephardic Jews as their social equals and tended to look down on them because they spoke Ladino rather than Yiddish. The Ashkenazi did not consider them to be true Jews. According to one historian, "There was no intermarriage of the Sephardim and Ashkenazim Jews until 1932."<sup>15</sup> Despite the social rift between the two groups, Sephardic Jews settled among the eastern European Jews along South Illinois and South Meridian Streets.

In the early twentieth century, Indianapolis's south side also became home to several Jewish community organizations. The South Side Hebrew Ladies Charity Organization established a shelter house at

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6. "Marion County History," 1.

7. Carolyn S. Blackwell, "Jews," in *Encyclopedia of Indianapolis*, David J. Bodenhamer and Robert G. Barrows, eds. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 846.

8. *Ibid.*, 848.

9. *Ibid.*, 846.

10. *Ibid.*, 847.

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11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. "Marion County History," 1.

14. "Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews."

15. "Marion County History," 9.

907 Maple Street in 1906.<sup>16</sup> The local chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women and the Jewish Federation of Greater Indianapolis, both organizations promoting human welfare, were located on the city's south side. The Jewish Federation centralized fund-raising for these local Jewish organizations and provided financial assistance, employment, health care, and legal aid for new immigrants.<sup>17</sup> In 1913 the Jewish Federation established a Jewish community center on the south side. Called the Communal Building, this center provided adult education classes (such as citizenship classes for recent immigrants), a kindergarten program, and social gatherings. The National Council for Jewish Women lead these activities. The Nathan Morris House, a settlement house for recent Jewish immigrants to the city, provided help to poor newcomers and served as an educational and community center.<sup>18</sup> Here, immigrants could find meeting rooms, a library of Yiddish books, and a kindergarten program for their children.<sup>19</sup>

In the post-World War I era America's strong nativist movement and restrictive immigration policies slowed Jewish immigration. By this time Indianapolis was already well established as the center of Jewish life and culture in the state. Eventually, well-to-do Jews from the south side began to move north. According to records from the Jewish Community Center Association:

By 1910 the South Side Jewish neighborhood was becoming stratified. It became highly desirable to move from the west side of South Meridian Street to the east side along Union Street, a predominantly German neighborhood. Once they had lived on one of the better south side streets, the more prosperous Jews generally moved to the north side of Indianapo-

lis, their homes taken over by other newly arriving immigrants. The Jewish migration out of the South Side community began in the 1920s, but came to a standstill during the Depression years. The migration resumed again during the 1930s, until by 1940 out of approximately 2,500 Jewish families in Indianapolis only 328 lived on the South Side; of those who lived on the South Side, two-thirds of the families lived in the original community location or west of South Meridian Street, and one-third lived east of South Meridian Street, on or near Union Street.<sup>20</sup>

As Jewish residents left their south side homes, some were torn down to make way for businesses and to offer more room for remaining residents. Other homes were rented out, mainly to southern whites and blacks who had migrated to northern cities during and after the Great Depression.<sup>21</sup> While the demographics of Indianapolis's south side were clearly changing, it continued to be a first stop for new Jewish immigrants.

During World War II and the postwar era, newcomers included European refugees. The rise of the Nazi party in Germany and Adolf Hitler's persecution of Jews throughout Europe forced some to flee their homeland and take refuge in America. Jewish refugees began arriving in Indianapolis in 1938. By the beginning of World War II, there were already 250 refugees living in the city.<sup>22</sup> The arrival of Jewish refugees halted during the war, but resumed after the Allies defeated Germany.

The local chapter of the National Council for Jewish Women "assisted federal immigration authorities in resettling Eastern European immigrants and in providing guidance regarding American life and culture." Among the services provided by the National Council of Jewish Women were English and

20. "Southside (Indpls.) Community History, 1974," Jewish Community Center Association Records, 1852-1981, M0349, Box 2, Folder 8, p. 7, Indiana Historical Society Collection.

21. Ibid.

22. Blackwell, "Jews," 846.

16. Ibid., 2.

17. Carolyn S. Blackwell, "Jewish Federation of Greater Indianapolis," in Bodenhamer and Barrows, eds., *Encyclopedia of Indianapolis*, 845.

18. Endelman, *Jewish Community of Indianapolis*, 45, 93.

19. "Marion County History, 2.

citizenship classes as well as instruction in American culture and lifestyle.<sup>23</sup> The NCJW was dedicated to helping refugee families adjust to life in America. It even offered a Home Institute to provide instruction for refugee housewives in child care, budgeting, cooking, and homemaking. Meanwhile, the Jewish Social Services agency assisted postwar Jewish refugees in finding housing and jobs, as well as filling out work and immigration documents. In addition, Jewish Social Services provided financial support for refugee families with funds from the United Jewish Appeal. News photos of refugees and the destruction in Europe helped spur donations in the early years following World War II. Between 1945 and 1946 Indianapolis Jews contributed \$821,000 to help victims of the Nazi horrors.<sup>24</sup>

During the 1950s fund-raising efforts became more local, such as improvement projects and building campaigns for synagogues, homes for the elderly, Jewish community centers, and Jewish hospitals.<sup>25</sup> In particular, funds were used to build synagogues, schools, and community centers on Indianapolis's north side, where the bulk of the Indianapolis Jewish population now lived. The Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation and Congregation Beth-El Zedeck established building campaigns in the 1950s so they could move further north to serve a large suburban Jewish population.

In the 1950s synagogues were also very focused on education. Jewish congregations established their own schools. Many communal Hebrew schools were absorbed by these congregational schools. However, one communal Jewish school remained in operation. Run by the Jewish Educational Association under the Jewish Welfare Federation, it continued to provide instruction in the Torah, Hebrew language, prayer, and Jewish history.<sup>26</sup>

23. Stacey Nicholas, "National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW)," in Bodenhamer and Barrows, eds., *Encyclopedia of Indianapolis*, 1036.

24. Endelman, *Jewish Community of Indianapolis*, 189.

25. *Ibid.*, 191.

26. *Ibid.*, 197, 204.

A 1948 study showed that only 11.4 percent of the city's Jewish community now lived on the south side. This area had become an integrated neighborhood that housed Jews, African Americans, and Catholics. A more extensive 1943 study described the following trend:

The Jewish community [on the south side] is disintegrating. Young people leave for other parts of the city as soon as they marry. At present, a number of the young men and women are leaving for the armed services of the United States. The census material reflects these trends by bringing to light the fact that the Jewish population is much older than the general population, while the Jewish school population is decreasing at a much greater rate than the drop in the general school population.<sup>27</sup>

The four remaining Orthodox congregations on Indianapolis's south side merged to form the United Orthodox Hebrew Congregation in 1966.<sup>28</sup> Although the center of Jewish life in the city may have shifted to the north, Jews who remained on the south side were, in general, very observant of Jewish religious customs, helping to preserve a strong sense their Jewish heritage in this area of the city.

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27. "Indianapolis South Side Communal Building Survey, May, 1943" Jewish Community Center Association Records, 1852-1981, Box 4, Folder 6, p. 24.

28. Judith Endelman, "Judaism," in Bodenhamer and Barrows, eds., *Encyclopedia of Indianapolis*, 855.