

The Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington: Its Archival Program

By SYLVAN M. DUBOW

National Archives

A BRIEF announcement in the *National Jewish Ledger* of May 14, 1965—that Dr. G. F. J. Bergman would speak on May 18 at Tifereth Israel Congregation on the Australian Jewish Community—stimulated my interest in the lecture's sponsor, the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington (JHSGW). At the lecture, I met some of the members, from whom I learned that the JHSGW was affiliated with the Jewish Community Council of Greater Washington and was the local chapter of the American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS). This lecture was typical of meetings held throughout the year. The local society had no publication of its own at that time; it is now issuing *The Record* twice a year. That evening, I became a member of both historical societies.

Robert Shosteck, one of the founders of the JHSGW, described it as "typical of a small local society which endeavors in a small measure to serve archival functions." Mr. Shosteck told me that there is no legal provision for chapters or local affiliates in the constitution of the national society. The local society works closely with, and many of its members belong to, the AJHS. Although Isidore S. Meyer, editor of the *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, refers to us as an affiliate and others look upon our group as an independent body, the aims and purposes of both national and local societies are the same—to encourage research and publication in Jewish history. At almost every meeting of our society some distinguished speaker—local, national, or international—has given a lecture on some phase of that history.

How is a historical society—national or local, secular or religious—created? By people. By a nucleus of a community that recognizes the need to research and to document its origins and to preserve for future generations its contribution to history in general. Thus it was that on November 6, 1960, some prominent members of Washington's Jewish community assembled at the

The author, Archivist of the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington, is a member of the staff of the Old Military Records Division, National Archives.

home of Rabbi and Mrs. Meyer Greenberg. United by one bond, their interest in American Jewish history, more especially local Jewish history, they planned to organize a local affiliate of the AJHS. A temporary chairman was appointed—Robert Shosteck; he was soon elected as the society's first president. (Later presidents were Hyman J. Cohen, Bernard I. Nordlinger, and Judge Milton S. Kronheim, Jr., in office at the present time.)

In the days that followed, a constitution was drafted; and a Special Archives Committee, composed of historians, lawyers, and archivists, was created to establish criteria for accepting collections and to evaluate collections offered the society. As stated in the constitution, which was approved with some modifications on March 5, 1961, the purpose of the society was:

A. To bring together people interested in American Jewish history and in the history of the Jews of this area.

B. To collect, catalog, and preserve manuscripts, printed materials, works of art, memorabilia and other objects relating to the Jews of this area, to establish suitable facilities for preserving and storing the materials acquired by the Society.

C. To encourage research, promote publications and to arrange exhibits and lectures relating to the history and achievements of the Jews in this area.

D. To engage in any other activities which may further the above purposes.

A letter inviting membership in the JHSGW emphasized the purposes specified in the constitution and outlined future plans. It would work closely with the AJHS and pattern its program after that of the national society. Individual members would either do independent research or participate in group projects. On April 23, 1961, the society's first major project was approved—research into the role of Washington Jewry during the Civil War. This was to be the first phase of a long-range program to write a history of the Washington Jewish community. Robert Shosteck drafted an outline of the Civil War research program, which was presented to the membership at a meeting on June 7, 1961. The first objective was the preparation of a master list of Jews so that names encountered could be positively identified. Researchers were to examine: (1) membership records of the Washington Hebrew Congregation for 1861–65 and its interment records from 1860 to 1930, and to compile an alphabetical list from these records; (2) Jewish periodicals such as the *Jewish Messenger*, the *Israelite*, the *Occident*, and the *Hebrew Leader* for 1861–65; (3) local newspapers such as the *Star* and the *National Intelligencer* for the same period; (4) copies of the *Washington Directory*, 1861–65;

(5) Civil War muster rolls and bounty rolls from the Genealogy and Local History Room of the Library of Congress; (6) military service and pension application files and census records in the National Archives; and (7) histories of Washington published in the 19th century that contain data on Jews and Jewish organizations. Visits to the Columbia Historical Society and the Washingtoniana Division of the D.C. Public Library for material of Jewish interest were recommended.

In his outline, Mr. Shosteck further suggested that letters be sent to professors of American history and directors of Hillel Foundations at local universities. These were to call attention to the project and offer students an opportunity to do limited research projects in local Jewish history for theses or research credits. A potential source of material of Jewish historical value, such as old letters, diaries, photographs, and other family mementos, might be found in trunks and files in attics and cellars. Letters were sent to the "old families" of Washington requesting donation of their papers to the Society or permission to make photostatic copies of them. One of the financial burdens confronting us was the cost of reproducing documents, manuscripts, and newspaper and magazine articles. The cost was estimated at roughly \$500 a year, and the Finance Committee was requested to look into possible sources of support.

The program outlined by Mr. Shosteck was put into operation. In addition to the cemetery records of the Washington Hebrew Congregation, we obtained those of Adas Israel Congregation, 1860–1911. A Technical Advisory Committee of professional historians was created to guide the activities of the volunteer researchers. The American Jewish Archives (AJA) gave us photostats of pages from the *Occident* dated between 1860 and 1865, containing 245 references to the Washington Jewish community, as well as photostats of catalog cards of these items. Materials presented to us by Jewish communal leaders and descendants of old families or otherwise acquired were deposited in the Washingtoniana Division of the D.C. Public Library. (At that time, we did not have our own home.)

The research program covering the Civil War years was nearly completed in 1962, and the material collected was being organized and written up as the first unit of a projected history of our Jewish community.

Next on our agenda were the years 1866–90. For this period, our researchers concentrated on news items in Jewish periodicals,

records of the Columbia Historical Society and of the German Historical Society of Maryland, and again the records of our oldest congregations, Washington Hebrew and Adas Israel. The AJA again aided our program by lending us microfilm of Jewish periodicals of the 19th century. The Baker Library, Harvard School of Business Administration, furnished copies of Dun and Bradstreet reports on Jewish business firms of 1860 to 1890. The Washingtoniana Division of the D.C. Public Library made its records available to us so that we might assemble data on Jewish organizations and personalities. Retirees from the professions were recruited to gather data on the roles of local Jews in their respective professions through the years. By December 31, research into medicine, dentistry, law, and pharmacy was underway. Both Washington Hebrew and Adas Israel furnished lists of members buried in their respective cemeteries between 1912 and 1930, to supplement the earlier lists. Washington Hebrew also furnished some 19th-century miscellaneous lists, which supplemented their cemetery lists. The lists provided by both congregations were consolidated into one master list. News items in congregational bulletins and in the *National Jewish Ledger*, requesting family and personal archives, resulted in our acquiring several small collections.

Our membership in 1961 was 23; it is now more than 100. Some of our volunteer officers and members are retired people who can give much time, and others are people who work and can contribute little time. Financial support is always hard to come by. Membership fees and personal contributions cannot cover all of our needs. We have also sought grants from philanthropic organizations. Only through persistence can we obtain funds in sufficient amounts to fulfill our purposes. In June 1962 we applied for membership in the Jewish Community Council of Greater Washington. Upon acceptance of our application, Hyman J. Cohen and Mrs. Meyer Greenberg were named as delegates to the Council Assembly.

One local Jewish soldier in the Union Army of the Civil War was already known—Adajah Behrend. Society researchers visited the National Archives to identify others. They found 78 possibly Jewish names in the index to the compiled military service records of D.C. soldiers. By the end of the year, they had examined the military service records and pension application files of 40 of these soldiers, and specifically identified 8 as Jewish.

In 1963 our researchers continued their examination of contemporary newspapers and other publications of the 19th century

and the census, military, and income tax records in the National Archives. We continued to solicit descendants of old families to donate private papers and documents. Religious and social organizations were requested to donate annual reports and histories. The response to these requests, however, was negligible. Local professional societies, such as medical, dental, and pharmaceutical, were canvassed to find individuals willing to conduct research into the contributions of Jewish members of their professions to the community as a whole in the past century.

In 1964, to achieve a more permanent status for our society and its research activities, the executive committee resolved to seek the assistance of the Jewish Community Council of Greater Washington, and in April 1965 the Council informed us that it endorsed our program, would provide office space and a telephone for us in its office, and would cooperate in our research.

In September 1965 President Bernard I. Nordlinger offered me the post of Archivist, which I accepted, and on November 1, 1965, I was appointed. On that same day we moved into our new office and depository at 1330 Massachusetts Avenue N.W., the new address of the Jewish Community Council. One of my first jobs was to appraise and organize the materials gathered by our researchers and donated by local families and religious and social organizations. The results of the appraisal are given at the end of this article. On October 18, 1965, our application for a corporate charter was approved by the Superintendent of Corporations of the District of Columbia.

When I first examined our holdings, with the assistance of Samuel H. Holland, they were completely unorganized—in folders, binders, and kraft envelopes—on top of a desk, in a corner of a book cabinet shelf, and in the lower drawer of a filing cabinet. The arrangement system that I devised deviates somewhat from the conventional rules of provenance, but I feel that it allows for future expansion and is adequate for our present needs.

ARRANGEMENT SYSTEM FOR THE ARCHIVES (as of December 1, 1965)

RECORD GROUP 1. *Records of the Jewish Community Council of Greater Washington.*

This is an organization of organizations, composed of representatives of approximately 120 religious, educational, social, welfare, and philanthropic organizations. It performs functions relating to the activities of the organizations represented.

Series A. Records relating to the American Tercentenary Celebration in Washington, 1954. A proclamation of the local celebration of the arrival of the first Jews in America in 1654, program material, correspondence, a scrapbook, notes concerning essay contests, music programs, committee meetings, and other activities related to the celebration, and the Tercentenary Medal of the American Tercentenary Committee (National Committee). Processed and typescript, 2 lin. ft.

Series B. Stenographic transcripts of hearings before the Arbitration and Conciliation Committee. Six hearings held between May 6, 1950, and November 9, 1950, concerning a dispute between Agudath Chavey Sholom Congregation and Ohev Sholom Congregation. Typescripts, both ribbon and carbon, various pagination, 1 lin. ft.

Series C. Records of the Board of Jewish Education. Miscellaneous reports concerning Jewish education in Washington (1946 to 1964). Processed and mimeographed, various pagination, 1 folder.

RECORD GROUP 2. *Records of Synagogues and Organizations.*

Series A. Records of Synagogues. Histories of congregations and sisterhoods of congregations, programs of dedication of new buildings, anniversary issues of bulletins, and membership lists. Subdivided numerically and then alphabetically by congregation. Typescripts, ribbon copy and carbon copy, also processed, various pagination, 10 folders.

Series B. Records of social and community service organizations composed of histories, articles, yearbooks, and programs. Subdivided like Series A. Typescripts, ribbon copy and carbon, mimeographed and processed, various pagination, 15 folders.

RECORD GROUP 3. *Records of Individuals and Families.*

Subdivided numerically by folder number and alphabetically by surname. Original family documents and correspondence, photostats of such items, newspaper clippings, biographical sketches from encyclopedias, articles, photographs, and handwritten notes, 15 folders.

RECORD GROUP 4. *Records Relating to Other Historical Societies and Associations.*

RECORD GROUP 5. *Periodicals.*

MISCELLANEOUS RECORDS

1. Census records.
2. Community service records.
3. Economic records.
4. Records on education.
5. Military service records.
6. Taxation records.
7. Miscellaneous publications.

This arrangement scheme for the JHSGW records is, of course, tentative, but it is proving its usefulness as a basis for the steadily growing archival program of accessioning, arrangement and description, and service to historical and other researchers.