
1936



90TH ANNIVERSARY



GJC

Centre Call Installment 1: excerpts from an ongoing exploration of GJC's history by Charlotte Peitzman

IN THE BEGINNING

The organizational history of GJC is a story of how small groups of Jewish families who met in homes for socializing, prayer, and study became a large membership assembling in a massive landmark building. At every turn in this development, the education of our children emerged as the decisive priority.



In the 1930s the spacious, leafy neighborhoods of East Falls, Germantown, Mount Airy, and Chestnut Hill attracted Jewish residents from Strawberry Mansion, West Philadelphia, and South Philadelphia because of the easy commute to center city and the natural splendor of the Wissahickon Valley Park.

Some of the young new Jewish residents of the Northwest were affiliated with synagogues in their old neighborhoods. Others had drifted from active religious

practices but felt a strong need to return when their children arrived. A group of slightly older families was already locally established. Those not affiliated with a synagogue held Sabbath services in homes during the year and rented space in the neighborhood for the High Holidays.

The Germantown Fellowship, a Jewish men's fraternal and cultural club, offered informal adult education at its monthly meetings at the Delmar Morris Hotel on Cheltenham Ave.

The Fellowship later merged into the Germantown Jewish Centre and became the nucleus of the Men's Club.

The newly arrived and the established families coalesced around the need to educate their children Jewishly. Private homes were used, then the families pooled funds to rent space above the shoemaker shop at Greene St & Carpenter Lane. From 1934 to 1936, Rabbi Abraham E. Milgram was engaged to supervise Hebrew and Sunday School instruction.

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WHERE TO EDUCATE?

The growing number of families pressured for more space and permanent quarters, not only for a religious school but also for a modern synagogue-center. Their vision called for social and cultural activities, lectures on current events, chapters of B'nai B'rith and Hadassah, and Jewish Boy Scout and Girl Scout groups.

As evidence of this thinking, the name Germantown Jewish Centre was selected and has remained despite many attempts to give it a Hebrew title. Two events in 1936 marked the official launch of Germantown Jewish Centre. On March 16th the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania issued GJC its non-profit corporate charter. On September 28th GJC held its first congregational meeting at the downtown Benjamin Franklin Hotel at 9th & Chestnut Streets.

Between the two events, the charter enabled a leadership team to elect officers and to set an initial annual budget of \$6,500 (today's value would be \$148,655!)

The new officers compiled a list of Jewish people they knew in the Northwest and invitations for September 28th were mailed. 100 attended, with 92 pledging a total of \$3,200. in membership subscriptions. Growth was quick and impressive: our March 1937 dinner dance souvenir book showed 237 family units and an enrollment of 85 school children.

The congregation voted to affiliate with the Conservative movement in 1940.



Our first elected officers were Edward N. Polisher, Esq., President; Benjamin J. Miller, Vice President; Morris Rudofker, Vice President; Isadore N. Weber, Treasurer; William R. Ladenheim, Financial Secretary; and Harold H. Charlop, Secretary.

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OUR FIRST HOME

It emerged that the goal of educating our children in an appropriate physical space required major investments of leadership talent, business connections, time, and money. Conceived during the Great Depression and completed after World War II, the ideal took ten years to become a reality.

In September 1936 GJC rented the second floor of the Ross House annex of the Pelham Club at 6815 Emlen Street. This remained our home until November, 1947.

Our Ross House quarters were the largest auditorium in the city at that time. It had a seating capacity of 750 at tables and 1,200 in chairs for lectures. It was more than adequate to hold religious services in the front portion, with the stage as our bimah, and for Oneg Shabbat or Kiddush in the rear portion. Using low movable partitions, the sides could be set up for classrooms. A full kitchen was available to the side and ample check room and restroom facilities were in the lobby.

The house committee, led by Max Silberman, worked feverishly to fix up, clean up, build partitions, and make the space attractive and functional. On November 11, 1936, an appropriate ceremony was held and we began to function fully.

Rabbi Solomon Grayzel, PhD, noted Jewish historian, Gratz College professor, and editor-in-chief of the Jewish Publication Society, agreed to be our part-time spiritual leader until a permanent rabbi could be hired. Dr. Grayzel quickly assembled a teaching staff with Dr. Gershon Gelbert as School Principal and Activities Director and also instituted regular Friday evening and Saturday morning services.



1942



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GROWING PAINS

Before long, the leadership of the Centre recognized the deficiencies and disadvantages of the Ross House rented space. Above all, membership and student enrollments were growing. The best way forward was to purchase land and design buildings for our specific needs. A search committee, led by Sidney Markovitz, was set up for the acquisition of land. Sidney Quitman was put in charge of the building committee to raise funds for the project.

Rabbi Elias Charry, a New York native and a 1930 graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary, arrived at GJC in mid-1942. Rabbi Charry plunged into his new position by appealing for building funds at 1942 Kol Nidrei services. His effort drew pledges of \$50,000 (today's value of \$984,242), including \$10,000 (today's value of \$96,848) from the Women's Club.



After careful consideration of all available vacant lots in the area, our present six-acre triangular site at Lincoln Drive and Ellet Street was selected. It was especially attractive because of its prominent location, ample ground, and affordable price. Through the services of Ben Lanard, a prominent realtor and good friend of many of our members, the property was bought for \$10,400.

At the time of purchase, the ground was nothing more than a weed patch with some scrub trees. All of the eligible architects in the city were contacted and asked to inspect the site and submit a plan for buildings. The results were not encouraging. They objected that the slopes were too severe, and the site was mostly hard rock outcroppings with very little topsoil. Considerable blasting would be necessary to obtain a conventional level floor building. With one exception, they advised us to sell it and look for a flat piece of land.

1945



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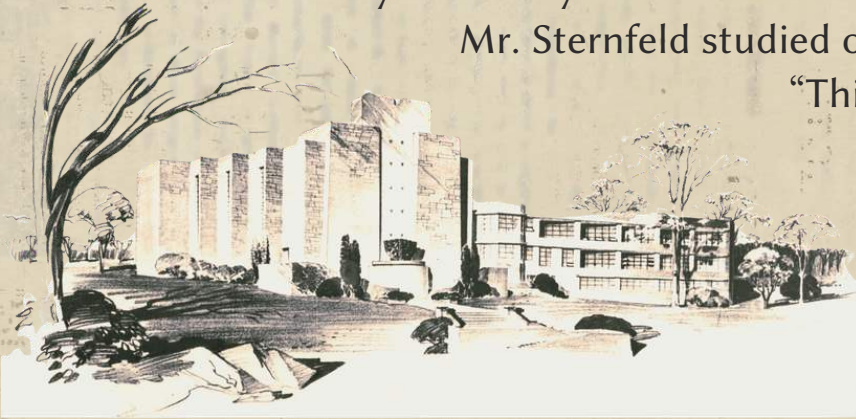


GJC

PLANNING TO BUILD

The one exception was Harry Sternfeld, F.A.I.A., a professor of architecture at the University of Pennsylvania who was known as an “architect’s architect.”

Mr. Sternfeld studied our site carefully and said, “This
“This land and project are an architect’s dream and challenge. I would be honored to work on it.” He promptly submitted a hand-drawn sketch of his concept.



In March 1945 a planning committee was formed, who felt that we would need approx. \$125,000 (\$2,243,094 today) for the school building, and \$375,000 (\$6,729,282 today) for the synagogue building. It was decided to erect the school building first and use it as a temporary sanctuary and social hall as well.

The final plans called for a library and eight classrooms on the second floor and a kindergarten

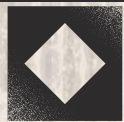
and two classrooms on the first floor. The balance of the first floor, starting with the fire doors halfway down the hall, would be the temporary sanctuary.

The first floor would also have a large office, with a back room for an educational director and an upper room for the rabbi’s study. The lower floor was to be one open space with kitchen facilities, which could be used for social functions, school assemblies, and meetings.

All this was to be juggled by the architect into the building, using the natural contours of the ground to avoid expensive rock blasting.

In May 1945, after considerable modification of plans and negotiation of price, the building contract was awarded to Laub Brothers for \$161,000. Maury Laub was a Centre member and his brother Albert was a social friend of many Centre members.

1946
1947



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GJC

FIRM FOUNDATIONS

Ground breaking ceremonies for our school building took place in July 1946.



We were still faced with shortages and rationing that lingered from World War II. The construction committee, chaired by Maury Kolsky and Maurice Fisher, had to make many optional decisions, involving cost limitations, material substitutions, and space allotments. One of the important decisions was the selection of the stone to be used in the outer walls of the building. It was to be a prominent and distinguishing feature.

After careful research, Mr. Sternfeld recommended a granite quarried at Port Deposit, Maryland. The subcontractor selected for the masonry work was Joseph A. Casacio, who employed many expert stone masons trained in Italy. Mr. Sternfeld's standards were very demanding. Every stone corner had to be square cut, without spalling. The pattern of stone sizes had to be pleasing to his eye, or else the section was torn down and redone.

On May 18, 1947, an impressive cornerstone-laying ceremony was held. At the dedication on November 30, 1947, we had 450 families. What a wonderful feeling! After many years of dedicated hard work, after improvising in makeshift quarters for over 10 years, it was like paradise to move into our own building, professionally designed as a school for our children.

1951
1977



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COMPLETING THE BUILDING

Groundbreaking for the sanctuary building took place on March 11, 1951. In 1954, the congregation, numbering 650 member families, celebrated the sanctuary's completion, pictured below.



*Jay Furman, Leon Magil, Leo Dushoff,
Harold Laden, Sidney Quitman, Ed Lane*



Germentown Jewish Centre - Dedication Services - May 21-22, 1954



1978



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GJC

RABBI HAHN & RALPH GRANGER

Rabbi Sanford Hahn came to GJC in 1978. A native of New York, he was inspired to enter the rabbinate by his childhood rabbi at Park Avenue Synagogue in Manhattan. He received ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1953 and earned a master's degree in Counseling Psychology.



GJC membership was at a low ebb with little over 300 household units. Rabbi Hahn matched the congregation's social justice leanings by co-chairing the Philadelphia Black-Jewish Clergy Association with Reverend Bill Moore of the 10th Memorial Baptist Church.

In 1982 Rabbi Hahn helped the Northwest Division of the Jewish Community Relations Council create an interfaith cultural celebration of the legacy of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.

Likewise, our continuing annual Ralph Granger Memorial Shabbat was instituted. It pays tribute to our beloved custodian, Ralph Granger, a Christian African-American who cared for our building and members with great devotion from 1947 to 1982.



1989

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GJC

SHELTERING THE UNHOUSED

Rabbi Hahn's outward focus oriented GJC volunteers to tackle the city's unhoused population crisis.

Around 1989 our Social Action committee, chaired by Maxine Margolies, answered the city's Department of Human Services call for volunteers to distribute sandwiches to unhoused persons who sought shelter in downtown public transit stations.

In 1991 GJC again answered a call to help the unhoused, this time from the North-west Interfaith Movement, to cluster with local churches as free shelter sites through the national Interfaith Hospitality Network.

Centre members shouldered the labor and logistics of making our school building a hospitable and functional overnight home. Classrooms were used as bedrooms and the Temin Canteen Room served as the dining room and social center. GJC created a stall shower for the guests in the Temin restroom.

We opened our doors to the homeless during December, 1991 and only the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic ended our 28 years of hosting after December, 2019.



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HAVURAH JUDAISM

Following Rabbi Hahn's retirement in 1994, we selected Rabbi Leonard Gordon as our next religious leader.



One of the organizations that drew Rabbi Gordon's allegiance in particular was the National Havurah Committee. A loose federation of many small, East Coast havurot (fellowships), the NHC described its position as "post-denominational." In the 1980s Rabbi Gordon served a term as the volunteer chair of the organization.

For prayer, Havurah Judaism favored davening in small, warm, informal, democratic group settings. Key features of participatory Havurah prayer were gender equality and the lack of a presiding rabbi; decisions about conducting services were reached by egalitarian group consensus.

The vicinity of GJC had its own history of havurot going back to the 1970s. A 1977-79 pamphlet issued by the Northwest Division of the Jewish Community Relations Council stated, "Northwest Philadelphia leads the area, if not the country, in developed alternative Jewish groups."

In 1974 Mike Masch and Rachel Falkove led a small delegation from the Germantown Minyan that secured permission from

Rabbi Charry to meet on its own for prayer at the Centre.

The Minyan grew quickly, attracting young families who settled in Mt. Airy seeking a hamish setting to raise their children, as well as a more transient population of graduate students. Eventually the Germantown Minyan evolved into two prayer groups, the Dorshei Derekh and Minyan Masorti Minyanim, that now flourish at GJC.

1999



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PLURALISM AND GJC

Committed to the presence of the Minyanim, Rabbi Gordon instituted many changes that made pluralism the norm of GJC culture.

Punning on the new word “cinplex” that describes a multi-screen movie theater, he dubbed the Centre a “synaplex.” A glossy ticket mailed weekly to every member gave the bearer admission to an innovative lineup of multiple options every Shabbat.

The facelift for the Centre’s identity came with a new logo. The sketch of our building that had appeared on all printed matter for 45 years was retired. It was replaced by a stylized seven-branched menorah with a leafed stem as its central shaft, an image that fuses tradition and growth.

A 60th anniversary fund-raising campaign in 1996, led

by David Kraut, Curt Pontz and Steve Segal, brought in \$1.8 million that financed major physical changes.

In 1999 the original fixed pews in the Charry Sanctuary and Magil Chapel were removed and replaced with upholstered chairs. When the chairs were set in semi-circles, daveners could be aware of each other as a group and experience the communal style of Minyanim prayer.

The flexibility of replicating Minyan-style seating throughout the building enabled Rabbi Gordon to promote the inter-dependent, cooperative exchange of spaces among prayer groups.

In the late 1990s the congregation voted positively for Dorshei Derekh to affiliate with the Reconstructionist movement. In 1998 Dveera Segal, a member of Minyan Masorti, was the first GJC president to come from the minyanim. A good number of congregational presidents, officers, board members, and committee chairs from both Masorti and Dorshei have followed since.

Energized by change, GJC was thriving. By the early 2000s membership was up to 500 households, where it continues to hover. In 2009, Newsweek magazine named GJC one of “America’s 25 Most Vibrant Congregations,” lauding it as “a model for pluralistic and egalitarian worship and community.”