

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION

PHOTOGRAPHED, CURATED, AND WRITTEN BY AYELET PEARL

THIS is but a small sampling of our archives; a gentle nod to the rich history that is Astoria Center of Israel. Ninety years of Jewish life in Astoria cannot be easily culled into a three-wall exhibition; our vast selection of documents, portraits, and prints could fill a museum. The back rooms of the building hide records that speak not only to the development of the Center itself, but the Queens Jewish experience throughout momentous historical events, from humanity's worst affronts to its greatest achievements.

BEGINNING with board minutes from 1925 detailing what was intended to be the Astoria Talmud Torah Association, the curated selection seeks to touch upon the defining moments in both world Jewish history and synagogue development. A promising message from Rabbi Joshua Goldberg on our First Anniversary is followed by one of his 1938 letters to family, friends, and colleagues in Europe and Palestine on the eve of the Holocaust. But it was during this dark time in world history that the synagogue began its redesign of the bimah: the blueprint for the side walls and pulpit dates to 1939. Such juxtapositions are especially prominent in the popular ACI Bulletins. Marriage announcements, Friday night service notices, giveaways, galas, and calls to join the synagogue and Hebrew School snake between discussions on Anti-Semitism and excerpts of articles and speeches on the reestablishment of a Jewish homeland.

THE Bulletins, dating back to 1926, were as much a connection to the Center for members in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s as they are today. The soldier who received the Bulletin, wherever he was abroad, is in excellent company seventy years later. Many of our honorees who are no longer able to come to synagogue as regularly as they wish keep up with ACI events and happenings through the Bulletin and its modern compliment, the Friday Flyer.

UNLIKE the Journals - which undoubtedly provide another rich source of information - the Bulletins focus on the day to day, and provide a slightly less curated look at past decades. They give voice to individual members and, in the process, provide a glimpse of changing culture, a theme that is obvious throughout the exhibition. The roaring 20s, with its affinity for flashy flamboyance, gave way to the Great Depression; fabulous ads for prizes and dances took on a more sensitive (although not diminished) tone with an awareness of economic hardships. The lead up to World War II was discussed at length; both from the American perspective - many servicemen and women were members of the synagogue - and from a Jewish one, calling on the community to act for, donate to, and help their brethren in Europe. ACI, a thriving Jewish community center, was the central point for lectures,

fundraisers, and drives throughout this time. After the end of the war, the sound of bride and the sound of groom was once again heard throughout Astoria, and by the 1960s, a new generation of families was looking to enroll their children in Hebrew School. It is at this time that many, although not all, of our honorees joined the synagogue.

MUCH like ACI itself, the honorees of this service are not simply what we wish them to be, and their names cannot be tokenized in a fleeting moment of communal appreciation. A synagogue can only be what one invests in it; similarly, the lives of these nonagenarians will only hold meaning if we choose to engage with their stories. For both ACI and our fifteen honorees, it must not only be the happenstance of age, as Anni Newbeck quipped, that has rendered them worthy of our accolades, but rather, their unwavering fealty to sustaining each other. “Without them, there wouldn’t be a synagogue,” reminisced long-time congregant Mark Sohmer, but without the synagogue, these stories would not be what they are.

THERE are those who have been part of the synagogue since its founding, like SYDELLE DINER (née Eisenberg), who has lived her life tirelessly continuing a long standing family tradition of active involvement. MARTHA MICHAELS (née Sklarofsky), too, grew up at ACI, and contributed much throughout her many years as both a member of the congregation and the board. Many others, however, joined the synagogue once their children reached Hebrew School age, and all maintained some degree of involvement for the years to come. ANNI NEWBECK grapples with many theological aspects of Judaism, but dutifully enrolled her daughter in Hebrew School, and has maintained her membership out of a sense of commitment and loyalty. AL and SARAH OPOLINER, who were involved with the Center when they lived in New York, still retain associate membership while living now in Florida. RUTH SCHWARTZ regularly attended services with her late husband. But there are those who found and embraced a home here in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and gave back to it certainly as much as they received. ROSE RATNOFF, AL and JEANNE SIEGEL, LOTTE FINNOCHIARO, and DR. ROBERT FELSHER, a long-time member along with his wife, GRACE, all held numerous positions on the board and/or committees, and through their rigorous attendance of nearly all services and functions, contributed invaluable to the social and spiritual success of the synagogue. ESTELLE REIFF, a neighborhood figure who has become more involved in the Center with age, is especially recognizable for her love of the Purim and Chanukah parties; RALPH and RUTH SCHLOSS, related by marriage to a multi-generational founding family, joined only in recent years, and have quickly found community as well.

ALTHOUGH their stories vary, every single one of these nonagenarians believe deeply in their commitment to ACI and Jewish life. Throughout the ups and downs of the Center, there has always been a deep seated love for Judaism and Zionism - whether as a national identity, an ancient heritage, a religious philosophy, or a kindred community. It is easy to lose oneself in the nostalgic allure of our history, but it would be doing an injustice to the honorees and the Center. The vigorous spirit evident in these men and women who are in their tenth decade of life seeps through the pixels in these photographs and imbues our building with the promise of decades to come. The spiritual, financial, and time spent investments of generations old and new, coupled now with the synagogue's revitalization under the leadership of Rabbi Jonathan Pearl, marks a clear vision for our future. This commitment to the preservation and continuity of our peoplehood is a tradition which has sustained us not only for four thousand years, but for ninety.

**MANY THANKS FOR INVALUABLE ASSISTANCE
IN ORGANIZING, CURATING, AND LEARNING TO:**

SUSAN COHN | JUDITH REINHART | RABBI JONATHAN PEARL | MIKE TELLO | PHYLIS HOCHBERG | IRENE SPRUNG | RUTH RAKOFSKY | AUSTIN DuPOUX | MATTHEW HASDAY | GERSON KOENIG | ROBIN O'HANLON | ELAINE BRICHTA | EITAN PEARL | RACHEL ROSEN | DARIA POPESCU | LOU EPSTEIN | JUDY PEARL | MARK SOHMER

**A CATALOGUE CHRONICLING THE EXHIBIT AND FEATURING ADDITIONAL
INTERVIEW TEXT WILL BE AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE COMING SOON**