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## Local Jewish history gets a home



Larry Yudelson • Cover Story  
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*The Jewish Historical Society of North Jersey is moving hundreds of boxes of its artifacts to the Barnert Medical Arts Complex in Paterson. PHOTO BY JERRY SZUBIN*

Long before Teaneck became a kosher restaurant mecca, before the largest Orthodox synagogue in the state grew in Englewood, and before Chabad opened enough branches to reach every corner of the country, the Jews of northern New Jersey lived in Paterson.

Last week, the Jewish Historical Society of North Jersey, guardian of the region's vast and storied Jewish past, began moving into Paterson's Barnert Medical Arts Complex, bringing the area's Jewish history back to the city where it all began.

"We have been wandering for almost 30 years and are finally entering into the Promised Land," said Jerry Nathans, the man who has virtually single-handedly shepherded northern New Jersey's Jewish history for more than 20 years.

A founding member of the historical society, Nathans, now 81, lamented during a series of interviews last week that it had fallen by the wayside in recent years, almost relegated to the history books it seeks to preserve. But this new development has given him hope for the future of this area's past.

"We are the 'People of the Book,' and as such, we have an obligation to continue and perpetuate that story," Nathans said. "This tells us where we came from and how we might have done it."

Nathans has a lot of stories to tell.



*Jerry Nathans, president of the Jewish Historical Society, and Jeffrey Moll, managing partner of the Barnert Medical Arts Complex, review plans for the society's space. JOSH LIPOWSKY*

At its height, the society was a strong link to the once thriving, multi-faceted Jewish world of Paterson. With a board of directors and a dues-paying membership of 70, it sponsored lectures, exhibits, and other events throughout the years.

In 1978, a woman came to the North Jersey Y looking for information about her husband's grandfather, a rabbi who had lived in Paterson during the previous century. The librarian,

Sylvia Firschein, realized that even though the Y had originated in Paterson, she didn't know how to help this woman because nothing had been preserved. Firschein put out a call for tales of the city's past. In response, Jerry Nathans and Reeva Isaacs began interviewing people around Paterson, trying to learn as much as they could about its once-thriving Jewish population.

In 1979, as he and Isaacs transcribed tapes from almost 100 interviews, the pair realized there was so much more out there to recover. Thus began the Jewish Historical Society.

"We realized that Paterson history was being lost," Nathans said. They wrote to the Jewish Community News asking its readers for any memorabilia and records of Jewish Paterson. As the responses came in, the society came about.

"As we were collecting, we realized we needed an organization, rather than two people just collecting," Nathans said. "We started pushing it."

In May 1986, the as-yet unincorporated society self-published "Our Paterson Jewish History," with details dating back to the 1800s. A second edition, with photographs, was published in 1987. Both runs, each about 500 copies, sold out.

The society filed for incorporation on June 15, 1989. In its heyday, during the '90s, the society put out at least two newsletters a year, and hosted lectures on topics such as the public image of the American Jewish woman, Jewish farming in New Jersey, and the relationship between genealogy and history. It also hosted exhibits at the Fair Lawn library, the Paterson Museum, and Yavneh Academy, which had originated in Paterson before moving to Paramus.

The collection was housed at the YM-YWHA of North Jersey in Wayne but soon ran out of space. Nathans stored some of it at his family's framing store in Paterson, closed in 2007, but most of it has been sitting in boxes in Frederick Raubinger Hall at William Paterson University, unsorted and closed off from the public eye.



In 2002, Martin Greenberg, then executive director of the Jewish Federation of North Jersey in Wayne, arranged for the society to move most of its collection to WPU. Nathans completed the move in March 2004.



*More than 300 boxes are stored at William Paterson University and need to be moved to Barnert. PHOTO BY JOSH LIPOWSKY*

Before the JFNJ merged with the UJA of Bergen County & North Hudson (to become UJA Federation of Northern New Jersey), it had planned a \$2 million extension to the Wayne Y, part of which was to become the new home of the Historical Society. But after the merger, the expansion never materialized.

The university has been “very generous,” Nathans said, during a visit there, but limited access to the building has made it difficult to bring in volunteers and the limited space has made it difficult to unpack.

“I can’t do anything here,” he said, pointing to the stacks of boxes. “It doesn’t make any sense to sort anything.”

Hard times befell the organization these past 10 years. Tragedy struck the society and Nathans in 1999 when his wife, Rita, died. “Everything came to a halt with her passing,” Nathans said. He had been a driving force in the society, but withdrew to focus on his business. Isaacs, who had helped Nathans 20 years before with the interviews that started it all, had moved to Princeton. The other members of the board began dying off or moving away. The newsletter ceased production and the lectures stopped.

“It’s been a different world since my wife died,” Nathans said.

He is the last caretaker of 150 years of history, packed into some 300 boxes. Paintings, banners, and boxes filled with photographs and documents, detailing events from synagogue groundbreaking to synagogue closings, as well as everything in between, have remained locked away. Worse for the society than its inability to catalogue its collection has been its lack of visibility. As people sift through their parents’ and grandparents’ belongings, they toss out treasures of the past rather than donate them to the society because they don’t know it’s there.

“So much has been thrown out because people don’t know we exist it’s pathetic,” Nathans said. “I read obituaries of people who were active in the community — and what happens to their papers? In most instances they get thrown out.”

Martin Rittenberg of Wayne, the society’s treasurer and only other remaining board member, joined in 1990. He helped Nathans move into WPU but said his role is mainly to maintain the society’s bank account — enough to cover minor expenses, he said — and keep track of any donations, which have been few and far between in recent years.

“He’s the guy behind it all,” Rittenberg said of Nathans. “It’s his labor of love, really.”

### **Coming home to Paterson**

At one time, Paterson was home to Jewish philanthropists, such as Nathan Barnert, the former mayor of Paterson who is credited for helping build the Jewish community there, while the Paterson Hebrew Free Loan Association provided interest-free loans to members of the Paterson and Passaic Jewish communities for 106 years before expanding to Bergen County in 2006.

As the Historical Society has struggled these past few years, it had received offers from various Jewish organizations to host the vast collection — outside of northern New Jersey. Nathans refused to take the history out of the area, and now he hopes to put it on display in the city where it all began.

“They don’t belong in Cincinnati or New York or any of those other places,” he said of the artifacts. “They belong here.”

After World War II, Jews began spreading out to suburbia from major metropolitan areas and the smaller towns of Bergen and Passaic counties flourished while Paterson dwindled. Now, the historic Temple Emanuel there has been converted to a concert hall — its congregation has moved to Franklin Lakes — and all that remains of the city’s once-thriving Jewish community is the Barnert Medical Arts Complex, which was named for Nathan Barnert.

“It’s a nice fit conceptually because [the hospital] was founded by Nathan Barnert; it does have a Jewish heritage and history,” said Jeff Moll, managing partner of the Barnert Medical Arts Complex.

Moll hopes to create “a synergy” between the Historical Society and the hospital. He noted that although the hospital is a for-profit business, the agreement between the two organizations is “more of a mitzvah as opposed to a business plan.” (The society will pay rent, but Nathans declined to mention the amount.)

<b>Homeward bound, but help still wanted</b>	Given the hospital’s Jewish roots, Moll called it “a continuous cycle” that the two groups have come together.
The Jewish Historical Society may have a new home but, says its president, it still needs help. The society needs donations to help it continue to function, says Jerry Nathans, as well as an archivist, an accountant, and volunteers to help unpack and catalogue more than 100 years worth of history.	“I find it a little nostalgic,” he said. “It’s a nice home considering the Jewish history and tradition of the hospital.”
	For now, Nathans and his collection will occupy several rooms in the basement while renovations continue on the facility. Dozens of boxes have already arrived, but they represent only a small portion of the

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collection. Walking through the space,  
Nathans talks of plans to expand the  
storage area to 2,000 square feet and  
eventually transform it into a research

center where people can easily sort through records and photos. He and  
Moll speak of plans to create a display area in the main lobby and perhaps  
more after that.

Almost as a sign of proof of what Moll had said about the continuous cycle,  
Nathans opened one of the boxes and pulled out an old fashioned black  
medical bag, about 70 years old, he estimated. It had belonged to Dr. Morris  
Joelson of Paterson, who, Nathans said, “delivered many, many babies here  
at Barnert Hospital,” including Nathans himself.

With this new home, the tumultuous journey through the wilderness is  
seemingly drawing to an end for the society. After wondering if the century-  
plus old photos, records, and other artifacts would ever see the light of day  
again, Nathans is optimistic that northern New Jersey’s Jewish history will  
survive into the future.

“For some time I have wondered if I personally, like Moses, would not enter  
that Promised Land but would view it from afar,” he said. “I am grateful that  
HaShem has allowed me the pleasure of entering it.”