

Librarian's Lobby

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Helping a Researcher Learn About KINS

As a librarian I frequently help people with their research especially when they have to write papers for class. I am always amused when they come ask for two scholarly sources for a paper due the next day. Sometimes research just takes time to find the answers and writing takes time to develop. When my high school aged son, Asher, came to me to ask for help on his historical research, I was glad to help. I didn't realize that I would be involved in primary research on a topic that no one had ever written about.

The research was for the Chicago Metro History Fair. The theme is, Tragedy to Triumph and must be connected to Chicago. He needed a solid thesis and the research needed to be based on primary and secondary sources. His history teacher taught about the difference in sources and how to cite them. My son needed help defining a topic that he could find the resources and was within his ability. First he wanted to tell about synagogues that were destroyed by the Chicago fire. At first I thought there were none burned, but I learned from Morris Gutstein's book, *A Priceless Heritage* (New York, 1953) five were burned completely and the more than 500 Jews lost their homes. The sources that Rabbi Gutstein used were beyond the ability of my son to examine. That type of project would require more time and research skills than he has. The next topic was to investigate synagogues in Hyde Park. He would have needed to make calls and visit the synagogues. This was also beyond his time and resources and my ability to help him with logistics. Since he defiantly wanted to write about Chicago synagogues, he kept asking me about places that would fit the theme of tragedy to triumph. I suggested Agudath Achim in the Lakeview area. I knew the rabbi and that place has been trying to renovate the building and revive its previous glory. This place did not interest Asher.

I began to ask around. At a Friday night dinner at the home of Dr. Y¹, he suggested that Asher write about KINS². Asher lived through the time when KINS went from an almost dying traditional congregation to a vibrant, active Orthodox congregation. Dr. Y. reminded me about a fire that occurred in the storeroom shortly after the new group took over KINS. While the fire did little physical damage, the whole building was filled with smoke and caused many people to be saddened. Asher, a student in the pre-school that met in the KINS building then, had a regular school day on the day of the fire. I remembered entering the building and smelling smoke on that day, but Asher and his teacher at the time didn't remember it.

From the mid-1950 to the late 1980's KINS was a very active traditional³ congregation. KINS started as West Rogers Park Congregation in 1951 in a rented store front on Pratt Avenue. They bought an empty lot on that covered most of the block at the corner of North Shore and California Avenues shortly thereafter. The building was built in stages. The first part was the sanctuary which was really a multi-purpose room. Later classrooms and a dedicated sanctuary

¹ It is my custom not to mention living people's names in my articles without their permission. All the interviewees signed a form granting permission to Asher to use their names, the interview information, and sound recordings in his report.

² Congregation K'nesset Israel Nusah Seford, which everyone calls KINS.

³ Traditional is a variety of Judaism, mostly in Chicago that in the stream of observance is somewhere between Conservative and modern Orthodox. They use an Orthodox prayer book and their rabbis are from Orthodox yeshivot. Men and women sit together in the sanctuary and some use a microphone on Shabbat and holidays. In Chicago there was once a council of Orthodox and traditional synagogues. Today most of the traditional synagogues are waning.

were added. The community and membership grew faster than the building could keep up. At one time the KINS Hebrew School had 800 students and more than 1500 people attended High Holiday services. By the early 1990's attendance at Shabbat services was usually less than 75 and the daily minyan struggled to find the required 10.

I told Asher the story of metamorphosis of KINS is a perfect fit. Here was a congregation that almost had to close its doors because of dwindling membership. Because of the willingness to change and meet the needs of a changing neighborhood, today it is a strong active Orthodox congregation with beautiful facilities⁴. Even though he was young and didn't remember the change, he did know many of the prime movers.

I started to tell Asher the names of people he should interview. I thought that I would just be able ask people for interviews and Asher would be able to follow up. The people involved readily agreed to talk to him. They said, "Have Asher call me." I learned that high school aged researchers have big dreams of finding answers, but the road is full of excuses. Even though Asher knew all the people he was to interview, I had to set up the appointments and be there with him. I had to prepare him with background information on each person and their role in the period of change. He wrote the questions, but I supplied some of the follow up questions. I told all the interviewees that Asher is a high school student and not a skilled interviewer. The interview period had to be during his winter vacation from school. Since that was when I had time to help, his schedule was most flexible and the interviewees were available.

Unfortunately, Bernard Meer, who was one of the prime movers of KINS and honorary president, died a few weeks before Asher started his project. Bernie met Asher as an infant coming to shul with me for morning minyan. Bernie was "Mr. KINS" for more than 30 years. He saw the writing on the wall that the shul was going to close its doors unless something drastic was done.



In 1959 West Rogers Park Congregation merged with KINS, which had been on Chicago's West Side. On the left is a picture of that building dated 1921.

On the right is the ceremony receiving the sifre torah⁵ from the West Side.



⁴ KINS is an anchor of the community in more ways than one. In 2000 the pre-school closed and a local public school needed more space. The public school signed a deal to rent 8 classrooms. They remodeled the rooms and with the added rent KINS was able to make repairs and remodel other parts of the building.

⁵ Torah scrolls. Notice the men in the middle of the picture marching into the auditorium.



This is a picture of the cornerstone ceremony for the 2800 W North Shore building. Rabbi Moses Mescheloff is holding the brick. Below is the artist plan for the sanctuary.



Another person involved with the congregation, the hazzan emeritus, Abraham Mendelsberg, knew Asher and loved to kid him. Sadly, he too, died before the start of the project. This added a kind of urgency to recording some of the oral history.

The first interview was with Shmuel Brandman, who was the president of the group at Beth Itzhak that merged with KINS. Mr. Brandman's main concern was that the merger would be done peacefully. Some issues were not even discussed so that no one would be hurt. He said that if there was ever a problem, Rabbi Leonard Matanky⁶ knew how to smooth them over. Asher did a great job of asking questions and taking notes. However, the tape recorder did not work correctly. We learned to test the recorded before each interview.

The second interview was Zoltan Weiss and Joseph Samuels, both long time members of KINS. JS was one of the people who gave out the honors on Shabbat. ZW was a board member and a regular at KINS daily minyan. He was also a member of Beth Itzhak. These were old timers who remembered the shul and neighborhood through many changes. ZW helped carry messages between the leadership of KINS and Beth Itzhak. At this interview Asher learned an important lesson for all researchers. That is everything you hear, no matter how interesting, is not relevant to your project. Many stories added to the texture of understanding the context of the events, but one story ZW told did not have any connection to them. This kind of information I call noise. Since I am dealing with the background and "noise" of research, I will retell the story.

KINS had many regular members who attended daily and Shabbat services and drove to shul. The rabbis and leadership of KINS always tried to get members to learn more and be more observant. One of these members, Mr. Obler, attended daily and Shabbat services. He frequently led services during the week. He drove to shul on Shabbat even though he lived less than 0.5 miles away. After he retired the rabbi convinced him that he should walk to shul since he no longer had to rush anywhere after services. Eventually Mr. Obler agreed. One Shabbat morning, the sun momentarily blinded a careless driver and Mr. Obler was hit and killed as he crossed Pratt Avenue, a block from the shul. The family blamed the rabbi for his death. Even though logically it was not true, emotionally they never forgave the rabbi for making Mr. Obler walk to shul. The rabbi was very hurt. In remembrance of Mr. Obler, Mr. Weiss took his place as hazzan on Wednesday mornings.

⁶ The current rabbi of KINS.

This story will not be part of Asher's paper. We mentioned the story to other members of KINS and no one had heard it before. Mr. Obler was symbolic of many of the KINS members. They really wanted to be observant, but felt the economic pressures of making a living were much greater. They wanted to make sure their families were provided for. The children of KINS members moved in two directions. Some became much more observant than their parents and some moved further away from observance. As these children moved physically away to the suburbs or religiously to more observance, the membership declined.

We then interviewed Rabbi Joseph Ozarowski. He was once the executive director of the Chicago Rabbinical Council and a former shul rabbi in several communities. He has been a keen observer of the Jewish community in Chicago and nationally for more than 30 years. I have known him since high school and his son is friends with Asher. He gave Asher some insight to the trends and development of the Jewish community. He told us that no matter how much people want to change there is institutional inertia that slows the process. He was a rabbi in a suburban Elmont, NY synagogue that installed a mehitza⁷ in hopes of attracting young Orthodox families to the neighborhood. This shul, in contrast to KINS, did not succeed. They were a victim of demographics. People just didn't want to move to the neighborhood and the children moved away. This interview gave Asher information about another shul that tried, yet failed, to change. It gave Asher new ideas about asking questions in further interviews. Asher needed to learn more about the West Rogers Park neighborhood. Why was West Rogers Park different from Elmont?

We asked Rabbi Matanky, the current rabbi of KINS, to tell his version of the merger story. He essentially agreed with the other people we interviewed.

To answer questions about the neighborhood we went to the Library of Spertus Institute. Asher looked at everything we could find about the Jewish population of Chicago and the West Rogers Park neighborhood, but the published information was not helpful. We knew there a national and local Jewish population survey in 2000-2001. We found mention of this study including negative criticism, but the library did not have the document. Asher got special permission to view the archive material on KINS that was in the Chicago Jewish Archives. This is where it helps to have a father who is a librarian. The Archives is officially closed to researchers until the move to a new building later this year. I knew the librarians at Spertus and I was able to convince them to let Asher see the material. Here is where the difference between a high school student and a seasoned scholar differ. The Archives' box on KINS contained copies of newsletters and mailings. It was well arranged. Asher was not examine the material with the care and experienced eye of a scholar. High school students are not able to spot trends and make connections as well as experienced historians.

Two days later we went to the office at KINS. They could not find their archival records. Many of the merger meetings were informal without any minutes taken. They couldn't find their old newsletters. The best they could help us with was some old photos, unlabeled that were in a box. Some of the photos are included in this article.

The final interview was with Rabbi Moses Mescheloff, the rabbi emeritus of KINS and his wife. She sometimes acts as his spokesperson. Both are in their mid-90's. He was the rabbi of KINS from 1954-1982. He was honored by the mayor of Chicago and inducted to the Chicago in May of 2002 and the street in front of KINS was named in his honor. In his younger years he was an erudite, dynamic, and thoughtful speaker. Many of his sermons were published in the RCA sermon manuals. Today is suffering from hearing and seeing problems and can no longer give speeches or lead classes. The interview was very pleasant, but Asher had a hard time trying to

⁷ That is the divider between the men and women during prayer services.

To Rabbi Moshe Mescheloff



Best wishes, Mayor Richard M. Daley

come up with questions. He saved all the congregational newsletters and showed them to us. They were in chronological order and presented an interesting chronicle of the synagogue.

Mayor Richard M. Daley congratulates Rabbi Mescheloff on his induction to the Chicago Hall of Fame.

There are still many unanswered questions about both the synagogue and the neighborhood. Last Shabbat Asher had a discussion about his project with several members who remember other aspects of neighborhood and Chicago history. While this project is largely finished, the job is not done. We talked about additional areas of research that could be done over the next year.

What did I learn as both the father of the researcher and a librarian? First it was an opportunity to interact with my son on an intellectual level. We had long conversations about history and sociology of the community. As a librarian I probably learned more about the neighborhood than Asher did. I lived here many years and never knew some of the sociological and historical processes that were happening before my eyes. Much of my training was from printed sources. I was used to looking for monographs and articles for my research. This project showed me the kind of history that is locked in the minds of the people around us. They are willing to share, but memory is a funny thing. The questioner has to do research to figure out the correct questions

to pique the memories. Libraries do not have all the resources to gather and store the information historians need to analyze the past.

In addition to the history Asher learned, he learned how to prepare and conduct interviews, and how to have a conversation with others about his work and how willing everyone is to help him. He accomplished gaining a joy in learning as evident at se'udat shlishit⁸ where he was able to meet new people and tell them about his project.

A copy of Asher's project will be sent to the Chicago Jewish Archives and to Congregation KINS so that others may learn from his research.

Daniel D. Stuhlman is president of **Stuhlman Management Consultants**, Chicago, IL, a firm helping organizations turn data and information into knowledge. We are looking for new clients and opportunities. Visit the web site at **Stuhlman.biz** to learn more about knowledge management and what our firm can do for you. Previous issues of **Librarian's Lobby** can be found at: <http://home.earthlink.net/~DDStuhlman/liblob.htm>. **E-mail author**.

⁸ Third meal on Shabbat afternoon eaten between minchan and maariv in shul.