

National Museum of American Jewish History tells 'story of America through Jewish eyes'

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Left: The glass facade of the museum, above, represents fragility and openness, curator Josh Perelman says. At right, a projected ballroom scene dominates the "Choices and Challenges of Freedom" exhibit. Right: The Golda Och Atrium of the National Museum of American Jewish History. Jerry Seinfeld and Bette Midler will join weekend celebrations for the facility, which opens to the public Nov. 26.

In the 1960s, a popular national ad campaign showed miscellaneous people - a wizened American Indian, a Chinese elder, Buster Keaton, an Irish cop, an angel-faced African American boy - biting into a luscious deli sandwich, with the caption: "You don't have to be Jewish to love Levy's real Jewish rye."

The gist of that message - that the integration of Jews in America has helped shape the culture - is a founding principle of the new National Museum of American Jewish History. The museum, says George Ross, cochair of its board of trustees, is the first to explore how Jews have changed and been changed, given this country's unique opportunities and freedoms.

For 34 years a small collection in nearby Congregation Mikveh Israel, the museum occupies a sparkling new 100,000-square-foot building on Independence Mall, designed by James Polshek, architect of the Newseum and the Clinton Presidential Center.

Though not open to the public until Nov. 26, it is celebrating this weekend with a star-studded, headline-grabbing series of events featuring Jerry Seinfeld and Bette Midler, and boasting a guest list that ranges from Sidney Kimmel, Jeffrey Lurie, and Gov. Rendell to Vice President Biden, Rep. Bob Brady, and TV anchor Renee Chenault-Fattah.



Offerings from the museum, clockwise from above: Projected images of former U.S. Rep. Bella S. Abzug; a Jewish Relief Campaign poster; a photo of Julius Meyer, an early Jewish merchant in Nebraska, with several American Indian leaders; and images projected on a kitchen table at an exhibit focusing on Jewish migration to the suburbs.

That the latter three are not Jewish is precisely the point: The museum is as expansive in heart as it is sprawling in square footage. As Michael Rosenzweig, its president, said: "We're a Jewish institution, but not a religious institution."

After all, the curators attempt to cover only 350 years of a people whose history dates back several millennia. Despite the persistence of anti-Semitism, both covert and overt, the story of Jews in America is the story of a remarkable assimilation.

The five-story building includes fifth-floor event space, a basement auditorium and education center, and 25,000 square feet of gallery space containing more than 50 exhibits. They deal with immigration and industrialization, tenements and civil rights, anti-Semitism, Hollywood, high society, the borscht belt, Broadway, suburbia, and summer camp. They illuminate acts of courage and cowardice, prejudice and religious chauvinism. The museum lauds the contributions Jews have made to literature, science, comedy, and cuisine, and yet manages to make visitors - no matter what their religious backgrounds or beliefs - feel part of the extended family.

Because the museum, at Fifth and Market Streets, overlooks Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell on some of the nation's most richly historic real estate, its designers made an effort to connect to America's fundamental, if not always self-evident, truths.

"The theme of the museum is freedom," said curator Josh Perelman. "It is the story of America through Jewish eyes." The glass facade, he explained, represents fragility and openness. "It gives a porous view to Independence Hall. It is a physical embodiment of the interaction between the particular story we tell inside here and the institutions outside."

About six years ago, a confluence of events occurred that led to the museum's emergence as a major historical institution. "Independence Hall was being refurbished. The Constitution Center was being built," Ross said. "The mall was coming alive with people, and we thought maybe this is the time to make it a real museum."

In 2002, the museum had become an affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution. But it needed more space to display its collection and broaden its reach, so the board approved plans to expand. Then, in 2005, the former headquarters for KYW became available.

"It was, arguably, the best spot on the mall. It's the 50-yard line. So the board decided to bite the bullet and buy it," said Ross, 77, chairman of the capital campaign. The \$10 million purchase price was a relatively small down payment on the \$150 million project. With the addition of two major contributions last week, he said, the museum had raised \$154 million, much of it donated

from other parts of the country. After the \$137 million in construction costs are covered, the remainder of the money, and future funding, will build the substantial endowment needed to sustain the institution.

"It's the location that's so powerful," Ross said. In any other spot in the city, "I'm not sure we could have pulled this off."

While Philadelphia is its home, he said, "this is a national museum. . . . You have about 80 Jewish museums in this country - Holocaust museums and museums about Israel and museums of Jewish art - but none are devoted solely to the American Jewish experience."

The museum, founded in 1976, has added to its original collection through many loans, including Barbra Streisand's costume from the 1983 film *Yentl*, Steven Spielberg's first 8 mm camera, and the piano on which Irving Berlin composed "Alexander's Ragtime Band."

Many exhibits contain interactive elements for children, who can climb onto a covered wagon, reach into an eye-level recessed box to turn a crank that flips photographs, and open a refrigerator stocked with images of 1950s nosh.



Films and audio recordings tell stories of seminal events. To illustrate the rise of anti-Semitism in the early 1900s, the museum commissioned a short documentary by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Alfred Uhry, who wrote *Driving Miss Daisy*.

Uhry tells the chilling story of the 1915 lynching of Leo Frank, a Cornell-educated Northern Jew. Frank worked for Uhry's great-uncle in his Georgia pencil factory and was convicted of murdering a 13-year-old girl. (He was pardoned posthumously.)

"No one in my family wanted to talk about Leo Frank," Uhry narrates. "But I knew about it."

Although they chronicle the triumphs and travails of Jews in America, the museum's exhibits present historical moments that tend to touch on universal human experiences - for example, the 18th-century story of Phila Franks.

Phila was the daughter of Abigail and Jacob Franks, leaders in New York's tiny Jewish community in the early 1700s. Jacob, a ship owner, led his congregation and was well-integrated into the city's largely Protestant elite. In 1743, Phila eloped with Oliver DeLancey, a fine young man from a rich, prominent family - and not a Jew.

Abigail, devastated, barred the couple from her home. The museum displays the letter Jacob wrote to try to appease her: "Wee live in a small place. And he is related to the best family in the place."

Abigail was not persuaded. She and her daughter never reconciled.

As Perelman noted, "Generations of families have wrestled with these issues."

Despite the effort to make the museum relevant to all of the anticipated 250,000 annual visitors, it is still a Jewish institution. The cafe is kosher. Compromises were made to keep the museum open on the Sabbath; the gift shop won't accept cash or process credit-card purchases until sundown Saturday. And the exhibits are filled with religious materials.

"If you want good Judaica," Perelman said during a preopening tour for members of the media, "those Torah finials over there are phenomenal!"

There are many ways to be Jewish in America, but if there is a common trait, it is knowing how to argue. No surprise, then, that an article this month in the national Jewish newspaper the Forward criticized the museum for its inattention to issues surrounding Israel and religion itself: "Only the slightest reference is made to Hasidism, for example, despite the fact that it constitutes arguably one of the most potent religious forces in American Jewish life today."



Overall, however, the writer approved. "Even if the decision to skew toward the universal . . . involves the sacrifice of some complexity . . . this choice allows the museum to earn its place on Independence Mall."

Not that anyone is likely to forget the violence and hatred aimed at Jews, but visitors nonetheless are given a sobering reminder as they enter, passing through a sophisticated security system.

The first floor features the "Only in America Gallery," examining the lives of 18 prominent Jewish Americans who were nominated by a public vote last year: Irving Berlin, Leonard Bernstein, Louis Brandeis, Albert Einstein, Mordecai Kaplan, Sandy Koufax, Estée Lauder, Emma

Lazarus, Isaac Leeser, Golda Meir, Jonas Salk, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Rose Schneiderman, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Steven Spielberg, Barbra Streisand, Henrietta Szold, and Isaac Mayer Wise.

You leave the museum through a room featuring other famous Jews whose contributions, one way or another, have had an effect on our culture. These include Adam Sandler singing "The Hanukkah Song" and Gilda Radner as Roseanne Roseannadanna fulminating about saving Soviet "Jewelry."

Two galleries invite visitors to tell their own stories. A contemporary-issues forum poses questions such as "Should government regulate where houses of worship are built?" and provides Post-it notes on which visitors can respond. In a recording booth, they can express their views or interview one another for videos that will be posted to a public website.

The museum creates a sense of belonging, said Jay Nachman, director of public affairs, whose own picture - taken when he was 5 years old - hangs in one of the exhibits.

"We all have our stories."

More Information

The National Museum of American Jewish History, at Fifth and Market Streets, will open to the public Nov. 26.

Hours: Tuesday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. The museum will be closed Mondays, Thanksgiving, New Year's Day, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and the first two days of Passover.

Admission: \$12 for adults;

\$11 for seniors 65 and older, active military, and youths ages 13 to 21; and free for children 12 and younger.

Information: 215-923-3811 or www.nmajh.org

Go online for museum and exhibit photos, articles, and video.

SPECIAL A&E SECTION

Articles explore the museum's exhibits, sensibility, architecture, and operations.

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http://articles.philly.com/2010-11-14/news/24955726_1_american-jewish-history-museum-lauds-national-museum