

JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

National Museum of American Jewish History Awarded National Grant

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Eva Davidson (right) with her fellow Marines. National Museum of American Jewish History, 1992.126.19. Gift of Judge Murray C. Goldman in memory of his cousin Eva Davidson Radbill

The National Museum of American Jewish History received a \$325,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) for an upcoming exhibit.

“1917: Gateway to the 20th Century,” which was co-organized by the NMAJH and the American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS) in New York, will illustrate how the events of a single year resulted in fundamental changes for politics and culture in America and across the world. The exhibit will be on display locally from March 17 through July 16, 2017. After that, it will spend five months at AJHS.

NEH, an independent federal agency, supports research and learning in the areas of the humanities. Over the 50 years of its existence, NEH has given about 6,200 grants to museums across the country, totaling about \$750 million for roughly 2,600 exhibitions.

The exhibit coincides with the centennial year of America’s entry into World War I.

Three major events occurred in 1917, which affected the Jewish population greatly: America’s entry into World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the signing of the Balfour Declaration, in which Great Britain pledged support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

“The exhibition allows us to focus on a particular moment in history, which is generally covered within our core exhibition,” said Josh Perelman, the museum’s chief curator and director of exhibitions and collections. “However, now we have the opportunity to go in depth and explore the transformative nature of this particular year.”

More importantly, Perelman said the events of that year established a political culture that still impacts our lives today.

“The exhibition provides an entirely new perspective in American history by exploring world events through the eyes of American Jews, who were eyewitnesses to events of that year,” he said of both American and diaspora communities.

In honor of the centennial, there will be many commemorations in Philadelphia and across the country documenting the significance and impact of that moment, but “as a culturally specific museum, we have the opportunity to add and enrich that discussion by viewing the events of that year,” Perelman continued, “and showing how those events brought about really significant changes in the way Jews understood themselves as Americans and Jews, and our country’s approach to minorities like Jewish-Americans as well as others.”

Perelman noted bridges between 1917 and other key years, such as the one between 1917 and 1924, during which America ended its period of immigration, an era when 2 million Jews immigrated to the U.S.

And between 1917 and 2017, some of the same issues still resonate (and are at the center of this exhibition): immigrants and their identities, war and society, politics in the Middle East, and attitudes of Americans toward minority and immigrant populations.

“All of those were fermenting during the year of 1917, and all of them are inherently present in our lives today,” he said.

For instance, Perelman said the Balfour Declaration was “a stepping stone and pathway from Zionism moving from a theory or a dream ... to a nationalist political identity on par with other European nationalisms.”

Perelman hopes visitors will not only gain insight into major events from a century ago through interactive programs, but understand the complexity of origins and consequences and how those moments are still relevant today.

This grant is the largest the NMAJH has received from NEH since opening the new building in 2010.

Prior to “1917,” NMAJH received a \$40,000 NEH grant in April 2016 for the spring 2018 exhibition, “Leonard Bernstein: The Power of Music,” as well as a \$300,000 grant in September 2013 for the 2014 exhibition, “Chasing Dreams: Baseball and Becoming American.”

“We acknowledge so few projects are recognized by NEH every year, and to have the confidence of NEH in this project and the really thoughtful insight of our NEH reviewers on the subject matter of the exhibition is just a thrilling motivator. We’re very grateful for that kind of recognition,” he said.

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