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Shabbat candle-lighting: Tomorrow, December 17 • 4:13 p.m. Friday, December 24 • 4:17 p.m.

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Brotherly love

Maplewood siblings make beautiful jazz together. Page 36



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Newark shul hopes to house state's first Jewish museum

by Ron Kaplan
NJJN Staff Writer

If Oklahoma can have one, why not us? That's the reasoning behind the creation of the Jewish Museum of New Jersey, to be located on the second floor of Newark's Ahavas Sholom, a 1,400-square-foot space on 145 Broadway that 50 years ago housed the synagogue's Hebrew school.

Joe Selzer, a real estate financier from West Caldwell, and an Ahavas Sholom board member, came up with the idea after a visit to Jewish Museum of Florida in Miami, which had been created under similar circumstances. He discussed the concept with Ahavas Sholom president Eric Freedman, who agreed that New Jersey, with its rich Jewish heritage (the first Jews arrived in the Garden State in 1698) deserved a museum of its own.

"The Jewish Museum of Florida is housed in a restored 1936 synagogue," Selzer said in a phone interview with *NJ Jewish News*. "Presently, there is no central place in New Jersey where the Jewish history of [the state] is exhibited. The Jewish Museum of New Jersey will fill this void."

The museum is seeking grants from public and private foundations, and Selzer projected that it would take about \$100,000 to rehabilitate the space. "After that, a budget of \$100,000 to \$150,000 annually will allow us to begin creating a Jewish history museum, including programs and permanent exhibits."

(According to Guidestar.com, a Web site that monitors non-profit organizations, the Jewish Museum of Florida, which opened in 1995, took in \$1.3 million in revenues in 2003, while expenses reached almost \$2.1 million. By comparison,

the much-larger National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia had \$6.9 million in revenues and \$2.7 million in expenses last year.)

Ahavas Sholom, Newark's last surviving synagogue, was selected as the site because planners felt it important to locate the museum in an inner-city environment. "In the last couple of years, we've hosted a few hundred sixth graders from Newark public schools for Holocaust education," Freedman told *NJJN*, adding that he saw the new facility "as a way to refine some of these educational opportunities [and] create a dialogue with non-Jews."

Referring to the former state poet laureate's false claim that the Israeli government knew in advance about the attacks on the World Trade Center, Freedman said, "We felt after some of the controversy after Amiri Baraka's post-9/11 poem that there are a lot of people out there who have a negative feeling about the Jewish community."

Although the 71-year-old building is currently open only on Shabbat, the ultimate goal is to make it accessible to museum visitors throughout the week.

According to Selzer, the museum has earned the support of many of the state's Jewish historical societies, some of which stage exhibitions of their own.

Bob Max, president of the Jewish Historical Society of MetroWest, voiced his support for the Newark project.

While acknowledging "an atmosphere in which many social services depend on the philanthropy of the community," Max insisted that "there is no competition" between the JHS and the proposed museum. Max said his agency serves to "research, preserve, and

protect" the history of the MetroWest area, while the museum would operate as a showplace for artifacts and exhibits. "We have offered them counsel and advice, based on what we do here," he said.

JHS curator Linda Forgosh concurred with Max's assessment. "What could be bad?" she asked, noting that any endeavor that promoted the history of the Jewish community was welcome. "The contributions of Jews in New Jersey have never received their due," she said. Forgosh added that the JHS would be more than willing to cooperate with the museum by offering the use of its traveling exhibitions.

If you build it ...

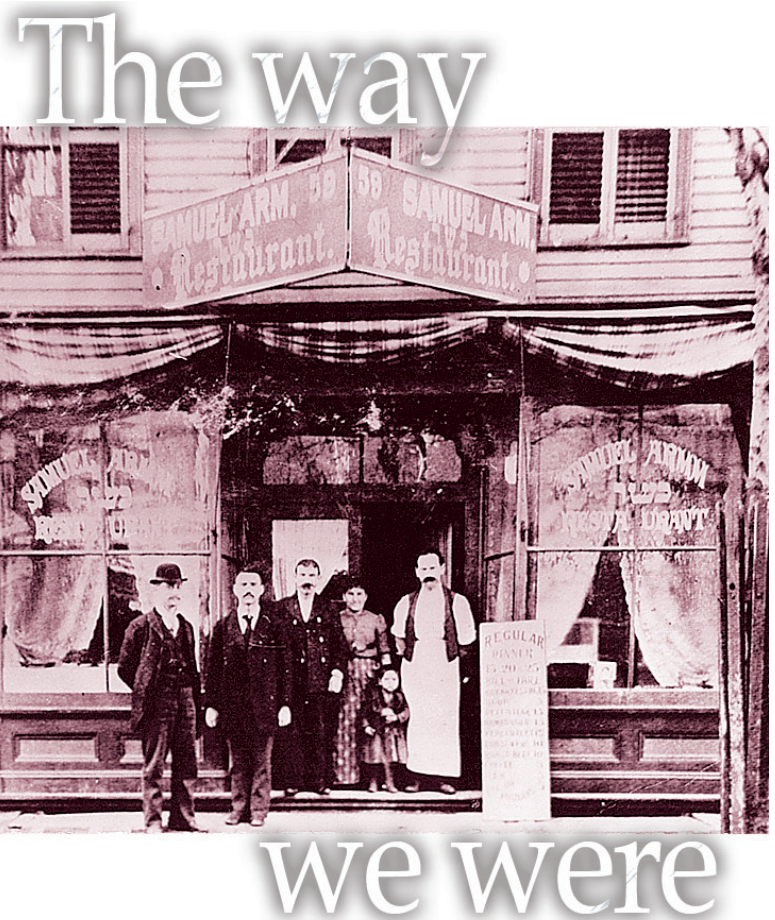
More than 125 people — including the entire board of the JHS, according to Max — attended an open house in October announcing the establishment of the museum. The goal of the kick-off event, according to Freedman, was "to inform the community of the goals and why [the] museum is important."

It was "a very positive day, not a fund-raising event per se," he said. "We were trying to get our tentacles out there and let the community know that Newark is important as a tangible opportunity to...support dialogue between the Jewish and non-Jewish communities."

Michael Rockland, professor of American Studies at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, was the featured speaker for the program. He showed pictures and offered accounts of the Jewish immigrant experience in the Garden State (including those of Holocaust survivors), as well as local Jewish involvement in the first and second world wars, based on his book *The Jews of New Jersey*, co-authored with his wife, Patricia Ard, a professor at Ramapo College's School of American and International Studies in Mahwah.

According to Selzer, "There is no [specific] target date" for opening the museum, which is still a work in progress. There are no paid staff members nor have any exhibits been acquired yet. "[They] will come as we raise money.... [eventually] we will be in a position to hire someone to do this on other than a volunteer basis."

"We're not interested in [just displaying] artifacts," said Selzer. Among the museum's programs will be a permanent "core exhibit" and a timeline of the history of New Jersey's Jews; the hosting of traveling exhibits; a symposium for New Jersey Jewish historians; and field



Armon's Kosher Restaurant in Newark, circa 1890s

Photos courtesy of Jewish Historical Society MetroWest

trips for Newark schoolchildren to take part in hands-on exhibits.

Organizers expect that temporary exhibits will include profiles of New Jersey Jews from the worlds of politics, sports, arts, and other occupations. Others will pertain to Jewish culture, such as holidays, Torah, and heirlooms; fine arts; and the diversity and multiculturalism of New Jersey's Jewish population. Toward this end, the museum is seeking information and materials from the public on congregational life, family life, and business, as well as oral histories, photographs, and ceremonial items. Outreach programs to public and Jewish schools, nursing homes, other synagogues, interfaith and interethnic programs as well as programs that enhance the curriculum of schools that teach about Anne Frank, the Holocaust, and anti-Semitism are also in the planning stages.

"We would hope to be able to have the space renovated and exhibits on display within a year," said Robert Kaplan, a retired press relations officer for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and a Caldwell resident, who also serves on the museum's board.

He suggested one of the first programs might include a discussion about the experience of the Jewish farmers of South Jersey during the first half of the 20th century.

Selzer said the museum is currently working with Philanthropic Innovations, a consulting firm, "to develop a plan to reach our goals: to establish a museum that has a very strong educational component that would serve the Jewish community, but equally and perhaps more importantly, reach out to the non-Jewish community and teach them about the Jewish experience in New Jersey."

Kaplan believes, to paraphrase a line from the film *Field of Dreams*, "If you build it, they will come."

"One of the things I realized was that most states do have a Jewish museum," Kaplan said. "Oklahoma has one, and here we are, the state with the fourth-largest Jewish population, and we didn't...."

"It's about time we had one."

For more information about the Jewish Museum of New Jersey, call 973-227-8854 or visit its web site, Jewishmuseumnj.org.

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Prince Street, Newark, circa 1950s