



# The CHAIowan

*Newsletter of the Iowa Jewish Historical Society*

*Volume Nine, No. 2, Spring 2007/5767*

## **The Kinder transport: Esther Bergh's Journey to England, Israel, and America**

*-Adapted by Krys Phillips from excerpts of the following pieces: Teacher of One Thousand Des Moines Jewish Children Memoir by Esther Bergh; Exile Experience: Esther Bergh and Inge Sadan on the Kinder transport of Jewish children to England by Amanda da Gloria Verfasserin, German student, English Final, Pestalozzi-Gymnasium Munchen; Esther Bergh; Oral History Essay by Elena Hermanson.*

*"... as a child you don't understand. You just try to lead as much of a carefree life as you can."*

Esther Bergh (whose given name was Edith Laster), beloved and respected preschool teacher to more than 1,000 of Des Moines' Jewish children, was born on June 7th, 1924, in Schwabisch Gmiind (Germany), where she spent her early childhood. She, her brother Herbert, born in 1925, and her sister Herta, born in 1930, were raised religiously but not severely orthodox by their Jewish parents.

All family members were later on considered to be *Ostjuden* (Eastern European Jews), which were the first the Nazis acted against, as her father originally came from Poland. After his death in 1934 the family moved to Munich. There Esther and her brother, who had earlier attended a regular school, attended Hebrew school.

Though sometimes being called *Hasslicher Juden* (ugly Jew) by other children and noticing the presence of the *Der Sturmer* (German Newspaper) on their way to school, they experienced the first years in Munich as really carefree and warm. Esther only began to realize that "something was happening" when Jews little by little were forbidden to attend any of the public places and her family experienced a narrow escape from a deportation to Poland in October 1938.

"I attended public school until 1934 or 1935," Esther remembers. "Then Jews were no longer allowed to go to public school. That's when I realized we were treated differently." Up until this point, Esther had been able to go to movies, the public swimming pool, and on walks without being scared. Then the Hitler Youth kids who were trained to hate Jews began throwing stones at the Jewish people. "It was November of 1938," she recounts, "that *Kristallnacht* (the night of broken glass) occurred. Jewish homes, businesses, and synagogues were destroyed. My uncles came running into our apartment telling us not to go out; I then became afraid to [leave home]."

The Lasters and many other Jews of Polish origin were put on a train taking them to a concentration camp - which they of course did not know at that time - as the train suddenly stopped and returned to Munich. It was the last known train that was sent back.

It was shortly after *Kristallnacht* that Esther's mother heard of the Kinder transport (On November 16th, 1938, the cabinet under Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain determined the entry permit to an indefinite number of Jewish children. The informal name of the open action, in which many organizations were involved, was Kinder transport). The only conditions

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*The IJHS is open on Friday afternoons  
from 1:00 to 3:00, June-August.*

"imposed by British government were the participants' maximum age of sixteen years and a guarantee sum of fifty pounds per child". After being signed up for the transport by her mother, things went very quickly: "Before we departed, I received a packing list, which reminded me of a camp list. We were only allowed to take one suitcase. My mother had two good dresses sewn for me. Shortly before I departed to England, my family put on a brave face and went to take a family photograph, which shows us all together for the last time."

Esther was the first of the siblings to travel to England.

*"Many children were crying ... I remember that I decided to put on a happy face."*



Esther, her brother, Herbert, her mother, her sister, and her grandmother -circa 1938

Esther recalls the moments before she left for England. The day came when the children were to board the *Kinder transport*. Esther didn't realize that this would be the last time she would see her mother. Although she was worried, she wanted her mother to feel she was doing the right thing by sending her away. Esther never showed her emotions. The last words Esther remembers hearing from her mother were, "We will see you soon."

Despite her anxiety, Esther looked at the *Kinder transport* as an adventure. Accompanied by several of her good friends, she left Munich in early January. "We were stuffed into these small cabin trains that had a strong sulfur smell. On the train, kids were getting sick; there was that horrific smell of vomit. Even though the smell was horrible, I was still one of the lucky ones who didn't get sick." Although terrified of what may happen, and fearful that the SS could come onto the train, Esther tried to stay positive.

As they first were told to behave and sit quietly by the strict SS men, it was a great relief for the children to cross the border of the Netherlands, where they did not feel like enemies anymore, but were welcomed and given food by Dutch Organizations.

After finally reaching Harwich on a ferry, they were brought to summer camps close to the sea where they had to wait until they could journey on to their future homes.

As it was a very cold winter and the camps were not built for winter weather, Esther became so sick that she was unable to travel, and after weeks in the camp was one of the last children to leave. Esther got over the disease, which had been a very hard experience for her - alone in a foreign country - and was brought to Manchester where she finally met her new family, a young couple with two little children.

*"When I came to England of course I missed that most: Being together with the family. That was the hardest actually."*

Esther, pictured with Lucy's children in Manchester, England -circa 1939.

As her foster-parents were very traditional and devout Jews, she soon had to change her name from Edith to the Hebraic Esther, which she has kept until today. In addition to that, she was given the task of working as the family's babysitter; instead of going to school, as she actually had expected to do.

Accepting her duties but not wanting to upset her mother, who "always wanted ... [her] children to have a good education"; she hid those facts in their correspondence which lasted until the outbreak of war. Later, after her sister had been sent to another family on the *Kinder transport*, Esther's foster-parents decided to support her brother to join the family. Therefore, he subsequently arrived in England in early October, 1939.

The application for her mother to come to England as a domestic, so that she could get a visa to flee from Germany, was sent too late. Esther's mother and grandmother became victims of the Nazis.



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While Herbert left to attend a regular school, Esther became a student of the Anna-Freud-Institute in London, and later on Teacher and Director of an institute called Born-Nurseries. Despite loving the work with children, Esther was not really satisfied with her life, as she did not feel at home, so that she soon decided to leave England. She left England for Israel.

*"I felt like a pioneer, and that's what I wanted to do. I came to Israel to build up the country."*

In 1949 Esther immigrated to the newly created state of Israel where she first lived in a Kibbutz and then in Jerusalem. She stayed there for six years, enjoying the country, the people and life there very much. At her sister's request she then traveled to the United States, where Herta and two of her uncles had settled, planning to soon return to Israel. However in Iowa, she met her husband, Warner - who also had been born in Germany, but had spent his exile in Shanghai - and in the end stayed here with him. Recently the two celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary.

Esther raised a family and continued working in early childhood education until she retired.



Esther and her brother Herbert  
in Manchester  
-circa 1941.

The following is an excerpt from Esther Bergh's Oral History:

When I started my association with the Bureau for Jewish Living 30 years ago, I certainly did not dream or envision that I would take pen to paper today and reminisce about 30 eventful and gratifying years of teaching.

All beginnings are difficult and it certainly was for me. Before coming to Des Moines I had taught in England and Israel. When I arrived here in Des Moines I was thrilled to find out there was an opportunity for me to teach a group of 10 Jewish preschoolers. It was up to me to create something out of nothing.

Over the years I had the fortune to teach approximately 1000 Jewish children of different ages. Imparting Jewish tradition and handing down our Jewish heritage is an important task. I found myself rewarded many times, when I saw the eager and excited faces of the students after mastering their first Hebrew reading, listened to their many questions and answers, and watched them grow from early childhood to proud Bar & Bat Mitzvah students.

*"There is a saying by the Rabbis, "Teaching can change the world."*

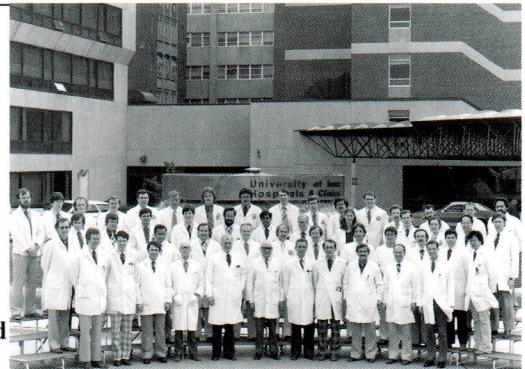
*The Iowa Jewish Historical Society thanks Mrs. Bergh for her many years of education to our community and for her continued teaching, as she educates our youth about the horrors of the Shoah.*

Please call 515-277-6321 to visit the Iowa Jewish Historical Society Casper Heritage Gallery. We are currently featuring the following exhibit:

*The Iowa Jewish Medical Community: A Heritage of Healing*

In addition, we currently display artifacts and photos from WW's I and II, the Holocaust, Iowa Jewish Business since 1858, as well as many other artifacts of Jewish Life in Iowa. We are open Fridays during the summer months, from 1:00 to 3:00.

Dr. Sidney E. Ziffren is pictured, outside the Boyd Tower, at the University of Iowa School of Medicine, May 1978. Boyd Tower contains the Ziffren Auditorium. Dr. Ziffren (uncle of Debbie Gitchell of Ames), is pictured in the bottom row, 6th person.



## Sam's Family

-written by Marcia Levitt Goldstein (daughter of Tiby Bassman), submitted by Joel Bassman of West Des Moines and edited by Krys Phillips

Sam (Scholom) Bassman was born on October 1, 1893 in Vilna, a city of winding cobblestone streets and a large Jewish population with a rich cultural and intellectual life. Vilna was part of Russia at the time that Sam was born, but in the years that followed, its nationality sometimes changed. Most of Lithuania was annexed by Russia in 1795, and it remained Russian until 1918, when independent Lithuania was re-established. The Vilna area was annexed by Poland in 1919 and the capital was Kaunas (Kovno); it became a republic of the USSR in 1940 and the capital was Vilnius (Vilna). Lithuania became independent again in 1990 and the capital has remained Vilnius. Sam's father was Hertz Bassman, the son of Elia and Chana (Schlossberg) Bassman. His mother, Libby (Libe), was the daughter of Sheppie and Goldie Siegel. Hertz and Libby married in 1885. Sam eventually had seven siblings: Jacob (b. 1886), Sara (Sorel), and Lizzie (b. 1893) were older than he was. Frieda (b. 1896), Eli (b. 1897), Anna (Chana) (b. 1900), and Hirsch (b. 1904) were younger. The native language of the family was Yiddish. Jews in Russia were being persecuted and living conditions in Vilna were becoming dangerous and oppressive, so the family started coming to America.

Sam's oldest brother Jake came first in 1907, at the age of 21 and married Sarah Siegel in 1913. Sarah was also from Russia; she immigrated in 1908 at the age of 15. By 1920, Jake and Sarah lived at 1411 Twelfth Street, Des Moines. They owned this home, which was worth \$4000 in 1920, and also Jake's grocery store. Altogether, they came to have four children, nine grandchildren, and eighteen great-grandchildren.

Next came Frieda, at age 12, in 1908. In 1919, she married Abe Carey (b. February 12, 1896). He had immigrated in the same year she had, in 1908. They adopted a son, Irwin, who was born in 1927, and, in 1930, were living at 1820 Pleasant Street in Des Moines, a home they owned worth \$8000. They also had a roomer, Loren Lawless, a young hat cleaner from Greece. Abe and Frieda were both naturalized citizens who reported to the 1930 census-taker that their native language was Russian. Abe worked as a merchant in a grocery store.

Sam came two years after that, a 17-year-old Russian tailor bound for Des Moines, Iowa. His steamship, the Hannover, left Bremen, Germany on September 22, 1910, and arrived in Galveston, Texas three weeks later, on October 13. Sam traveled in steerage. Sam Bassman married Anna Friedman (who had immigrated in 1908 at the age of 11) on January 3, 1915. Their first child, Tiby, was born nine months later, on September 17, 1915. A little over a year later, their second child, Harry, was born on December 2, 1916. Morrie, their third child, was born on June 18, 1922.

Tiby married Milton Levitt (b. December 3, 1914), a podiatrist who was the son of Max and Lillian Levitt, on August 20, 1939. When they were first married, they lived in Newark, New Jersey. Eventually, they moved to 440 Cedar Ave., a home they built in Highland Park. They had three children.

Morrie (b. June 18, 1922) served in the Coast Guard as a radio man aboard a troop transport ship from 1943-45. He is pictured, on the right, in 1944.

Morrie married Shirley Berg (b. April 17, 1921), the daughter of Abe and Lena Berg, on July 14, 1946. Their children are Roberta, born November 10, 1948, and twins Jeffrey and Joel, born March 29, 1951. They lived at 949 Cummins Parkway in Des Moines as the family was growing up, and Morrie ran a garage building company. Roberta married Robert Wynn (b. December 31, 1941) on August 20, 1972. (pictured on the next page).



**50<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary of Hertz and Libby Bassman, taken in 1935.**

Pictured from bottom to top on the left side of the table: Herschel Bassman, Pincus Finfer, Anna Friedman Bassman, Sam Bassman, Sarah Siegel Bassman, and Jake Bassman.

Pictured at the head of the table: Hertz and Libby Bassman. Pictured at the right side of the table from bottom to top: Charlene Bassman, Frieda Bassman Carey, Abe Carey, Molly Rosenberg Bassman, Eli Bassman, Chana Bassman Caplan, and Lizzie Bassman Finfer



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Pictured is the Bassman family at the 1972 wedding of Roberta Bassman to Robert Winn. This photo was taken at the Hotel Fort Des Moines, Des Moines, IA.

*Sam, as an adult, did not really know when his birthday was. When he was young, they didn't bother about that kind of detail, he said. So, when his young daughter, Tiby, discovered that her parents did not have birthdays to celebrate, she decided that they needed to have specific dates. Tiby's own birthday was September 17, and her mother said she was*

*born around the same time of year, so Tiby "assigned" her a birthday of September 15. Her father said his birth was around then too, but a little later, so she picked October 1 for him.*

At the time of the 1920 census, the family lived in rented quarters behind Sam's tailor shop at 1508 Grand Ave. in Des Moines. By the 1930 census, they'd bought a house worth \$5000 at 1710 Forest Ave. After Anna's death, Sam married his second wife, Esther.

Sam's sister, Lizzie Bassman, came to the U.S. in 1917 at the age of 24. She married Joseph Finfer (b. 1884) in 1919. when. He had emigrated from Russia in 1915. Both became naturalized citizens. Lizzie and Joseph had seven children. Their first child, Hyman Ray, was born in 1921, followed by Hannah in 1923, Goldie in 1924, Mark in 1925, Ida in 1926, Paul (Pesach), and Sydel (Shanie). Paul and Sydel were born after the 1930 census. At the time of the 1930 census, the family lived in Chicago, where Joseph was a *schohet*, a ritual slaughterer of chickens.

Sam's mother, Libby Bassman, sailed three years later, at the age of 54, with her two youngest children, Chana, age 20, and Hirsch, age 16, on the Nieuw Amsterdam, departing from Rotterdam. The ship arrived in Ellis Island on June 29, 1920. In 1930, Sam's sister Anna (Chana) and her husband, Leonard Caplan (b. May 17, 1900), lived at 1212 15th Street Place in Des Moines, a home they rented for \$32 a month. They got married in 1925 and their daughter, Sorita, was born in 1928. At some time after 1930, their two sons, Stanley and Gary, were born.

Leonard reported to the census-taker that he and his parents were born in Lithuania; Anna said that she and her parents were from Poland. Both spoke Yiddish as their native tongue. They both immigrated in 1920, and both were naturalized citizens. He worked as a grocery clerk. Leonard died in November 1978. She and Leonard had three children. Sorita married Leonard Greene and had two sons, Marshall and James. She lived on Cummins Parkway in Des Moines. Stanley also had two children, Randall and Laura.

Younger brother Eli arrived in America during in the early 1920's also. At the time of the 1930 census, Eli lived in Des Moines with his wife, Mollie (Rosenberg), and daughter, Charlene, 8 months old, in a home they owned worth \$11,000. Mollie was born in Iowa of parents who had immigrated from Romania. Eli was the proprietor of a grocery store. He was also a military veteran who had fought in World War I. Their son, Martin, was born October 2, 1937.

Sam's father, Hertz, also arrived in the early 1920's. He was naturalized on May 21, 1923 at the district court in Des Moines, Iowa. Shortly after his naturalization, Hertz, made a trip back to Europe to visit his remaining family, the children of his daughter Sara. He returned to America aboard the Olympic, which sailed out of Southampton in May 1924 and arrived at Ellis Island on May 21, 1924. Hertz's address in the U.S. was listed on the ship's manifest as 1508 W. Grand Ave., Des Moines, Iowa, the address of the shop and home of his son Sam

Sam's oldest sister, Sara, is the only member of the family who did not emigrate. She married Michael Butman and stayed in Vilna, but five of their children, Nathan (b. September 12, 1912), Dorothy (b. May 9, 1921), Lena (b. 1923), Benjamin (b. 1925), and Sonja (b. 1927), eventually did come to the New World. There were also two little boys, Shep-sekel and Yonkel, who died as children in Europe. When Sonja was less than a day old, Sara died, and the older children, Nate and Dorothy, had to take care of the younger ones.

The family had a large garden, where they raised potatoes, beets, and other vegetables which they would sell. They also had beautiful flowers, lilac trees, and apple trees, but they had to contend with religious discrimination and, at Easter time, pogroms, which forced them to lock themselves into their house for safety. Sara and Michael had, altogether, seven children, ten grandchildren, and seven great-grandchildren.

#### SAVE THE DATE:

The IJHS Fall Event dinner and concert will be held on Oct. 28, 2007 at Caspe Terrace. Our speaker and performer is Frank Perowsky, who will be finishing up a European tour with Liza Minelli.

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### Sam's Family, continued:

Sara's children, Dorothy and Lee, immigrated in March 1939, aboard the Gdynia-America Line's M/S Batory. After a stormy 12 days at sea, the two teenage girls landed at Ellis Island speaking no English. They were met there by their cousin, Tiby Bassman, and her fiancé, Milton Levitt, who helped the girls get on a train to go to Des Moines. Milton taught them their first words of English. "If anyone bothers you," he told them, "say 'Nuts to you.'" In Des Moines, 17-year-old Dorothy stayed with Chana and Leonard Caplan while 15-year-old Lee boarded with Frieda and Abe Carey. The girls made potato salad and sliced bologna at Leonard's grocery store to earn money to help their siblings emigrate. After a year, they went to Chicago to stay with Lizzie and Joseph Finer.

Sam's nephews and niece Nate, Benjamin, and Sonja came to America by way of Israel, where Benjamin served in the army, and then Canada, where Sonja settled.

Many thanks to the Blumenthal Oral History Project and Put It on Video in Clive for restoring 34 oral histories and Shoah Survivor Testimonies to DVD.

If you would like to view a DVD, please make an appointment at 277-6321 x 217.

### Recent Acquisitions:

- The Personal Papers and Artifacts of Holocaust survivor, Steffie Bresler, donated by Mr. Stephen Gross of Des Moines
- Jewish Ritual Artifacts, donated by Rose Sloven (from the estate of Hortense Dirsh)
- Newspaper inserts of the Jewish Press and other photos and artifacts from Doris Chrenen, of Denver, CO
- A New Year's Card, from Alma, Iowa, donated by Richard Borg, Attorney at Law, from Oklahoma
- A scrapbook from the early 20th century through the 1960's donated by Bernard Levine
- Personal photos and family histories of the Younkers and Mandelbaum families, donated by Mr. Bill Friedman of Des Moines
- Ames Medical and personal medical artifacts and photos from IJHS Patron Mrs. Debbie Gitchell of Ames

### IJHS Happenings:

In October the Waukee Chamber of Commerce visited the Caspe Heritage Gallery for a Wine and Cheese Reception. IJHS President, Joyce Swartz, and Jewish Federation Assistant Director, Steve Reitman, gave the group a tour of the gallery and facility.

In November Mrs. Patricia Hart's seventh grade language arts class from Brody Middle School toured our gallery. Mrs. Hart was planning to introduce the National History Day contest, and felt that our gallery's exhibits were a perfect fit with the theme of this year's National History Day theme: "Triumph out of Tragedy". Students were very impressed with our gallery and their tour.

The following is an excerpt from a letter sent by one of these students: "They take us to the zoo and the science center, (in reference to field trips), but we never learn anything. Here, I finally learned something."

National History Day Exhibit: Naomi Peuse of National History Day used our Jerome Schindler display and its corresponding story from June 2007 *Jewish Press* to create an exhibit for the event.

IJHS Director, Krys Phillips, served as a judge in the Senior Papers Division at National History Day in May.

Polly Clark photographed several displays and artifacts to include in a book co-authored with Barbara Tabach, *Life Catching Moments*.

The IJHS was a co-sponsor of the Daniel Sinclair presentation at Caspe Terrace in February. Prof. Sinclair (also an ordained Rabbi and Attorney) spoke about Jewish Genes and Levis in the Bookey Lodge. Both the lecture and question/answer session were thought-provoking and challenging. IJHS board member, Melanie Sandler, introduced Prof. Sinclair, while board members Kay Braverman and Elaine Steinger served as docents.

The IJHS shared images of Lifetime Member Matthew Bucksbaum that were included in a video commemorating his amazing life and philanthropic contributions to the University of Iowa Hillel.

The IJHS again shared images of local attorney and IJHS Patron Harlan "Bud" Hockenberg with AIPAC when it produced a video honoring him in March.

IJHS Director, Krys Phillips, delivered a speech concerning the History of Holocaust Denial and its implications for students who are performing research about the Holocaust at the Des Moines Jewish Federation's Teacher's Institute in April.

55 students from St. Francis of Assisi school in West Des Moines visited Caspe Terrace in April to view the movie *Paperclips* and to visit the Caspe Heritage Gallery. The students met with Linda Fishman and Warner and Esther Bergh, as well. They picnicked on the Richards Pavilion after their visit. IJHS board members Barb Lettween, Karen Engman, Janice Rosenberg, and Joyce Swartz assisted as docents, coordinators, and videographer.

60 West Des Moines students visited the Caspe Terrace in April to view the movie *Paperclips* and to visit the Caspe Heritage Gallery. These students were members of West Des Moines high schools and involved in diversifying leadership. IJHS board members Karen Engman and Joyce Swartz led students and teachers through the gallery.

The IJHS hosted an Iowa Museum Association workshop Wednesday, May 9th entitled: "Jumping into the Volunteer Pool." The IJHS Board President Joyce Swartz led attendees on a tour of the museum and attended the day-long event.

**IJHS TRIBUTES****In Memory:****Shirley and Morris Bassman**

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**Simchas and Honors:****Tom Swartz's Bar Mitzvah**

Alice Daniels and Larry Hackbarth

**The Bar Mitzvah of Joyce and Ben****Swartz's grandson, Tom Swartz**

Alice Daniels and Larry Hackbarth

The IJHS

Betty and Marvin Dubansky

**Paul Kagin's Special Birthday**

Harriet Pidgeon

**The IJHS**

Sally Robinson Schechter

**The birth of Toni and Tim Urban's new grandson, Berk Urban Holtzman**

Karen and Arnie Engman

**Marty Rosenfeld's good health****Marvin Pomerantz's good health**

Robbie and Marvin Winick

**Marvin Pomerantz's good health****The Bar Mitzvah of Zalman Jacobson, son of Rabbi Yossi and Chanie Jacobson**

Trudi and Marty Rosenfeld

**Anita Mandelbaum's good health**

Robbie and Marv Winick

**The birth of Susie and Josh Kimelman's new granddaughter, Emily Malka**

Trudi and Marty Rosenfeld

**The birthday of Joan Mannheimer**

Joyce and Ben Swartz

**Lora Lee Spiro's good health**

Trudi and Marty Rosenfeld

**The birth of Shirlee and Jim Marcovis' new great-granddaughter, Mia**

Joyce and Ben Swartz

**Dr. Marshall Flapan's 70th Birthday**

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**REGRETS:**

The Fall Volume Nine, 2006/5767 issue of the *CHAIowen* inadvertently omitted Dr. Steven Elmets as a contributor of a case honoring his father, Dr. Harry Elmets.

The Fall issue's essay by Don Soltz of Colorado mistakenly referenced Len Caspe as Lew Caspe (in the photo of 3 children).

Also, the group photo of the entire family should have read "Mel" Caspe instead of "Leonard (standing in rear). The small boy in front in this photo is "Len" Caspe.

Mazel Tov to B'nai Israel Synagogue in Council Bluffs on their inclusion in the National Registry of Historic Places

**Honor your dear ones...****With a tribute card from the Iowa Jewish Historical Society.****Minimum \$5 donation per card****Contact Trudi Rosenfeld****13537 Village Court, Clive, IA 50325 (515) 277-7521**

**We need your support.  
Please become a member of the Iowa Jewish Historical Society!**

Your annual membership in the IJHS will help to preserve the history and irreplaceable treasures of the Jews in Iowa. With your membership you will receive the *CHAIowan*, a bi-annual newsletter packed with information and interesting items concerning the activities of the Iowa Jewish Historical Society's Caspe Heritage Gallery and the history of Jews in Iowa.

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The Iowa Jewish Historical Society and Caspe Heritage Gallery are part  
of the Caspe Terrace Committee of the Jewish Federation of Greater  
Des Moines.