

My Favorite Artifact: 1937 Jewish Census Book



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IJHS Board member

One of the amazing and wonderful things about historical artifacts is that people who see them can connect with them in very different ways. This is true of the 1937 census of Des Moines' Jewish community. Below, Kathy Bassman shares how this census inspired her to research the background of why the census was done while also connecting with the personal information listed.

The item I chose from the IJHS Collection for "My Favorite Artifact" is the 1937 Jewish Census book which has information on Jewish families in the Des Moines area. I originally thought this census was only done for the Des Moines area but found that similar censuses were done by Jewish communities all over the United States for the "American Jewish Year Book," which has been published by the Jewish Publication Society and the American Jewish Committee at various times since 1906.

In 1935, the American Jewish Committee asked Dr. Harry S. Linfield, Director of the Jewish Statistical Bureau of the Synagogue Council of America, to prepare the groundwork for the enumeration of Jewish congregations that needed to be done in connection with the United States Census of Religious Bodies. Dr. Linfield was then appointed a Special Census Agent by the United States government to collect statistics of Jewish congregations. There was a special census in 1937 in which Jewish congregations from all over the United States participated. Dr. Linfield compiled results from these 1937 censuses for the Jewish Year Book, Volume 42 (1941). This report shows that Iowa had 14,089 Jews in Iowa, 17 principal communities, 26 congregations, and .56% of the Jews in the United States.

Along with this 1937 Iowa Jewish Census book, are letters. The first letter is dated February 11, 1937. It is from Dr. Harry S. Linfield to Rabbi Eugene Mannheimer in Des Moines. Dr. Linfield states "... it is necessary to report to the government the number of Jews that reside in each community, and thus since 1906, each of these censuses has served as an occasion for a decennial survey of the Jews of the country." Dr. Linfield requested Rabbi Mannheimer's cooperation in securing accurate data of our Jewish community to be included in their report to the government.

The second letter is dated April 22, 1937, and is an unsigned copy of a letter addressed to Dr. Linfield from Rabbi Mannheimer. Rabbi Mannheimer informed Dr. Linfield

that "It just happens that we made a rather careful census of our Jewish community during this past winter, in connection with which we undertook to ascertain the exact number of Jews in Des Moines, their occupations, their congregational and other Jewish organizations and affiliations, etc. etc." "... we shall be glad to supply you with the desired information."

The third letter, dated April 23, 1937 and addressed to Dr. H.S. Linfield, is from "Superintendent" Mrs. Sam Weinstock, Federated Jewish Charities. She forwarded a copy of the findings from the Jewish census that had been completed in January of 1937. The Federated Jewish Charities census collected information on every person in Des Moines over 18 years of age. She gave Dr. Linfield a detailed description of how they proceeded with the census collection: "... we had a membership list of every Jewish organization in Des Moines. We used the city directory and telephone book and made a house-to-house where we were unable to secure the information by telephone or were not listed in the directory. To be sure we had the new-comers, we contacted all mercantile houses for the Jewish people connected with them."

Along with this third letter are the survey findings that Superintendent Weinstock sent to Dr. Linfield. "The study was prompted by the desire to secure intelligent information about the Jewish population with regard to their interests in Jewish religious culture as well as social activities and their affiliations."

Along with the general family information (birthplace, age, children, home and business addresses, etc.), the census book listed area congregations—Beth El Jacob, Children of Israel, Tifereth Israel, and the Temple, six religious Schools, 11 men's organizations, and 18 women's organizations. Interviewees would indicate their affiliations with a checkmark.

Name	Date of Birth	Place of Birth	Gender	Occupation	What Government in You	Age	Marital Status	Religious Affiliation
Bassman	12/10/1881	Russia	yes	Grocery	1. Birth, 2. Citizenship of Israel, 3. Birth, 4. Taxes	55	Married	Beth El Jacob, Children of Israel, Tifereth Israel, Temple, 6 Religious Schools, 11 Men's Organizations, 18 Women's Organizations
...	1896	Russia	yes	Housewife				
...	1915	Des Moines		Mark of Service				
...	8/1/16	Des Moines		Mark of Service				
...	1/11/20	Des Moines		Mark of Service				

Notes:
 Ruben married + out of home.
 David

The Census open to the Bassman listings. Jacob and Sarah were Kathy's husband's grandparents and the great-grandparents of Kathy and Jerry's son Bryan.

This is my favorite artifact because it freezes a time in history that we can look back and see information on the families that were in the Des Moines area at that time and because this is an original, the actual book that the information was recorded in. Not a photocopy, a picture, a microfilm. This Jewish census book, along with the letters between Dr. Linfield, Rabbi Mannheimer, and Superintendent Weinstock, is amazing and wonderful

to have all of these original works. I have tried locating original 1937 census books or information from other states and communities but have not found anything. This is the only book I've found from the 1937 Jewish census.

Kathy Bassman has been doing Jewish historical research since 2014. She started with a project to identify Jewish veterans in our cemeteries in Des Moines as part of the statewide project to honor Iowa's

Jewish veterans. Kathy has added and verified over 100 more Jewish veterans just in Des Moines. This project has also blossomed into researching the history of the people in the cemeteries, both in Des Moines and throughout Iowa. In November, 2018, Kathy volunteered to help with a joint IJHS/JewishGen project to transcribe the names on the yahrzeit boards of Iowa's Jewish Congregations so this information will be available to family members and genealogical researchers around the world. Kathy joined the IJHS board in 2018.

Collections Corner

“State Fair,” a Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, premiered in 1945 and starred Jeanne Crain, Dana Andrews, Dick Haymes, Vivian Blaine, Fay Bainter and Charles Winninger.

A.H. Blank was the founder of the Central States Theater Corporation who owned movie theaters in Iowa and other Midwest locations, and served as the President of the Jewish Federation from 1939 to 1942.

The Iowa State Fair was canceled from 1943-1945 due to World War II. The Des Moines Register described the premiere as a chance to have a long-awaited State Fair celebration after missing it during the war. Crowds gathered in downtown Des Moines to see Hollywood stars of the time and attend the movie.

This photo is a part of the Blank Family collection at the Iowa Jewish Historical Society, donated to IJHS in 2005. It contains scrapbooks, photos and objects, relating to the family, the family businesses, and their philanthropy in Des Moines in the 1900s.



Photograph of A.H. Blank with actress Carole Landis, center, at the State Fair Movie Premiere, Des Moines, Iowa 1945.

Documenting Pesach During a Pandemic



Andi and Jeff Lipman and family, celebrating Pesach in 2021.

There's still time to make your Pesach part of the history of the Jewish people of Iowa—as the Lipman family has done. Through a photo, video, or written words, IJHS needs to preserve documentation of how your family and other Jewish families across Iowa celebrated the second Pesach during a pandemic.

To participate, go to the IJHS webpage (www.ijhs.online) and click on Documenting Jewish Life in a Pandemic for more information and a link to IJHS DropBox account for sending us your memories of this year or last year's Pesach.