

Collection #  
M 0349

**JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER ASSOCIATION  
(INDIANAPOLIS, IND.)  
RECORDS, 1852–1981**

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## COLLECTION INFORMATION

VOLUME OF COLLECTION: Manuscript Materials: 6 document cases  
Visual Materials: 1 half-size photograph box, 2 oversize photograph folders in flat files, and 2 oversize graphic folders in flat files  
Printed Materials: 1 printed item

COLLECTION DATES: 1852–1981

PROVENANCE: Judith E. Endelman, Ann Arbor, MI, January and July 1992

RESTRICTIONS: None

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ALTERNATE FORMATS:

RELATED HOLDINGS: Jewish Welfare Federation of Indianapolis Records, 1903–  
Manuscript Collection: M 00463.  
Judith E. Endelman, *The Jewish Community of Indianapolis, 1849 to the Present* (F 534, .155, E 5, 1984)  
Judith E. Endelman Papers, 1979–1984.  
Manuscript Collection: M 0814.

ACCESSION NUMBER: 1992.0156X; 1992.0728X

NOTES: 1992.0728X is an addition to 1992.0156X

## HISTORICAL SKETCH

Nathan Morris House, established by a group of women in 1904 as a settlement house was incorporated by the Jewish Federation. It became a center for social and educational activities for the growing Jewish community. A library of Yiddish books, meeting rooms for south side organizations, and kindergarten made up the first Jewish community center. The Council of Jewish Women played a central role in the house and taught Sunday school, sewing, typing, English, and American citizenship. Lectures and dances were also sponsored by the organization.

Due to lack of space by December 1912 the Jewish Federation purchased and moved into the old Hoereth Athletic Club at 17<sup>th</sup> and West Morris Street. This became the new Jewish community center. Remodeled and dedicated on October 19, 1913 the building was called the Communal Building. The name, suggested by Rabbi Morris Feuerlicht, conveyed the principle that this building was to serve the whole Jewish community.

The new building included an auditorium-gymnasium, game rooms, meeting rooms, a library, and showers. A playground sat outside. Boy Scout Troop No. 50 which was organized by the Federation in 1915, as well as other troops, used the M. Kahn Memorial Log Cabin erected on the grounds of the Communal Building for their meetings.

The B'nai B'rith organized a milk station or well-baby clinic at the Nathan Morris House that was later transferred to the Communal Building. A dental clinic was opened at the building on January 21, 1920. The clinic serviced the entire south side but focused primarily on children. The dental clinic offered basic dental care as well as education in dental hygiene. A small fee was charged. The clinic was extremely successful. It opened for two afternoons a week and was staffed on a semi voluntary basis by a Jewish dentist, Phillip Falender (1899–1960).

Since its inception the Nathan Morris House and later the Communal Building focused on helping immigrant and indigent Jews. By the mid-1920s as Jews prospered and immigrants became acculturated the Jewish Federation re-evaluated its mission and goals. The Communal Building's services were no longer in need and the more prosperous members left the south side of Indianapolis and established themselves on the north side.

In 1916 Raphael Kirshbaum a wealthy German Jewish immigrant left \$60,000 to the Jewish Federation. In 1925 the Jewish Federation bought the Indianapolis Club on 23<sup>rd</sup> and Meridian and hired the architectural firm of Vonnegut, Bohn and Mueller to remodel the building which was to become the new community center for north side residents. The Kirshbaum Center was dedicated in November 1926 and was very successful. The Kirshbaum Center became the center of Jewish life for the north side, offering a diversified program and a common meeting ground without a touch of philanthropy that characterized the Communal Building. Both centers offered similar programs—boys and girls clubs, game rooms, dances, minstrel shows, athletics (especially basketball, both centers had teams which played in the city's amateur leagues)—each also organized specific programs geared to its own constituency.

While the aim of the Communal Building programs was to uplift as well as to Americanize its clientele, the Kirshbaum Center programs were designed to help the middle class

members fill their leisure time constructively. The Kirshbaum Center sponsored more adult education programs than the Communal Building. In its first year of operation, Professor Jacob R. Marcus of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati delivered six lectures on Jewish history. The Kirshbaum Center organized an adult literary group, opened a library, and inaugurated one of the best known programs, The Open Forum. The Open Forum was a subscription series featuring nationally and famous speakers which attracted many non-Jewish subscribers. Jewish topics were only discussed rarely and were reserved for the “Jewish Study Courses” another lecture series. The Kirshbaum Center unlike the Communal Building offered cultural programming to appeal to the more educated residents of the entire city. The Kirshbaum Orchestra begun in 1927 which later became the Indianapolis Symphony represent the elite class that the Kirshbaum Center appealed to.

Representing a new middle-class orientation, the Jewish Community Center Association was created in June 1926. The JCCA was to function as an autonomous affiliate of the Federation and oversaw both the Kirshbaum Community Center and the Communal Building and any other recreational and or educational efforts of the Federation. However, to retain some control the Federation board would appoint one-quarter of the Association board. Leonard A. Strauss (ca. 1898–1954) of the Kahn Tailoring Co. became its first elected president.

During the Depression WPA (Works Progress Administration) workers staffed both the Kirshbaum and the Communal Building. Many unemployed Jews made use of the facilities during these hard times. Attendance rose from 25,190 in 1928 to 112,479 in 1932 at the Kirshbaum Center and at the Communal Building from 32,042 in 1928–1930 to 35,711 in 1931–1932. Membership also increased due to scholarship and deferred payment plan assistance. In 1933 only 25% of the Jewish community remained on the south side. By the late 1930s the south side was no longer the center of the community.

After World War II both buildings were in a state of neglect and disrepair. The Jewish Federation undertook a self study which revealed inadequacies in both centers. Due in part to the findings by the self study the programs at the Communal Building were discontinued in 1947. After decades of promoting assimilation Jewish leaders called for a return to Jewish roots and an emphasis on Jewish content and “spiritual-cultural factors which constitute the Jewish way of life.” The Kirshbaum Center was deemed insufficient and was put up for sale in 1951. A.M. Strauss, architect from Fort Wayne was hired to draw up a plan for a new community center. In 1954 with an estimate cost of \$1 million, a campaign was inaugurated to raise \$500,000. Pledges trickled in slowly and the Jewish Federation decided to build an outdoor pool for the summer of 1956 and hopefully increase donations. In 1956 the Lily Endowment and the Indianapolis Foundation announced they would give \$40,000 and \$10,000 for the new center. In June 1957 the cornerstone of the new building was dedicated and on February 2, 1958 the new center opened.

By the late 1960s the Jewish Center shifted its orientation and added programs of Jewish content. Yiddish classes were organized.

Between 1975 and 1979 a health club was added. The percentage of non-Jews had also increased. In 1997 a major renovation took place the center quadrupled in size to include a

new Fitness Center, Multi-Recreation Center, auditorium, Infant/Toddler Center, and the Jewish Federation offices.

Sources:

Endelman E. Judith. *The Jewish Community of Indianapolis, 1849 to the Present*.  
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984. General Collection: F534 I.55 E5 1984

Jewish Community Center. "JCC History." <http://www.jccindy.org/> Last accessed 26  
September 2007.

Materials in the collection.

## **SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE**

The Jewish Community Center collection is comprised of materials not only from the JCC but also from various agencies within the Jewish Federation which heads the JCC. Among the materials researchers will find materials related to those community centers that predated the JCC such as the Communal Building and the Kirshbaum Center. The bulk dates of the materials center around the 1950s through the 1960s and ends by the early 1980s when the collection was donated. Almost all the materials focus on Indianapolis where the Jewish Community Center is located.

There is one box with two folders of black and white photographs. Nearly all the photographs are 8 x 10. The bulk dates again focus on the 1950s–1960s. Most of the photographs portray JCC participants in group activities. One folder has photographs with exact dates and the other folder contains folders with a ca. date.

There are four flat file folders. Two of them contain large sized scrapbook pages with photographs. Many of the photographs are labeled. The remaining two folders contain architectural drawings by A.M. Strauss, Inc. of Fort Wayne, Indiana of the future Jewish Community Center.

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