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B'nai B'rith: Cameo of Jewish Life

A dozen wealthy Jewish immigrants, led by a German named Henry Jones, founded B'nai B'rith 125 years ago today.

German, Bohemian, Latvian and Spanish, they represented a cross-section of New York City's 20,000 Jews in a time when every Jewish ethnic group was a separate closed community.

Their aim, said the 12, was "to unite Jews in their own interests and those of humanity."

Today B'nai B'rith, with 531,000 members worldwide, (there are chapters in Tokyo and Dublin) includes in its roster one out of every five American Jews. There are Zionists, non-Zionists, Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, garment workers, college professors, chicken farmers, businessmen and their wives and children.

As a sign of the organization's growth, it is now planning a new eight-story wing to double the space in its national headquarters here at 1640 Rhode Island Ave. n.w.

B'nai B'rith's first project was a widows' and orphans' fund, collected through fines imposed on members of Henry Jones's group who failed to wear their fraternal costumes or who spit on the floor. It totaled \$60.

As the organization grew, fraternal signs and rituals disappeared and aid became increasingly philanthropic and nonsectarian. Members conducted a drive in 1868 to aid victims of a Baltimore flood. This was 13 years before the founding of the Red Cross by Clara Barton, who was assisted by Washington photographer and B'nai B'rith member Adolphus Solomons.

In 1899 B'nai B'rith established the National Jewish Hospital at Denver, dedicated to the treatment of re-

spiratory diseases. From its inception the hospital has been nonsectarian and non-profit.

American Jewish concern about anti-Semitism was seen as early as 1851, when founder Jones learned that Jews were forbidden to live in certain cantons of Switzerland, and that American Jews traveling abroad were excluded from those areas.

He called the problem to the attention of Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Henry Clay and Secretary of State Daniel Webster who got the order rescinded.

In 1869, when the Czar of Russia expelled thousands of Jews from their homes near the eastern border, Simon Wolf, a Washington lobbyist and member of B'nai B'rith who knew every President from James Buchanan to Woodrow Wilson, led a delegation from his lodge to meet with President Grant. He said, in a letter to the Czar, "It is too

late, in this age of enlightenment, to persecute anyone on account of race, color or religion."

And in 1912, Wolf was there when President Taft abrogated a commercial treaty with Russia because the Czarist regime refused to recognize the passports of American Jews.

A major concern of the organization today is helping young people discover the relevancy of Judaism to modern moral and social issues.

Although B'nai B'rith Hillel foundations exist on 270 college campuses, there is a sense of alienation among many Jewish students who feel that the synagogue holds no answer in terms of the activism needed to confront war and poverty, and that their parents' generation, becoming part of the Establishment, lost sight of social issues.

Many Jews who felt that they had understood the Negro's rebellion against prejudice and supported his drive for equality are confronted by hostility, and are hurt, bewildered, and often angered by it.

A recent speech by B'nai B'rith's president, Dr. William A. Wexler, reflects the organization's questions. "There are no more white answers," he said. I plead for candor. I suggest that the dominant black community, having told it to us like it is, must not cop out in telling how it wants it to be—and join in honest dialogue with white America."

Toward that dialogue, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith has created an Urban Affairs Department, headed by Kenyon Burke, a Negro. The League also sponsors sociological studies to find out whether Negro resentment is toward Jews because they are Jewish, or because they are a symbol of "whiteness."

B'nai B'rith spokesmen say that the Jewish community is growing, despite assimilation through intermarriage, and that young people are still turning to Judaism for answers to today's problems.

"They still want to be Jewish," said a member, "but they don't know why or how."