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D.C., this is your (Jewish) life

Historical society marks its 50th anniversary

by **Richard Greenberg**

Associate Editor

In 1960, local car dealer Jack Blank was dealing “wide-track” Pontiacs for \$3,300, high school students in Kansas City, Mo., secretly formed neo-Nazi groups “to get rid of all Jews and Negroes” and Jewish women from throughout the Washington area attended an “equality conference” at the Shoreham Hotel in the District.

That same hotel, now called The Omni Shoreham, will host an event later this month commemorating another watershed moment for Washington-area Jewry that also took place in 1960 — the founding of the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington.

The organization’s 50th anniversary is being marked throughout the year with free monthly salons and other events, including an Oct. 17 benefactors’ luncheon at the Omni Shoreham, which has a Jewish history all its own.

The landmark Art Deco structure was constructed in 1930 by Washington-area Jewish builder Harry Bralove, with Jewish musician Barnee Breeskin leading the hotel’s Blue Room orchestra for decades. Breeskin, who

died in 1989, is best known as the composer of the Washington Redskins fight song, “Hail to the Redskins.”

The Redskins, incidentally, were mired in a horrific season the year the historical society was formed. The JHSGW, like several other Jewish historical societies in America, was an offshoot of nationwide celebrations in 1954 marking the 300th anniversary of Jews in North America, according to Laura Cohen Apelbaum, executive director of the organization.

Its creation was spearheaded by a group of local volunteers galvanized by Jacob Rader Marcus, a Reform rabbi and scholar of Jewish history, who had visited Washington and several other cities and urged community leaders to preserve their communal roots by chronicling their local Jewish history.

“It’s a force that brings people together,” said Apelbaum. “It shows our rootedness. People can come together and learn from the past, both the successes and the mistakes.”

The JHSGW and its Lillian and Albert Small Jewish Museum are housed in the historic 1876 Adas Israel Synagogue, the oldest synagogue building in the Washington area. In 1969, with the building facing demolition, it



A group of protesters from the Arlington-Fairfax Jewish Congregation participate in a daily vigil in 1973 on the steps of the Soviet Embassy.

Photos courtesy Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington

was moved three blocks to its present location at Third and G streets, N.W. (It is slated to move again, within the next four years, one block south to a larger footprint.)

In the past 50 years, the Washington-area Jewish community has undergone many changes. It has grown appreciably — now numbering at least 215,000 — and has established communal institutions in places that once had almost no Jews.

“In certain ways, though, our community is different,” said Apelbaum,

who grew up in Chevy Chase. Thanks to the federal government, the area has attracted more than its share of well-educated and independent-minded Jews.

“That can be a good thing,” said Apelbaum, who pointed to local Jewish innovations, such as the Sixth & I Historic Synagogue and the development of several independent *minyanim*. The downside? “Sometimes people move in different directions.”

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The Washington area is also distinctive geographically; it covers three fully independent political jurisdictions, "so it's never been ruled by a small cabal of people," said Apelbaum.

Events marking the historical society's 50th anniversary have included monthly salons showcasing a range of topics, from "Louis D. Brandeis: An American Zionist" to "Treasures at the Library of Congress Hebraic Section."

In addition, the JHSGW has featured monthly displays of local Judaic objects spanning more than a century, each one conjuring up a rich backstory. The

items include a tiny, white cotton circumcision gown, circa 1877; an Israeli flag signed in 1948 by local Zionist leaders (with the words "Long Live the State of Israel" added); and a star-spangled Jewish Lions Club banner dating to 1937.

Commemorative events also include a Nov. 14 presentation at Adas Israel Congregation in the District by award-winning Jewish journalist Marvin Kalb, who will discuss the many changes he has witnessed over the past 50 years.

The get-together at the Omni Shoreham will track the area's Jewish legacy back to the turn of the 20th century for a look at D.C.'s show business history, which began in earnest with

singer Al Jolson (born Asa Yoelson in Lithuania), whose father was a cantor at the Talmud Torah Synagogue in the District, now the Ohev Shalom Talmud Torah Congregation in Olney.

The story of Jolson — his impact on American Jewish history and on the evolution of mass popular culture in this country — will be told by Stephen Whitfield, a professor of American civi-

lization at Brandeis University.

"He was the first U.S. superstar," Whitfield said in an interview this week. "He was a product of D.C., but he was also a product of Jewish immigration, and of New York, where he made it as a star. He exemplified the idea of upward mobility for Jews and he set the groove for the first half of the 20th century on what constituted show business success for Jews."

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The Jewish Lions Club was formed in 1937 as a social outlet for District teenage boys. As each member left to serve in World War II, a star with his name on it was embroidered on the banner. The banner is on display this month to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington.