

## NEH Proposal: The Pittsburgh Jewish History Project

Two years ago members of the Department of History at the University of Pittsburgh and representatives of the city's Jewish community initiated a cooperative project to reconstruct, in a systematic and comprehensive fashion, the history of the Pittsburgh Jewish Community. Much has already been accomplished: major sources of data have been inventoried, methods of data collection are being developed, and considerable community interest and support have been generated. Here we propose to develop these beginnings into a full-scale project. We seek to involve the community more fully at every level, to perfect a variety of modern methods of data development, and to create a complete and unique resource for local history. What is more, we plan to create a model of cooperation in ethnic studies between university and community which will result in both ethnic fulfillment and successful scholarly investigation. We are confident that this model will be useful for similar projects in other ethnic communities.

### An Approach to Ethnic Studies

Today we are increasingly aware of the vital importance of ethnic groups in America. It is clear that the melting-pot concept has only limited application and that ethnic communities wish to retain their unique identities. Realizing this, scholars have also shown renewed interest in the role of ethnicity in American life.

Certainly, group involvement, identity, and understanding must be among the main objectives for programs in ethnic studies but the critical problem is to minimize the dangers of narrow ethnocentrism and to maximize the potential for a broader comparative study of ethnicity. Such programs should incorporate full community participation leading to a genuine understanding of and appreciation for a community's heritage while at the same time focusing attention and efforts on those areas where objective analysis can emerge and an appreciation of intergroup similarities and differences can result.

An historical approach to ethnic studies can provide the basis necessary for such a program. One must learn of the past in order to understand the development of a real sense of group identity in any community. Sources exist for all communities which can contribute to such an understanding; moreover, because they are more formal and remote than sources dealing with contemporary community life, they particularly lend themselves to objective study and comparative analysis. Although this historical orientation may well minimize the dangers of ethnocentrism and controversy, knowledge of the past experience of the community should be directly relevant to the community's present interests, problems, and self-identity.

A focus on the total record of past experiences of the entire population of a community provides an ideal context for the stimulation of maximum community interest and involvement. This "history from the bottom up" allows for concentration on the broad range of recorded experiences of everyone who once lived in the community. In this way history becomes not only the dramatic events and achievements of an elite, but also the more common patterns of everyday life of all of the individuals, families, and groups which composed the community. Since this kind of orientation most closely approximates the current experience and concerns of community members, a comprehensive historical reconstruction should be of personal interest

and relevance to a considerable proportion of the community today.

Much of the historical reconstruction can be done by members of the community. Modern methods of data collection provide opportunities for considerable community participation and interest without sacrificing standards of inclusiveness or accuracy. Under professional supervision, community members can carry out many of the techniques of data retrieval and oral history interviewing. Through participation in this process individuals and groups from different backgrounds and generations could join together in a common, unifying enterprise.

The product of these efforts will be a computerized collection of historical materials more complete and more carefully arranged and indexed than exists for any other community. Such archives cannot help but lead to increased community interest in its own past and present since it will have been created by community members and will be easily accessible to them. Moreover, the development of such an archives will help to break down the traditional barriers which stand between university and community.

### The Pittsburgh Jewish Community

The Pittsburgh Jewish community dates back to the mid-nineteenth century and became a major center of American Jewry with the large influx of eastern European immigrants in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Since 1920 the local Jewish community has numbered over 30,000 residents, containing virtually all elements of the American Jewish population and most of the institutions of a full community life. The sources for the history of this community are remarkable rich, varied, and complete. They include most of the congregational and organizational records, some dating back to the 1850s, several weekly newspapers which began in the early twentieth century, a number of issues of community directories, three comprehensive sociological surveys of the community, and a considerable number of older residents whose memories go back to the early twentieth century. In spite of its broad-based population, its stature as a major Jewish center, and its abundant records, there has been little research done on the development of the community.

A systematic, comprehensive reconstruction of the history of the Pittsburgh Jewish community seems to be particularly appropriate for a number of reasons. The standing of the community and its role in Pittsburgh and Jewish history deserve a more thorough, formal record than now exists. The size and diverse composition of the twentieth-century community should reveal a good deal about recent Jewish community life and organization. Because it is an early ethnic group which has been Americanized but yet has successfully maintained its sense of identity, a Jewish community is a good place to initiate this kind of study. Finally, its location in a city with over two dozen ethnic communities makes the Pittsburgh Jewish History Project especially appropriate as a model for further ethnic community studies.

### The Current Status of the Project

Two years ago the Western Pennsylvania Jewish History Society was formed to generate interest in the Project, to collect contributions for its support, and to serve as the umbrella organization representing the local community. Officers and a board of directors were chosen from a broad spectrum of community groups and they

have been instrumental in publicizing the Project, facilitating access to sources throughout the community, and raising the funds necessary for the support of the Project during the past years.<sup>1</sup>

During the past two years considerable preliminary work has been done on the Project and in the process the focus, character, and potential of the program have been clarified. An inventory of all of the records of every congregation and organization in the Jewish community has been completed and detailed information on the nature of these records is being incorporated into a computerized index. Similarly, the community's weekly newspaper has been systematically searched from 1900 to 1940 to determine the character and quantity of information included in its pages. A number of old records which were in danger of being destroyed or lost have been saved and deposited in a special collection of the University's Archives of Industrial Society. Members of the community have been contacted to collect names of potential interviewees and several oral history interviews have already been conducted. The directors of the Project have held a number of meetings with groups and individuals in the community in order to publicize the Project and to develop interest and possible support for future volunteer efforts.

The University of Pittsburgh has provided archival facilities, a considerable amount of computer time, and office space, equipment, and services. Technical guidance in the development of the data bank has been provided by experts from the University's Computer Center and the Social Science Information Center has made available its programmers and keypunch services.<sup>2</sup> The University is generally committed to involvement and cooperation with local communities and has particular interest in ethnic studies. A faculty committee is currently planning a program in ethnic studies and a Jewish Studies program, presently underwritten by the local community, is already under way. The Department of History has a special orientation toward social history and new methods of data development and has given the Project considerable aid and encouragement. Clearly, the Project will benefit from close relationships with the History Department, the Jewish Studies Program, and the University at large.

#### Specific Details of the Proposed Activities

Considerable preliminary work has thus been done. What remains is to build on the foundation. This proposal is designed to develop community participation in the process of data collection, to create the technical facilities necessary for a computerized data bank, and to build this data bank for two specific periods in

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<sup>1</sup>The Society has raised \$17,000 for preliminary work thus far from local sources and a national organization and will coordinate efforts to raise the funds necessary for the matching grant.

<sup>2</sup>The University of Pittsburgh's excellent computer facilities and expertise should contribute significantly to the development of the new methods of data retrieval proposed herein.

the community's past. If these efforts are successful the community should be able to continue the program on its own and the approaches and techniques could be adapted to other ethnic groups for their own historical resources.

In order to encourage community participation on a large scale we propose to initiate the following specific projects:

- (1) Organization, training, and supervision of volunteer groups.  
Much of the data retrieval and interviewing can be done by members of the community. The data retrieval will involve copying specific items from historical records (such as congregation membership lists, organization minute books, individual memoirs, etc.) on forms from which the information can then be keypunched or otherwise put in machine-readable form. Groups such as senior citizen clubs, congregation sisterhoods, and Sunday school classes can be given specific tasks relating to their own historical records. Interviewers can be selected and trained on the basis of their individual knowledge of the subject of the interview (be it a person, organization, or event). In every case intensive training and supervision will be required to produce a final product that will be accurate and acceptable to both the community and interested scholars.
  
- (2) Family genealogies.  
The collection of genealogical information on families in the community is basic to the development of the data bank and can be a dramatic means of introducing the Project to everyone in the community and demonstrating his personal identification with the community history. Through the facilities of the community newspaper, family reconstruction forms can be distributed and instructions provided, to be supplemented by an office of trained volunteers who can answer telephone inquiries about the way in which forms are to be filled out.
  
- (3) Individual projects, group programs, and a newsletter.  
In order to further develop community interest in the Project and to demonstrate the utility of the resource which it is creating, small grants will be provided to individuals in order that they might pursue special projects. Such grants will allow members of the community to write histories of individual organizations, conduct oral history interviews, or to collect materials not otherwise available to the project, and will be awarded on a competitive basis. General lectures and panel discussions will be held to allow participants to interchange experiences and findings and a newsletter will be published periodically to review the progress of the Project.

Data collection through the archives, oral history interviews, and the data banks will be the focus of the actual historical reconstruction. In order to develop these we propose to concentrate in the following programs:

(1) Computerized data banks and community profiles.

We plan to begin with the development of extensive computerized, cross-indexed collections of data for two periods in the community's history. The first collection would cover most of the nineteenth century and would represent the early growth of the community and the major role played by its German Jewish element. The second data bank will focus on the decade of the 1920s and would reveal the shape and direction of community development after the mass immigration from eastern Europe and Russia. There exist considerable congregation and organization records for the nineteenth century and we are fortunate to have located a 1920 community directory which lists almost the entire Jewish population of the city for that year and which will serve as a basis for the second data collection. These data banks will provide a wealth of information about organizations and individuals and will serve as community profiles which can be compared with already existing 1938 and 1962 surveys.

In order to make these data banks as comprehensive and easy to use as possible, it will be necessary to modify and adapt present computer programs, develop new ones, and create a means of matching information from different sources by name, family group, or organization. Programs and expertise in this kind of data bank development are available, but must be adapted specifically to the particular needs of the Project and the capabilities of the University of Pittsburgh Computer Center.

(2) Jewish group identity: 1900-1970.

Using the community newspaper as the major source, a content analysis of all references to the Jewish religion, the Jewish people, American Jews, the Pittsburgh Jewish community, groups within that community, and other religious and ethnic groups, would describe changes in the characterizations, strength of group identity, and relations within and outside the community. This analysis will provide an important source of information on attitudes concerning group identity, cohesion, and intergroup relations.

(3) Directed group reminiscences.

Using oral history interviews of groups of older members of the community, lacunae in the historical record could be filled and a broad retrospective view of certain trends and problems in the community would be provided in a personally rewarding experience for the participants.

These specific programs should get the Project underway, develop the organizational and technical methods necessary for later work, and demonstrate at least some of the potential utility of the resource. Once the methods are developed, and the basis of the resource is created, the community can take over responsibility for continuing the program.

Administration of the Project

The Project will be supervised by an Executive Committee composed of the three Principal Investigators, the President of the Western Pennsylvania Jewish History Society, and the Administrative Director. One of the Principal Investigators, who will have a third of his regular faculty appointment released to the Project, will serve as the Chairman of the Executive Committee, which will define policy, appropriate funds, and be directly responsible to N.E.H. An Administrative Director will be hired to administer the specific activities of the Project on a day-to-day basis. He and his Administrative Assistant will have major responsibility for the volunteer projects and will be active in publicizing the Project throughout the community. The Programmer, Secretary, Key punch Operator, and Research Assistant will be responsible to the Director.

Results and Significance: Historical Reconstruction of Communities.

While providing stimulation and rewarding experiences for members of the local community, the Project will be developing new methods of historical reconstruction and creating an organized and easily accessible source of information on the Pittsburgh Jewish community. A variety of people from the community and university will undoubtedly use the collected data for a broad range of personal and scholarly purposes. Moreover, because of the systematic, comprehensive, and open-ended character of the collections, continued and increasing utilization can be assured.

The real significance of the Project, however, is the development of a new approach to ethnic studies. In its organization as a cooperative university-community enterprise, its focus on the total historical experience of an entire community, and its method of systematic, comprehensive data collection, a model will be provided which can be adopted by other communities for similar projects in historical reconstruction. Finally, if and when these other projects create similar resources, the basis for truly comparative ethnic studies will be laid.

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January, 1971