

CLEVELAND'S LAND OF PROMISE:



Rockefeller Park and the Jewish Community

BY SEAN MARTIN

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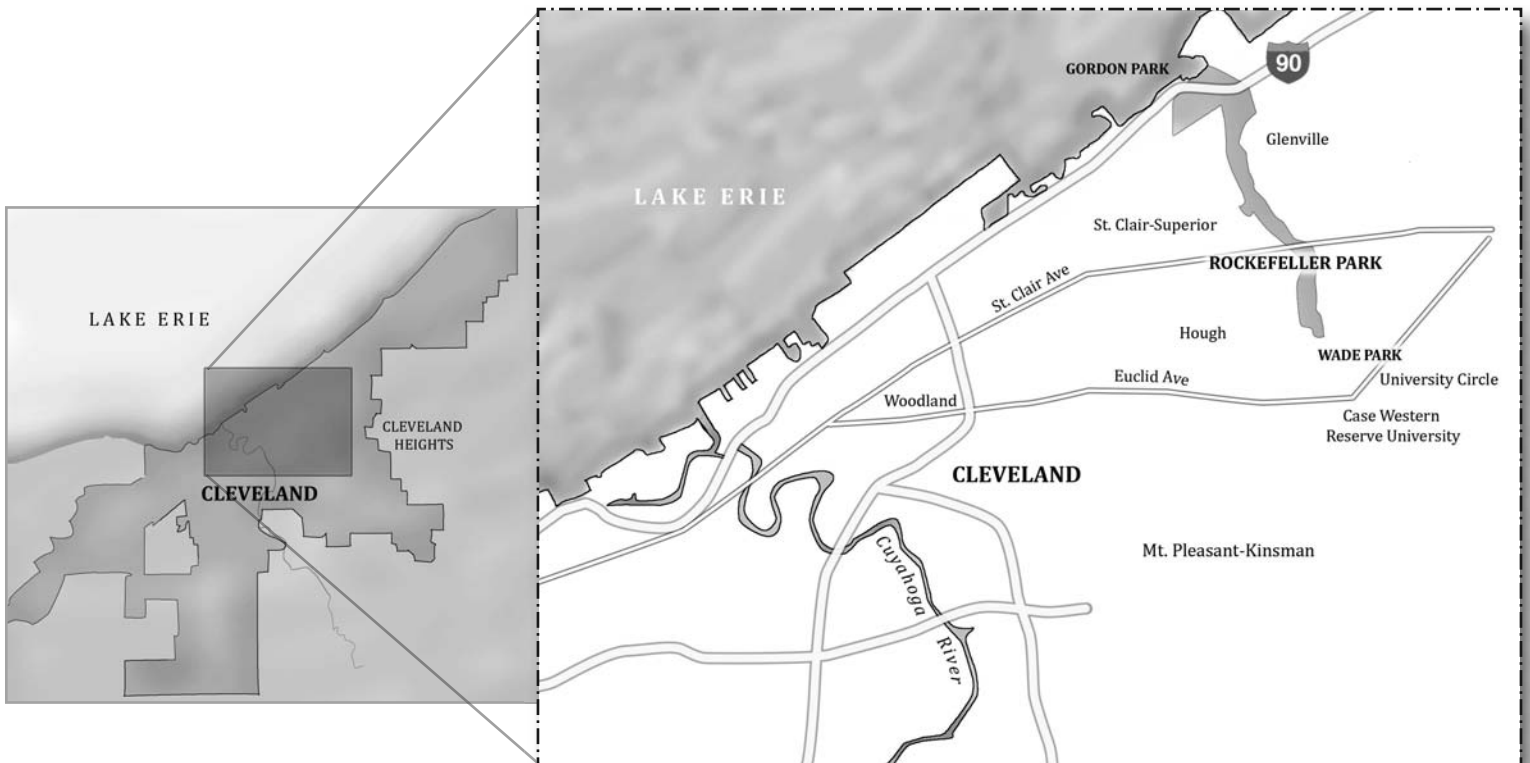
INTRODUCTION: THE NEIGHBORHOOD AND THE PARK

Jews have been present in Cleveland as an organized community since 1839. They came first from German-speaking lands and settled in the central downtown neighborhood of Woodland. Then, in the 1860s migration from Eastern Europe increased, bringing people with more traditional religious values as well as the Yiddish language and culture. They, too, settled in downtown districts alongside German Jews, creating a vibrant but increasingly crowded district whose population grew to about 100,000 in the 1920s.¹ By the end of World War I, Cleveland's Jews were prosperous enough to begin an eastward migration away from the downtown slums, and by 1930 about one-fifth lived in Mt. Pleasant/Kinsman and one-third lived in Glenville.² The neighborhoods of St. Clair-Superior and Hough were also home to some Jewish residents.

Public transportation connected residents to downtown Cleveland and to the growing inner ring

suburbs, especially Cleveland Heights. In Glenville could be found large congregations such as the Cleveland Jewish Center and small Orthodox shuls such as Kneseth Israel. Glenville also offered unparalleled educational opportunities: in the 1930s Glenville High School was one of the city's, and indeed the nation's, best high schools, while institutions such as the Cleveland Hebrew Schools and the Bureau of Jewish Education developed innovative courses and programs for the neighborhood's Jewish children. The neighborhood nurtured the likes of Howard Metzenbaum, United States Senator, and Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the creators of Superman.

The Jewish community of Glenville was centered on the apartment buildings along East 105th Street and on the large, imposing residences and on the mix of single family homes and doubles near East Boulevard. With its grocers, fish stores, and, in the memories of some, "the chicken place,"³ plus



theaters, clubs, and nightlife, East 105th Street was often described as “a second downtown.” Jewish institutions recognized the importance of Glenville early and established such important communal institutions as Mt. Sinai Hospital (in 1915), the monumental Temple-Tifereth Israel (1922) and the Cleveland Jewish Center, opened in 1921 as the home of Anshe Emeth-Beth Tefilo. Capped with the names of prophets and philosophers in Hebrew, the Center’s impressive columns proclaimed the building’s Jewish identity proudly. The Jewish Orthodox Home for the Aged and the Montefiore Home were also located in Glenville.

South of Glenville, University Circle was also developing. Home also to hospitals, churches and religious groups, University Circle took on its institutional character in the 1880s with the relocation of Western Reserve University from its original campus in Hudson, Ohio. By the 1910s the university included schools of medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, law, library science, and applied social sciences.⁴

The green space that offered the congested community of Glenville a respite from crowded urban life was Rockefeller Park. Bordering Doan Brook on Glenville’s western border, the park had been formally established in the 1890s as a lovely promenade to the shores of Lake Erie. Over the

Euclid Avenue and East 105th Street looking west. In addition to being a business center, the area was a popular choice for an evening out, particularly on Saturday night. Circa 1921.



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Intersection. East 105th Street and St. Clair Avenue, looking east on St. Clair. The Uptown theater marquee is visible in the distance. Circa 1925.

years, Rockefeller Park was mightily transformed by the community, serving as a canvas for the truly grand idea — a uniquely Jewish idea, some would say — of the Cleveland Cultural Gardens. The Gardens, like Glenville, flourished and then gradually fell victim to undermining social and political cross-currents, but their demise is not a foregone conclusion. Like the city of Cleveland itself, Rockefeller Park proved to be a welcoming place for the Jewish community and also a place the Jewish community left behind. But, like formerly forlorn parks that

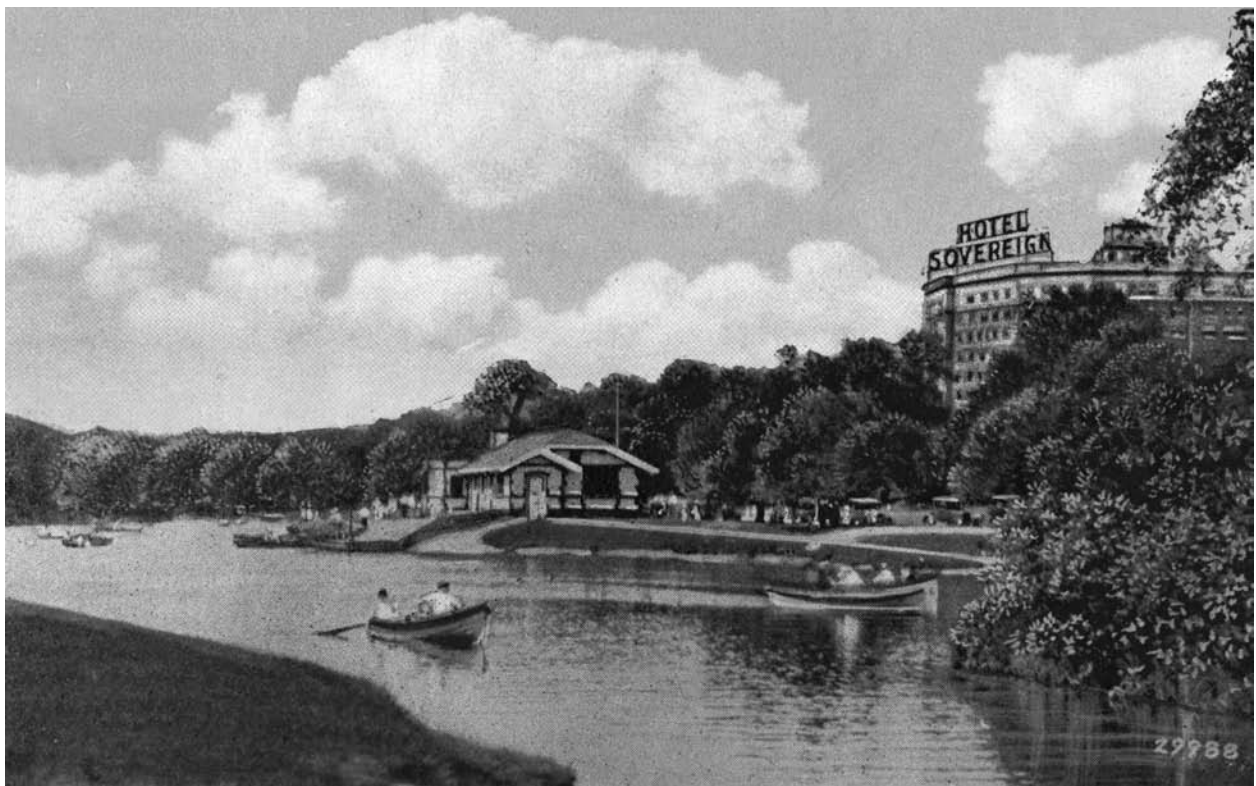
have been gloriously revived in New York, Chicago, San Francisco and elsewhere, Rockefeller Park could regain its iconic status and national distinction.

It was the gifts of three men, Jephtha H. Wade, William J. Gordon, and John D. Rockefeller, that transformed the landscape of the emerging University Circle neighborhood in the late nineteenth century. In 1882 Wade donated to the city land along East Boulevard south of Euclid Avenue. Named Wade Park, it quickly became a major recreational facility. In 1892 Gordon bequeathed land along Lake Erie. Gordon Park, offering residents fishing and boating opportunities, opened in 1893. In 1897 Rockefeller deeded the intervening land along Doan Brook. From the beginning, coinciding with the development of Western Reserve University and the University Circle area, the gifts of Wade, Gordon and Rockefeller determined land use, defined the boundaries of the emerging neighborhoods, and offered Cleveland residents significant recreational opportunities.

Residents rarely distinguished between Gordon, Rockefeller, and Wade Parks, seeing them as one

continuous space for recreation. At the beach in Gordon Park there was fishing, boating, a small cave in the rocks and, not least, ice cream. Rockefeller Park provided a place to get away from the heat in summer months and so fulfilled the wish of Rabbi Moses Gries “that the park commissioners ought to be responsible to the people and that parks should not be four or five miles away from the homes of the poorest, but just across the street.”⁵ Rockefeller Park also provided refuge on hot summer nights for those without air conditioning in crowded apartments and houses — going after dinner and lying on blankets in the cooler air until parents came or, sometimes, staying with parents all night long, sleeping in the park.⁶ Informants often stress the safety of Rockefeller Park back then, recalling that they were allowed to go there even as small children without adult supervision. Wade Park, in contrast, was the site of picnics, family gatherings, and meetings of social groups, reflecting the cultural and political diversity of the day.⁷ Women’s groups, labor groups, and Zionist groups all had a presence in Wade Park, spilling out from the Jewish community of Glenville.

Postcard image depicting the lake at Rockefeller Park with Hotel Sovereign in the background, circa 1910.



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THE CLEVELAND CULTURAL GARDENS

The original definition of Rockefeller Park as a physical space was the course of Doan Brook. Its marshy banks and steep hillsides were barriers to the development of such park facilities as playing fields, picnic areas, and open walking paths. But the brook connected what became the region's most important center of education and culture with Lake Erie. Serving as a path for all kinds of traffic, Rockefeller Park became a city landmark and a reminder of the enduring presence of the natural landscape in our manufactured city.

In 1916 Rockefeller Park became home to a concept that, over time, evolved into an institution that even today is absolutely unique: the Cleveland Cultural Gardens, a chain of themed gardens, each focusing on the civilization of a specific immigrant group. Conceived and launched just when Cleveland was at the height of its wealth, population and influence, the Cultural Gardens movement reflected the desire of newly arrived immigrants to maintain a separate ethnic identity while still asserting their commitment to ideals of "universal brotherhood," the term of choice. While not specifically a Jewish idea, the cultural garden concept was developed and promoted by Cleveland Jews and became integrally entwined in the local, national, and international

Construction of a Doan Brook tunnel structure, circa 1930.



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aspirations of the city's Jewish community.

The driving force behind the Cultural Gardens was Leo Weidenthal, editor of the Jewish Independent and member of a prominent Jewish family of newspaper men. In 1916 Weidenthal established a Shakespeare Garden for the tercentenary of the playwright's death.⁸ Wanting to express his love for the playwright and his reverence for English literature,⁹ it may also have helped that Weidenthal shared a birthday with Shakespeare.¹⁰ A decade later, Weidenthal began discussions about expanding the concept into a chain of gardens the length of Rockefeller Park. His compatriots included Charles Wolfram, a leader of the German community, and Jennie K. Zwick, a longtime Jewish leader and activist. Representatives of other groups soon joined their efforts, including Kazys S. Karpus, editor of Cleveland's Lithuanian newspaper *Dirva*.

That two of the three founders of the Gardens movement were Jewish perhaps explains why the first one dedicated, in 1926, was the Hebrew Cultural Garden. Zwick founded a women's group, *Gan Ivri* (Hebrew for Hebrew Garden), to lead a fundraising effort through concerts, meetings with visiting authors, and lectures.¹¹ Visiting Cleveland in May, 1926, Chaim Nachman Bialik, the foremost Hebrew poet of the day, planted three cedars of Lebanon¹² and gave a speech in Hebrew; Rabbi Solomon Goldman of the Cleveland Jewish Center translated for the audience.¹³ Present in addition to Weidenthal and Zwick were City Manager William R. Hopkins and Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver.

Throughout the next year, visitors to Cleveland continued to plant trees in the garden. The actor Jacob ben Ami and the writer David Pinski planted Norway maples; Chaim Weizmann planted cedars of Lebanon in honor of Zionist leader Ahad Ha-Am and the father of modern Hebrew, Eliezer ben Yehuda. Attending the formal opening of the Philosophers Corner in 1927 were Judah L. Magnes, a founder of Hebrew University, and Henrietta Szold, the founder of Hadassah.¹⁴ The presence of such prominent figures suggests the importance

Jewish leaders accorded the endeavor of the Cultural Gardens.

Weidenthal, Wolfram, and Zwick attracted the attention of local and international figures and achieved significant recognition. However, the Hebrew Cultural Garden was not without controversy, even within the Jewish community. For example, in 1927 the small Hungarian congregation of Knesseth Israel protested the placing of a monument to Maimonides; the congregation's members viewed Maimonides as a living figure no more in need of a monument than Abraham or Moses.¹⁵ Members of Knesseth Israel also opposed exhibiting the bust of Baruch Spinoza (sculpted by Cleveland's own Max Kalish) on the grounds that the heretical Dutch Jewish philosopher had been excommunicated by the Sephardic community of Amsterdam in 1656.

For Weidenthal, the Hebrew Cultural Garden was meant to reflect "a bit of Palestinian loveliness" and all kinds of cultural activities.¹⁶ Designed with a fountain of pink marble at its center, the Garden eventually included a Philosophers' Corner and a Musicians' Corner. A separate section also recognized the many achievements of Jewish women. Inscribed on the fountain was a selection from Proverbs 9, "Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars." The paths around the fountain formed the shape of a six-pointed star, while outlying areas were set aside for additional memorials. Many different individuals came to be honored in the Garden over the years, including Ahad Ha-Am, Chaim Nachman Bialik, Ernest Bloch, Het Aleph Friedland, Karl Goldmark, Rebecca Gratz, Jacques Halevy, Theodor Herzl,

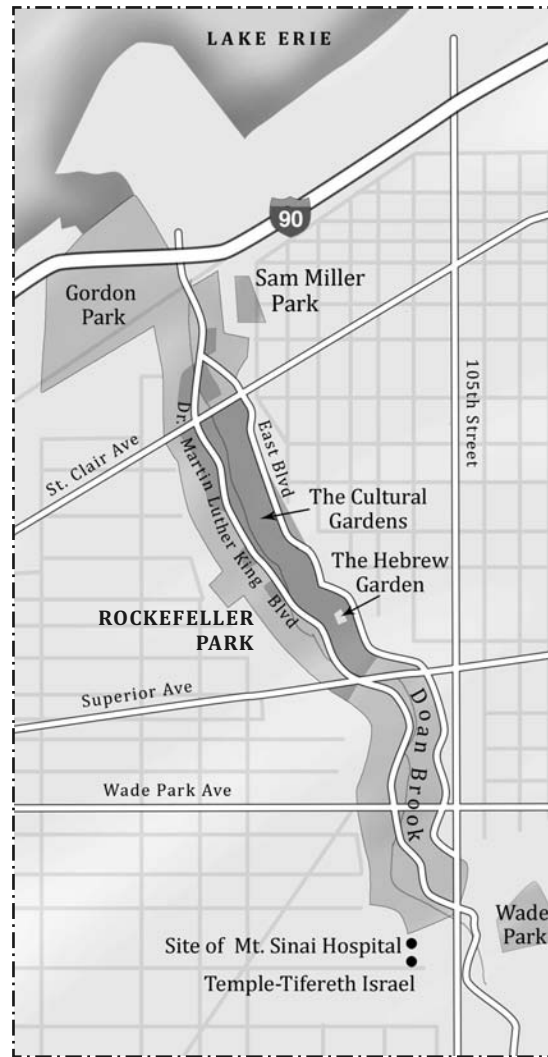
Emma Lazarus, Maimonides, Moses Mendelssohn, Giacomo Meyerbeer, Baruch Spinoza, Henrietta Szold, Saul Tchernikowsky, and the Pioneer Woman, who represented the ideals of the Jewish women's Zionist group Na'amat. A model for other ethnic

groups, the Hebrew garden provided both open space for public movement and more private corners in which to congregate. In May 1929, Councilman Abner H. Goldman sponsored legislation making the Hebrew Cultural Garden an official part of the city's park system.¹⁷

The establishment of this first garden proved greatly motivational for other ethnic communities and emphasized how strongly the early leaders believed in inter-ethnic cooperation. Of particular interest to the Jewish community was the German Cultural Garden, created in 1929. One of the first to be commemorated there was Gotthold Lessing, the German playwright whose work Nathan der Weise (Nathan the Wise) is remembered as an important Enlightenment plea for tolerance. A special "tolerance dinner"¹⁸ was organized by the Lessing-Mendelssohn Bi-centennial Commission which recognized

Lessing's friendship with Moses Mendelssohn (who was seen as a prototype for Nathan the Wise). Similarly, the seventy-fifth anniversary of the death of Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), a German language poet whose parents were Jewish, was marked in 1931 with a weekend of events, including musical performances and a speech by Rabbi Barnett Brickner of Anshe Chesed. While the prominent feature in the German garden is the monumental statue of Goethe and Schiller (a replica of a famous statue

ROCKEFELLER PARK TODAY



(MAP NOT TO SCALE)

in Weimar), the tributes to Lessing and Heine suggest a desire of the German Cultural Garden's founders to also appeal to those beyond the German community.

In supporting this dynamic initiative to celebrate America's absorption of immigrants, Cleveland's ethnic leaders rejected the notion of the melting pot. Rabbi Barnett Brickner of Anshe Chesed, for instance, said he preferred the metaphor of a hope chest, suggesting that immigrants come here to realize hopes and dreams that cannot be fulfilled elsewhere. "Because my grandfather missed the Mayflower and came over on the next boat he could get does not mean that those who came over on the Mayflower are in any way either racially, mentally, or spiritually superior to those who did not," he declared.¹⁹ The Cultural Gardens became a way for the city's ethnic groups to declare their specific identities and also to assert their equal stature with other groups.

In the midst of the Great Depression, thanks in no small part to federal assistance, the gardens literally blossomed. Laborers of the Works Progress Administration made them a reality, even as the city and the nation were experiencing economic crisis. The German garden was soon followed by the Italian, Yugoslav, Slovak, Polish, Hungarian, American, Czech, Lithuanian, Irish, and Russian gardens. (See the Appendix for a complete list of gardens.) Virtually all Cleveland's ethnic groups responded to the garden challenge by following the lead of Gan Ivri, sponsoring fundraisers and cultural events in Rockefeller Park. Each garden had a unique feature, from a formal Celtic cross for the Irish to an elaborate wrought iron entryway gate for the Hungarian. Several gardens featured large fountains; others were designed with both an upper and a lower level. Each contained plaques or statuary in honor of cultural leaders. Most gardens also included plants and trees from the ethnic groups' native countries.

From the start, the Cultural Gardens were a private effort on public land, a cooperative venture between citizens and local government. By 1939 it was time to formally dedicate the remarkable achievement, and the indomitable Jennie Zwick chose the World's Poultry Congress and Exposition as the highlighting event. Zwick rightly expected

this premier international event to draw hundreds of thousands of visitors, giving the garden leaders a grand platform to reveal their efforts and to express their views on ethnic identity and American patriotism.

The 1939 dedication included a special ceremony at the American Legion Peace Garden during which the soil of twenty-eight nations was intermingled — soil from faraway historic battlefields and the grounds of palaces.²⁰ Among many others present were Karl Kapp, consul general of Germany, who brought with him soil from the battlefield of Tannenberg, and Vladislav Drezun, with soil from the battlefield of Kajmakalan, Yugoslavia.²¹ The event featured hundreds of men, women and children who paraded in native costumes²² and drew significant press coverage. One writer concluded, "It is possible for one to be interested in the life and culture of the land of one's ancestry and still be patriotic and loyal to America."²³ The gardens addressed the very real immigrant experience, allowing them the freedom to express a separate identity within the limits of the American community.

The timing, of course, could not have been less fortunate. Less than a month later the Second World War broke out. But writing in *Cleveland Life* in February, 1941, Zwick showed her optimism in spite of war. She declared that the garden chain "will...reveal the cultural contribution to America made by every racial and national group that has accepted the American teachings of equality and tolerance, but it will spell the great truths which the democratic nations of the earth are now championing in the face of an onslaught by powers now seeking to extinguish the torch of freedom and banish human justice from the earth."²⁴

Nevertheless, the events of World War II made clear that the rhetoric of the Cultural Gardens was still far from reality, and, in its aftermath, Cultural Gardens leaders stepped up their efforts to promote harmony. In the wake of America's victory, One World Day, an international festival taking its name from a book by Wendell Willkie, was celebrated in 1946 (along with the sesquicentennial of Cleveland). The organizer of that event was Jennie Zwick's niece, Libbie Phillips; she continued with One World Day for nearly three decades. (Phillips,



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This photo from the *Plain Dealer* depicts the dedication at the American Legion Peace Garden in 1939, during which the soil of twenty-eight nations was intermingled at the garden in Rockefeller Park.

who had been involved in Gan Ivri in its early years, maintained her involvement in the Cultural Garden Federation throughout her lifetime, even after Zwick moved from Cleveland.)

The war challenged the international ideals of the Gardens leaders, but they faced a significant internal challenge, too, a challenge of which they showed very little awareness. Astonishingly, Zwick's 1941 reference to universal racial participation was patently untrue: from the start, the Cultural Gardens movement was decidedly Eurocentric. There was apparently no room in the Gardens for African Americans or, indeed, for immigrants who had come from any other areas of the world. The fact that the Cultural Gardens did not include all the residents of city was an issue that would not be addressed until decades later.

Despite the challenges, involvement in the Gardens continued after the war. The Jewish community hosted two additional events in the postwar period when soil from other lands was added to the park. In 1948, after the establishment of the state of Israel, soil was brought from the new nation to the

Hebrew Cultural Garden and a ceremony was held.²⁵ (Back in the 1939 intermingling, since there had been no Jewish national state, there had been no "Jewish soil" brought to the park.) Similarly, on the occasion of the dedication of a plaque for the poetess Emma Lazarus, soil from the American Museum of Immigration at the foot of the Statue of Liberty was brought to Cleveland.²⁶ Other activities, too, demonstrated the continued Jewish tie to the park, even after the peak of Jewish settlement in Glenville. A plaque to Chaim Bialik was dedicated in 1954, in tribute to the poet whose visit inaugurated the Gardens. Five years later Cleveland's chapter of B'nai B'rith dedicated the Shrine of the Four Chaplains to commemorate the actions of four religious leaders on the troopship USS *Dorchester* in February 1943. Two Protestant chaplains, a Catholic priest, and a rabbi gave up their life jackets to drowning soldiers when the troopship was hit by a German submarine in waters off Greenland. Witnesses saw the four link arms and go down together, a symbol of interfaith action that captured the world's attention.²⁷

THE HEYDAY PASSES

In the 1940s and 1950s, as Cleveland's white ethnics moved to the suburbs in ever greater numbers, their use of Rockefeller Park often diminished to the annual participation in One World Day — still an important civic occasion in Cleveland — or in special events in the Cultural Gardens. New gardens continued to be built, including those of the Finns, the Estonians, and the Romanians, but by the 1960s the days of sleeping overnight in the park were a memory. The realities of urban life gradually changed the use of the park and challenged the ideals of the Cultural Gardens.

By 1960 the demographics of the neighborhoods surrounding Rockefeller Park had changed completely. Glenville was 90 percent African American. Hough was 74 percent non-white. In November, 1967 Carl B. Stokes was elected mayor, making Cleveland the nation's first major city led by an African American. Back in 1937 two-thirds of the Jewish population of Cuyahoga County still lived in the city of Cleveland. By 1960 Sidney Vincent, a prominent leader in the Jewish Community Federation and a former student and teacher at Glenville High School, described Cleveland as a "city without Jews."²⁸ The Jews, who had begun to settle in Cleveland Heights as early as the 1910s,²⁹ had moved almost entirely to the eastern suburbs. Moreover, because of two highly publicized events in the late 1960s, many of them were afraid to return to Glenville, Hough, and Rockefeller Park even as visitors. In July 1966 an altercation at the Seventy-Niners Café in Hough sparked days of rioting that left 4 people killed and 30 injured.³⁰ Two summers later, a shootout in Glenville between Cleveland's police department and armed black militants left 7 people dead and 15 wounded.

Shortly before the September 1966 One World Day celebration, vandals defaced many of the monuments in the Gardens. "Get Whitey" appeared in spray paint on the relief of Baruch Spinoza in the Hebrew Cultural Garden.³¹ Volunteers and park

officials worked diligently to remove the scar, and the event went on as planned with the participation of the entertainer Liberace, but the damage proved to be lasting. In his speech, Liberace said, "My mother was of Polish descent, my father Italian; I was born in the German city of Milwaukee, my household is run by a Negro lady, my manager is Jewish, and my success is American."³² Liberace used his own life to describe the ways Americans of all kinds interacted, but unwittingly his words highlighted the tension between whites and African Americans, who, ignored by even the high-minded and well-intentioned leaders of the Cultural Gardens, increasingly asserted themselves. Included in Liberace's explication of his background and experiences, they had been excluded from the Cultural Gardens. The vandalism drew attention to the European nature of the Gardens. While the exclusion of African Americans was most probably not the direct cause of the vandalism, the vandalism surely made the exclusion visible.

In short, the vision of the Gardens' founders was still far from being realized. Discussions over a garden to represent the African American experience began in the early 1960s, but many Cultural Gardens leaders simply saw no need for one. To them, the African American experience was rooted in America and there were already two American gardens. In 1970 the Tuskegee Alumni Association finally succeeded in erecting a monument to Booker T. Washington in the American Colonial Garden, but many African Americans still felt the need for a separate garden to honor their unique backgrounds and diverse experiences. Only in 1977 was land finally set aside for an African American Cultural Garden, and the garden itself had not been developed by this writing in 2010.

The violence so affected public perception of the Rockefeller Park neighborhoods that some city leaders recommended abandoning the ethnic gardens and establishing new ones elsewhere in the

city.³³ Fortunately, this did not occur. In 1973, on the 25th anniversary of the founding of Israel, Mayor Ralph J. Perk attended the rededication of the Hebrew Cultural Garden. New aluminum plaques replaced the bronze plaques that had been stolen, and tree seedlings were distributed to all those attending the event. Perk stated, “We intend that this summer will long be remembered for bringing back to the people of Cleveland one of their greatest possessions.”³⁴ He also announced plans to improve lighting, security, and parking throughout Rockefeller Park, but these were never fully realized: Cleveland’s social tensions coincided with its economic woes, and in 1978 the city defaulted on its debt. The decline was everywhere. Surrounded by decaying urban neighborhoods, Rockefeller Park and the Gardens suffered from both lack of use and neglect.

In the mid 1980s Mayor George Voinovich took steps to obtain money for Rockefeller Park, filing suit against the family of former large landholder William Holden on the grounds that it had not properly carried out the Holden will. A settlement resulted in the establishment in the late 1980s of the Holden Parks Trust whose board also includes representatives from the city, the Cleveland

The fountain in the Italian Cultural Garden.



MITCH BERRIER



BILL JONES

Volunteers in the Hebrew Cultural Garden.

Botanical Garden and the Cleveland Museum of Art. Since its establishment, approximately \$4 million has been spent on capital projects.³⁵ A portion of these funds has been made available to Cultural Gardens associations for specific improvements.

Mayor Michael R. White paid even greater attention to Rockefeller Park during his term from 1990 to 2001. The city’s second African American mayor, White grew up on East Boulevard and served as the city councilman from Glenville from 1978 to 1984. His memories of Rockefeller Park and the Cultural Gardens led him to become actively involved in developing playgrounds and pocket parks throughout the city. White also encouraged his liaison for ethnic and international affairs, Richard Konisiewicz, to take an active role in the Cleveland Cultural Gardens Federation. Konisiewicz served as the group’s president in the late nineties, bringing in new volunteer leaders for many of the gardens and championing such practical projects as the placement of water spigots throughout the Gardens.

The number of stakeholders in Rockefeller Park suggests its importance to the community. Among them are University Circle, Inc., a community development corporation, and ParkWorks, a conservation and education group. (ParkWorks’ board includes Bob Gries, the grandson of Moses Gries, the rabbi who insisted that local parks be accessible to the public.) The Holden Parks Trust offers funding and institutionalizes the roles of University Circle institutions. And, not least, community members from nearby neighborhoods and distant suburbs, such as the Famicos Foundation, continue to sponsor events and advocate for the park.

THE PARK TODAY

Rockefeller Park was a creation of the 19th century, but the 20th century left the belt of green space surrounding Doan Brook transformed and quite a bit worse for wear. For instance, today's Rockefeller Park conforms to the boundaries of the park's original central Brookway Division. The southern Cedar Division ultimately yielded to the development of the campus of Case Western Reserve University. The Ambler Division remains, but it has been rendered almost inaccessible by heavily traveled roadways. The culverting of Doan Brook imposed a human plan on a natural landscape, enabling the development of the university but rupturing the park and degrading its best feature. And the growth of University Circle has brought increased traffic, virtually eliminating the notion of a greenway from the Shaker Lakes to Lake Erie.

Rockefeller Park itself remains primarily a picturesque drive that culminates in entrance ramps to the interstate. The course of the brook has now become a major thoroughfare, Martin Luther King Drive, two lanes in each direction, bordered by steep wooded hillsides and paths to neighborhoods avoided by most Clevelanders. Even though there is a pedestrian bridge, the noise and smell of the heavy traffic on the interstate's ramps has the effect of distancing Rockefeller Park from Gordon Park. Ultimately, once in Gordon Park, the visitor encounters a marina, some picnic tables, basic restroom facilities, a rocky shore, and Dike 14, a landfill constructed by the Army Corps of Engineers in the late 1970s. The old beach and bathhouse of Gordon Park

are long gone. Indeed, the current landscape makes the past quite difficult to imagine.

Recent events offer some hope for the park's future. The most significant change was the addition of a bikeway in 1997. Named for Harrison Dillard, a local African American track and field hero who brought home gold medals in the 1948 and 1952 Olympics, the 4-mile trail links Lake Erie to University Circle. Paved and entirely off road, it is one of the best ways to visit Rockefeller Park and the Cultural Gardens.³⁶ In addition, a brightly colored playground with water features was recently installed with the support of the Holden Parks Trust.

Some city residents have recently become more familiar with Rockefeller Park thanks to the work of Lois Moss, a bicycle enthusiast and event organizer. By closing the park road to automobiles for eight Sundays from 2006 to 2008, Moss' "Walk+Roll Cleveland" allowed over 10,000 people to enjoy biking, walking, yoga, music, skating, face painting, theater, nutrition information, and exercise classes along Martin Luther King Drive — all for free. After taking part in the event, many people felt safer and more comfortable using the park. Walk+Roll, which has grown to include other neighborhoods, including Slavic Village and Detroit-Shoreway, offers an outstanding model to encourage people to visit and return to the park.

The Cultural Gardens show promise, too. Far from irrelevant to many who still identify with their ethnic heritage, they remain an active work in progress. Four new gardens — the Azerbaijani, Indian, Latvian, and Serbian — have been completed since 2006 alone. An impressive statue of Gandhi now greets those traveling the route of Doan Brook. The Syrian garden is under construction, so is the Armenian (and as in the old world, they are neighbors in the new: the Armenian Garden will adjoin the new one of Azerbaijan). Those of Albania and Croatia are being planned. Ireland's was rededicated in 2009 and Italy's is being restored for \$750,000.





JEWISH FEDERATION OF CLEVELAND

Children at the fountain in the Hebrew Cultural Garden, 2008.

The African American Garden, too, has shown renewed signs of life. An impressive design features pavilions for the public, which could do much to encourage use of the park. Significantly, the Cleveland Cultural Gardens Federation recently requested that the city reserve land in Rockefeller Park for the addition of still more gardens.

Any plan for the future of Rockefeller Park must consider the continued development of the Cultural Gardens, but it must also do much more. Addressing the challenges, the *Plain Dealer's* noted architecture critic, Steve Litt identified that Rockefeller Park should become “more of an asset to the neighborhoods flanking the park, more of a tool to leverage economic development in the area, and more of a connection to Cleveland Heights and Lake Erie.”³⁷ Fortunately, a widely praised Rockefeller Park Master Plan developed by the non-profit ParkWorks offers a blueprint for how the park might achieve the goals Litt outlines. Among other things, the plan specifically calls for the addition of on-street parking and stone seating walls, facilities which could encourage people to stop as they drive through the park.³⁸

The plan also considers the expansion of one of the park's neighbors, the Louis Stokes Cleveland Veterans Administration Medical Center. The relocation of hundreds of employees from suburban Brecksville to the Wade Park neighborhood will lead to a significant increase in activity, which, if properly handled, could lead to increased foot traffic from both employ-

ees and patients. The capital improvements of the master plan, recently approved by the Cleveland City Planning Commission, may eventually help to change outsiders' views of the surrounding neighborhoods.

Ultimately, the renewal of the park may depend on strengthening the connection between those stakeholders who used the park most extensively in the past — the white ethnic communities who built the Cultural Gardens — and those who live in the neighborhoods surrounding Rockefeller Park today. Sadly, the reality of a segregated Cleveland threatens to undermine the ideals of the Cultural Gardens and certainly hinders the development of the city and region. But the strategic planning by ParkWorks and the Cultural Gardens Federation show promise. These plans would go beyond a transformation of only the physical characteristics of the park to a more basic upgrading of the surrounding neighborhoods — making the whole area more welcoming, safer and more pleasurable for everyone. For these plans to succeed, those who left Rockefeller Park for suburban comforts must recognize the needs of the current residents; similarly, those now living in Glenville must recognize that Cleveland's white ethnic groups have a special attachment to the Gardens. Bringing this all together, possibly in the context of Walk+Roll, could help combat the negative reputation of Cleveland's urban core.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

The Cleveland Cultural Gardens represents the most important way individual Jews and Jewish organizations experienced Rockefeller Park throughout the twentieth century. But within today's well organized and active Cleveland Jewish community, the Hebrew Cultural Garden Committee represents only a small part. It was revived in the mid 1990s by Paula Fishman, a community member shocked by the dire state of the garden. "Nobody was paying any attention to what was going on in the urban environment. To me, it was appalling. It was an insult to the Jewish community that we would have our name on the garden with it looking like that."³⁹ Her effort soon drew the attention and financial support of local philanthropist Sam Miller. Fishman also eventually succeeded in involving the staff and volunteers of the Jewish Federation of Cleveland, and for over a decade the Federation has helped to organize Brunch 'n' Bloom, a volunteer event that draws over a hundred people each year to plant flowers and prepare the garden for the summer.

Progress has been made. The garden is now free of trash, regularly maintained, and welcoming to visitors. With the help of the Holden Parks Trust and the Jewish Federation of Cleveland, its center fountain has been beautifully restored. Statuary reliefs are still

Brunch 'n' Bloom volunteers.



JEWISH FEDERATION OF CLEVELAND

missing, but seven of the plaques are expected to be replaced in 2010.⁴⁰ Still, there is little to inform visitors about the original mission of the Cultural Gardens, and Bob Gries maintains that "much of the Jewish community doesn't know the Cultural Gardens exists."⁴¹ Moreover, while Brunch 'n' Bloom has been a tremendous success, the volunteers have not yet moved beyond their Hebrew Garden work to a full-fledged connection to Rockefeller Park itself. Once again, the reality of the individual physical garden has been more motivational to activist volunteers — Jews and others — than the idealistic conception of the whole held by Weidenthal, Wolfram, and Zwick.

The Cultural Gardens were not a program generated solely from within the Jewish community; their multi-ethnic success was due to the enthusiasm and commitment of numerous individual leaders who were adept in public relations, fundraising and organizing within their communities. And the gardens are only one part of multi-faceted Rockefeller Park, the most important green space on Cleveland's east side. But it was the Jewish community that sparked this unique creation, and the question at the beginning of the 21st century is whether today's largely suburban Jews will rise to the challenge and continue the work of their parents and grandparents. Will Cleveland's Jewish community rally to support Rockefeller Park and its surrounding neighborhoods, as in decades past? Though physical distance from the old neighborhoods offers real challenges, the Jewish connection to the city of Cleveland remains strong.

Can former residents and their descendants unite with those now living in Glenville to improve the greater community where we all live and work? This question takes on added weight as the centennial of the Cultural Gardens approaches in 2016. While segregation and racial distrust is a barrier (as in all U.S. cities), the garden seeds planted within Rockefeller Park offer a glimmer of hope that cultural pride and natural beauty can allow all our citizens the freedom to express their identities, and to teach us how their identities shape our own.

APPENDIX

The Cleveland Cultural Gardens, in chronological order of their establishment. The British Garden was originally known as the Shakespeare Garden. The original Yugoslav Garden (1932) was dissolved along with the country of Yugoslavia in the 1990s; it is now the Slovenian Garden. There is now a separate Serbian Garden, and a Croatian Garden is in development.

British Garden 1916
Hebrew Garden 1926
German Garden 1929
Italian Garden 1930
Slovak Garden 1932
Slovenian Garden 1932
Polish Garden 1934
Hungarian Garden 1934
American Colonial Garden, 1935
Czech Garden 1935
American Legion Garden, Nations, 1936
American Legion Garden, States, 1936
Lithuanian Garden 1936
Irish Garden, 1939
Rusin Garden 1939
Greek Garden 1940
Ukrainian Garden 1940
Finnish Garden 1958
Estonian Garden 1966
Romanian Garden 1967
African American Garden 1977
Chinese Garden 1985
Indian Garden 2005
Latvian 2006
Azerbaijan Garden 2008
Serbian Garden 2009
Armenian Garden 2010
Syrian Garden 2010
Albanian (proposed)
Croatian (proposed)

Source: Cleveland Cultural Gardens Federation,
sponsored by Cleveland State University.

www.CulturalGardens.org

FOOTNOTES

- 1** For an accounting of Jewish population statistics in Cleveland, see Jacob Rader Marcus, *To Count a People: American Jewish Population Data, 1585-1984* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1990).
- 2** See MS. 4563 The Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland Records, Container 11, Folder 182, Western Reserve Historical Society (WRHS).
- 3** Personal interview with Arnold Miller, June 11, 2009.
- 4** Despite the proximity, a Jewish presence at the university was minimal in the early decades of the twentieth century, due not least to anti-Semitism. When in 1905 leaders of the Excelsior Club, an exclusive Jewish social group, selected a site on Euclid Avenue near Western Reserve University for its new location. University President Charles Franklin Thwing actively opposed the sale, arguing that the city's future art museum needed the site. But Jewish community leaders were already well connected politically, and Mayor Tom Johnson helped secure their purchase of the site. Anti-Semitic attitudes prevailed in Cleveland's academic circles at least until the 1930s. Interestingly, when the Excelsior Club merged with the Oakwood Club in 1931, the building was sold to the university and renamed for President Thwing. Today the Thwing Center serves as the university's student union.
- 5** December 22, 1897, *Cleveland World*. An album titled Park Board Reorganization, in the collection of the Cleveland Public Library, preserves newspaper clippings from the 1890s and early 1900s related to conflicts over park construction among park commissioners.
- 6** Personal interviews with Don Kalish, June 3, 2009 and Robert Brooks, June 10, 2009.
- 7** Personal interview with Jack Jaffe, June 5, 2009. Local resident Ellie Goldstein remembers a favorite kind of food from these kinds of events, nahit, or baked chickpeas with black pepper, sold in a bag or in a cone made from paper. Personal interview with Ellie Goldstein, June 15, 2009.
- 8** See *From Diss's Wagon* (Cleveland: The Weidenthal Company, 1926), a history of the Shakespeare Garden by Leo Weidenthal.
- 9** See *From Diss's Wagon* (Cleveland: The Weidenthal Company, 1926), a history of the Shakespeare Garden by Leo Weidenthal.
- 10** Cultural Gardens leaders often chose anniversaries of births or deaths as occasions for the planting of a tree or the sponsoring of an event in the Gardens. Weidenthal seems to have had a special interest in marking anniversaries, even of lesser known cultural figures.
- 11** See for example "Miss Libbie Neidus to Sing at Gan Ivri Women's Luncheon Bridge", *The Jewish Independent*, September 2, 1927 and "Many Attend Celebration of Gan Ivri", *Plain Dealer*, March 28, 1928.
- 12** This review of the early years of the Hebrew Cultural Garden comes from a review of the newspaper clippings and scrapbooks in MS. 3700, WRHS and the clippings file at the Cleveland Public Library. Weidenthal's own September 1927 publication, "The Gan Ivri, Hebrew Garden, in Rockefeller Park", also provides a succinct overview of the Garden.
- 13** "One World Day: A Uniquely Appropriate Setting", *Cleveland Jewish News*, September 2, 1966.
- 14** "One World Day: A Uniquely Appropriate Setting", *Cleveland Jewish News*, September 2, 1966.
- 15** "Fights Rabbi's Statue", *Plain Dealer*, October 3, 1927.
- 16** Weidenthal, "The Gan Ivri".
- 17** Weidenthal, "The Gan Ivri".
- 18** "Week of Tribute to Honor Lessing", *Plain Dealer*, April 26, 1929.
- 19** "Rabbi Brickner terms America 'Hope Chest' in Flag Address", *The Jewish Independent*, March 4, 1927, p. 2.

- 20** Roelif Loveland, "Just Plain Soil Welds People of 28 Nations", Plain Dealer, July 31, 1939.
- 21** Roelif Loveland, "Just Plain Soil Welds People of 28 Nations", Plain Dealer, July 31, 1939. This article notes that Kapp offered a Nazi salute during his role in the ceremony.
- 22** July 31, 1939, Cleveland Press.
- 23** July 29, 1939, Cleveland Press.
- 24** "That This Nation Might Endure in Freedom and Truth", Jennie K. Zwick, Cleveland Life, February 1941.
- 25** The Jewish community was not the only ethnic group represented in the garden chain without a corresponding political nation in which the group had some kind of group recognition. The Rusin Cultural Garden was established in 1939.
- 26** "Historic Soil will be Intermingled at Base of Emma Lazarus Memorial by General Grant at One World Day Observance Sunday", August 5, 1955, Jewish Independent. The director of the American Museum of Immigration at the time was the grandson of President Ulysses S. Grant.
- 27** For additional information, see www.fourchaplains.org, the website of the Four Chaplains Memorial Foundation at the Philadelphia Naval Business Center. See also a recently published popular account of the well known incident, *No Greater Glory: The Four Immortal Chaplains and the Sinking of the Dorchester in World War II*, by Dan Kurzman (New York: Random House, 2004).
- 28** See Judah Rubinstein, "Jewish Day of Atonement Census Studies", *Review of Religious Research* Vol. 5, No. 1 (Autum 1963), 30-39.
- 29** On the early presence of Jews in Cleveland Heights, see Marian J. Morton, "The Suburban Ideal and Suburban Realities: Cleveland Heights, Ohio, 1860-2001", *Journal of Urban History* Vol. 28, No. 6 (September 2002), 681-682.
- 30** Marc E. Lackritz, "The Hough Riots of 1966", undergraduate thesis, Princeton University, 1968, <http://web.ulib.csuohio.edu/hough/>, accessed November 3, 2009. A housing development at the corner of Hough and East 79th Street, Lexington Village, was the centerpiece of the neighborhood's effort at stabilization after the riots, but the damage to the reputation of the neighborhood was lasting.
- 31** For a photograph of the defaced Spinoza plaque, see "Cultural Gardens Vandals Hit", Plain Dealer, September 9, 1966.
- 32** "One World Day's Brotherhood Theme to Replace Riot-Scars", Plain Dealer, August 9, 1966. In MS 3700, Container 2, Folder 5, WRHS.
- 33** See Tony Tucci, "Cultural Gardens Planned for Mall," Cleveland Press, September 15, 1972 and Madeleine Drexler, "Pride and Prejudice", *The Plain Dealer Magazine*, October 11, 1985. Thanks to Mitchell Berbrier for these references.
- 34** "New Beauty for Hebrew Garden", undated, unidentified newspaper clipping.
- 35** Personal interview with Chris Bongorno, Planning and Sustainability Manager, University Circle, Inc., February 12, 2010.
- 36** See the Cleveland City Planning Commission description of the bikeway, <http://planning.city.cleveland.oh.us/bike/HDBikeway.html>. Accessed November 3, 2009.
- 37** Personal communication, Steven Litt, January 26, 2010.
- 38** See the Cleveland City Planning Commission Northeast Design Review Case Detail Report for Northeast Case # NE 2009-018, <http://planning.city.cleveland.oh.us/ezpdf/BRDdetailPDF.php?recordID=2384>. Accessed November 3, 2009.
- 39** Personal communication, Paula Fishman, April 19, 2010.
- 40** Personal communication, Bill Jones, April 19, 2010.
- 41** Personal communication, Bob Gries, February 19, 2010.



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COVER PHOTO: EAST BOULEVARD NEAR WADE PARK.
BEN F. CORDAY AND HIS CHILDREN, ESTELLE AND ELLIS, ENJOY A SUNDAY DRIVE IN THE FAMILY WINTON.
THE BRIDGE AND THE SERPENTINE PATH WERE DESIGNED BY CHARLES SCHWEINFURTH. CIRCA 1910.
COURTESY MRS. JACOB WATTENMAKER.