

# JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

## A Century Can't Separate the Reverberations Felt Now by '1917'

By Rachel Kurland - March 16, 2017



*Jacob Lavin (center) with group of American Expeditionary Forces in France. National Museum of American Jewish History, 1996.51.5. Gift of Marilyn Lavin Tarr.*

"Does the United States have a responsibility to defend other nations?"

"Is it patriotic to criticize the government?"

In retrospect, these are the simple questions asked at the National Museum of American Jewish History's (NMAJH) new exhibit, *1917: How One Year Changed the World*.

*1917* explores how the events of that year — America’s entry into World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution, the signing of the Balfour Declaration — shaped the world politically, culturally and socially and shifted the U.S. into a world power.

Interactive media allows visitors to vote “yes” or “no” to questions like these, alongside roughly 130 other artifacts, including uniforms, letters, photographs and posters.

The exhibition is funded by a \$325,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

It will run from March 17 through July 16; then its co-organizer, the American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS) in New York, will take over the exhibit from Sept. 1 through Dec. 29.

Rachel Lithgow, AJHS executive director, said compiling this exhibit started three years ago, but its history has become more relevant than ever.

“In light of the way we’ve been talking about gender in this country, there’s an important story here that revolves around Emma Goldman, Margaret Sanger — women who 100 years ago were championing reproductive freedom, women’s rights,” she said.

An original metal cervical cap is in the exhibit, one of the first strides that allowed “women to have a little bit of a say in their own bodies.”

Other pieces, such as the Balfour Declaration, a policy that stated Great Britain’s support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine, excite Lithgow.

This is the first Balfour Declaration ever on display in the U.S. — the exhibit shows two handwritten drafts.

“You can really see, looking at the document, the pain and struggle and care that its authors went through to draft a small paragraph,” she said.

There’s also a decoded copy of the Zimmerman Telegram, which propelled the U.S. into World War I; a copy of the Treaty of Versailles, the agreement that ended the war; an Uncle Sam costume; robes and the original nameplate of Louis Brandeis, the first Jewish Supreme Court justice; and the Medal of Honor posthumously awarded to Jewish soldier William Shemin in 2015 by President Barack Obama.



"[Jewish soldiers] laid down their lives for a country that was at the time questioning whether or not they were citizens, and that is a story that is extremely relevant to today," Lithgow added.

That soldier certainly had his own story, said Josh Perelman, NMAJH's chief curator and director of exhibitions and collections.

Shemin originally lied about his age to enlist. On the battlefield, he left the safety of his platoon's trench to help rescue and carry back wounded soldiers. After the casualties of his officers, Shemin took command.

Anti-Semitism prevented his honor for almost 100 years, according to the exhibit.

Stories like this one add another layer to those of 1917 that might not be told at other institutions.

Perelman said he came to understand that “there were pivotal events that took place in 1917 that really did fundamentally change the world and, moreover, had tremendous impact on ethnic minorities here in this country.”

In particular for Jews in the U.S. who also had strong ties to Europe, the events that transpired provided opportunities and challenges that they had not yet been confronted with in America.

“We are talking about significant events that happened a century ago but the reverberations of those events, the historical events that they initiated, we feel in our lives today,” he said. “What happened in 1917 is relevant to what is happening in the United States and the world at this very moment.”

About 250,000 Jews served in the American Expeditionary Forces (out of 4.8 million total), which is a high proportion per capita and consisted of a mixture of enlistment and conscription.

Eighteen percent of those Jews were foreign-born.

Perelman said many who come through the museum relate to that immigration story as a paramount core of American history.

“This war takes place really at the nexus between decades of mass migration — which eventually about 20 million people came to this country, about 10 percent of them Jews, which fundamentally changed the fabric of our nation,” he noted. “Jews of 1917 really had to navigate a complex web of identity considerations.”

After the war came the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, Perelman said, which brought about the most severe immigration quotas by the American government.

“Between issues of patriotism and service, between issues of the Balfour Declaration and the questions raised about Jewish loyalties, Jews very much wanted to emphasize the dedication and devotion to the [U.S.], but they didn’t want to lose their sense of duty, their sense of pride and their sense of calling to their own community in the United States and in Europe,” Perelman explained.

The exhibit concludes with "VICTORY?" posted in bold red print on the wall.

"The exhibition ends and asks the question, 'What did the world become after 1917?'" Perelman said, of which it is up to visitors to reflect and decide.

He explained further: "I've always felt that the adoption of the Johnson-Reed Act is a watershed event in American history that very few people know about. In ending that remarkable period of immigration in the 1880s, it really did fundamentally change the character of America. In some ways, it cut off the umbilical cord from Europe, and especially for ethnic communities, instead of this kind of new influx of people who are continually bringing language and tradition and culture from Europe into America, ethnic communities had to set about really fundamentally establishing their identities as hyphenated Americans."

Overall, making this history tangible was a proud moment for the curator.

"[The Zimmerman Telegram], to me — it's a piece of paper, but it's a piece of paper that led to an event that changed history," he said. "That's pretty exciting."

But it's the real people, too, that impacted it all, like William Shemin.

"He's someone that I admire and I'm inspired by. His sense of service, his sense of duty, his courage and his valour are of a magnitude that personally I've never experienced. It is stories like that that inspire me to be courageous, to be brave in my own life."

No matter one's feelings on war or military intervention, Perelman said he is a hero.

"This is a moment where having heroes is essential," he said.