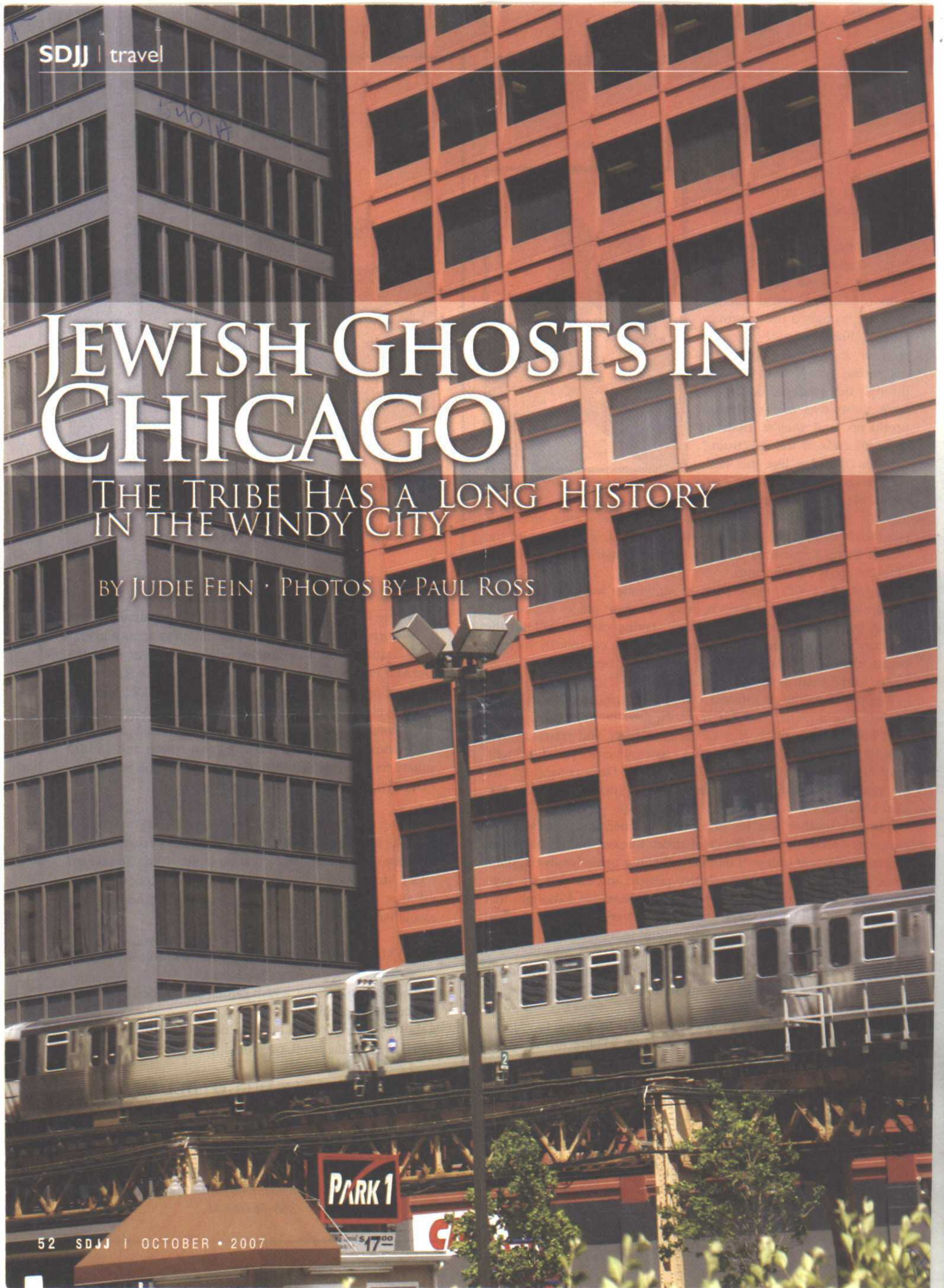


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# JEWISH GHOSTS IN CHICAGO

THE TRIBE HAS A LONG HISTORY IN THE WINDY CITY

BY JUDIE FEIN · PHOTOS BY PAUL ROSS



It's free. It's fun. It's feet-friendly. It's the Chicago Greeter program, where more than 250 volunteers take you on two-hour walking tours of different aspects of life in their town – with complimentary city transportation. There's literary Chicago. Chicago architecture. Art. Medicine. History. Fashion. And now the Greeter program has gone Jewish.

OUR GUIDE WAS MARSHALL JACOBSON, AN AFFABLE, retired, ex-Jewish Federation and Jewish Agency guy who transplanted from New York five years ago. He likes walking, and he loves to tell stories.

"You know about the Chicago fire of October, 1871, right?" he inquires.

"Yes..."

"Well, the official version was that Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicked over a lantern in the barn and started the fire. Others say a bootlegger named Peg Leg Sullivan started the blaze. But there's a third possibility that goes like this: a few teenage Jewish boys came to Mrs. O'Leary's barn to hide out while they played poker and drank beer. They knocked over a candle and the next thing you know, the city was burning."

Jacobson was full of tales. He said the first Jews – between 12 and 20 of them – came to Chicago around 1841. They were young sons from big German families, and they came as merchants, to start companies. We walked by Lake Street, where the first arrivals opened their dry goods, haberdashery and general stores. Today there's an elevated railway, and only the ghosts of Jews past remain.

Our guide stopped in front of the State of Illinois building; in 1845, it was a store owned by Rosenberg and Rosenfeld, and above it was the first High Holidays *minyan* in Chicago. By 1871, the Jewish population had exploded; there were 10 synagogues and several thousand people.

"I told you about the fire of 1871," Jacobson said, "but I didn't tell you that it started on Simchat Torah. The Jews were in the streets, parading their torahs. So eight of those 10 synagogues burned, but all the torahs survived because they were outside!"

After the fire, the Jews moved south and built the well-known KAM synagogue (today it is Baptist Pilgrim Church and the headquarters of Jesse Jackson). Then they moved to Hyde Park and Kenwood.

As we continued walking, we learned about Henry Horner, one of the most successful of the immigrants and a founder of the Chicago Board of Trade in 1848. His grandson, also named Henry Horner, was a Democrat governor of Illinois from 1933-1940. Today, in suburban Ingelside, there is a Jewish summer camp in his name.

In the 1870s and 1880s, when pogroms started in Eastern Europe, Jews started flooding into Chicago, and they settled on Maxwell Street. They were much poorer than their successful German counterparts. The latter included Max Adler (the treasurer of Sears Robuck, who gave money to build the Adler Planetarium) and Julius Rosenwald (who gave \$8,000,000 to start the Museum of Science and Industry).

We paused for a while on Maxwell Street



to learn about all the well-known Jews who once lived there: Benny Goodman, Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg, the fighter Barney Ross, Admiral Hyman Rickover (known as the father of the nuclear submarine and the nuclear navy) and the actor Paul Muni. It was like the Lower East Side... of Chicago.

Jacobson guided us to the influential Standard Club (320 South Plymouth Court), which was started before 1860. There, members recruited a Jewish regiment to fight in the Civil War. Two of them were Dankmar Adler (a pioneering architect who helped to develop and build steel-framed skyscrapers in the 1880's) and one of the Spiegel brothers who started the mail order catalogue business; alas, he died fighting.

Eastern European Jews weren't allowed in the tony Standard Club, so they started the Covenant Club. Today, the latter has merged into the former and has been replaced by the trendy Sopraffina Market Caffe.



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“As the Eastern European Jews began to prosper, they moved west and north, to Lawndale, Albany Park. There are less than 80,000 Jews left in the city,” Jacobson told us. “The rest of the 300,000 are in the suburbs. But that’s changing now. Everything changes. Jews and empty nesters are coming back and settling downtown.”

At Clark and Madison, sandwiched in between a Wendy’s and several skyscrapers, is the Chicago Loop synagogue. There is a green-hued bronze sculpture over the door; it’s an abstract rendition of two hands giving the priestly blessing. It’s not very visitor-friendly, so we had to stand outside and imagine what was behind the doors.

It’s decidedly friendlier at the Jewish Federation building at Monroe and Wells. After good-natured guards did the security thing, we were ushered inside. We learned that when Jewish newcomers arrive in the Windy City, they get Shalom Chicago packages and all kinds of personalized help. There are cool mix-and-mingle events for people in their 20’s and 30’s, groups for people in the 40-50 range and plenty of senior programs.



It's touching that a brown plaque on one of the streets near the Jewish Federation building states that the street is also called Honorary Ben Gurion Way. It's not on any map—it's an honor bestowed on the late Ben-Gurion—but it demonstrates the influence of Jews in the wonderfully cosmopolitan, architecturally-rich, friendly, varied city. ☆



## IF YOU GO:

**For a free two-hour tour:  
[Chicagogreeter.com](http://Chicagogreeter.com)**

The famed Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies, at 618 S. Michigan Avenue, is currently closed for repairs and expansion. It is slated to re-open by Thanksgiving 2007. It offers courses, exhibits, public events, and a new partnership with Wolfgang Puck for an onsite café.

For information on visiting Chicago: [www.cityofchicago.org/tourism](http://www.cityofchicago.org/tourism)