George J. Sherman and Lottie K. Sherman  
Museum of Jewish Civilization

“Freedom is Never Free: Norway and the Jews”

April 1 – October 25, 2010  
George J. and Lottie K. Sherman Museum of Jewish Civilization  
William Singer Gallery  
University of Hartford  
Sponsored by  
The Norway and the Holocaust Fund  
Maurice Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies
George J. Sherman and Lottie K. Sherman
Museum of Jewish Civilization

The George J. Sherman and Lottie K. Sherman Museum of Jewish Civilization was founded in 2003 thanks to a generous gift by Dr. William Sherman of West Hartford and other donors. It was directed by Dr. Richard A. Freund (2003-2007) and is presently directed by Dr. Avinoam Patt of the Maurice Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Hartford. DreAnna Hadash serves as guest curator, assisted by Sarah Rutman. The Sherman Museum is a teaching museum and its primary goal is to tell the story of Jewish civilization for the general and academic communities of Connecticut through exhibitions coordinated with lectures and coursework in the extensive Judaica offerings of the Greenberg Center.

The William Singer Gallery at the Sherman Museum has featured exhibits highlighting the history of Jewish interactions with Muslims and Christians; the lives of the Jews in Germany, the United States, Latin America, and ancient Israel, as well as books on and about the Jewish people worldwide and the Holocaust. The Jewish Music section features the Cantorate, highlighting the way Jews used the Arts to express their spirit, while the section on archaeology chronicles the daily and religious life of Ancient Israel.

The Sherman Museum is located in Mortensen Library, Harry Jack Gray Center, University of Hartford, 200 Bloomfield Avenue, West Hartford, CT. For docent led tours and Museum hours, please call 860.768.5729 or email mgcjs@hartford.edu.
Freedom is Never Free: Norway and the Jews

Freedom is Never Free: Norway and the Jews is an exhibition that will open on April 1, 2010 and run through October 25, 2010 in the William Singer Gallery of the Sherman Museum of Jewish Civilization. The exhibition, which initially opened in September 2008 at the Oslo Jewish Museum, presents the history of Jewish involvement in Norwegian Arts and Culture, as well as the Jewish role in the Norwegian struggle against German occupation in the Second World War. The exhibition was specially translated into English for the American opening at the Sherman Museum of Jewish Civilization at the University of Hartford.

The purpose of the Oslo Jewish Museum is to collect, preserve, research and disseminate reliable knowledge of Jewish immigration, life and integration into Norwegian society. The Oslo Jewish Museum is designed to be an open and living museum and cultural center, visible in Norwegian cultural life and policies through publications, lectures, concerts, temporary exhibitions and other externally oriented cultural activities. Future exhibitions will treat themes of Jewish culture, tradition, history and Judaism.

The exhibition Freedom is Never Free: Norway and the Jews was originally produced by the Oslo Jewish Museum in 2008.

Credits, Oslo Jewish Museum:
Chief Curator: Bjarte Bruland
Curator World War II biographies: Mats Tangestuen
Curator Culture and Arts biographies: Sidsel Levin
Text Editor: Torill Torp-Holte
Translation: Carol Eckmann
Layout and Graphic Design: Bison Design
Prior to the 19th century, few Jews lived in the Kingdom of Denmark-Norway. In 1814, Norway acquired its first constitution. While the document was relatively liberal, it stated that the official state religion was Lutheran Protestantism and that Jews and Jesuits were forbidden from entering the kingdom. The lobbying to change this paragraph was led by the national poet, Henrik Wergeland. In 1851 the ban was indeed reversed, six years after the Wergeland’s death. Following this, Jews in small numbers, who often did not have sufficient funds to reach America, started arriving in Norway, mainly from Poland and Lithuania. In June 1892, the first Jewish community was established in Christiania (now Oslo). At the time, there were 214 Jews in Norway, 136 of them living in Christiania. During the next 30 years, the number of Jews in Norway increased from 642 persons (343 in Christiania) to 1457 (852 in Christiania). The immigrants came from Eastern Europe, with many arriving in flight from the great unrest around the First World War and the accompanying persecution of Jews, in search of a better livelihood and religious freedom.

The largest congregation in 1939 was *Det Mosaiske Trossamfund* (The Mosaic Community); 3/4 of the approximately 2000 Norwegian Jews were affiliated to this community in Oslo, or the smaller community, which had been established in Trondheim. Between 1915 and 1940, Jewish cultural life in Oslo blossomed. Several competing Yiddish theatrical groups, choirs, cultural organizations (also in Yiddish) as well as academic organizations and a robust Jewish youth organization were established. During the years 1935-1940, a number of study-circles were
held, led by the community’s rabbi, Isak Julius Samuel. In 1942, the rabbi was deported and killed by the Nazis.

Norway during World War II  
(source: www.ushmm.org)

On April 8-9, 1940, Germany invaded Norway. Germany sought to secure naval bases for use against the British fleet in the North Sea and to guarantee vital iron-ore shipments from neutral Sweden. Despite British attempts to help, Norway surrendered to Germany on June 10. King Haakon VII and the Norwegian government escaped to London. Vidkun Quisling, who in 1933 had founded a fascist organization modeled after Germany’s Nazi party, proclaimed himself prime minister. Quisling’s name henceforth became synonymous with collaboration. The Germans quickly became disillusioned with him and established their own administration, but intermittently used Quisling as a figurehead.

There were approximately 1,700 Jews in Norway at the time of the German invasion, including about 200 German and Austrian Jewish refugees who had found safe haven there in the 1930s. Restrictions on Jews initially were sporadic, but with the German invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, numerous Jews in the northern part of the country were incarcerated. Arrests of Norwegian Jews began in the fall of 1942 with Norwegian police and paramilitary formations supporting SS and German police units. In early October, the authorities arrested all male Jews in Trondheim, a northern Norwegian port city. On October 26 and 27, 260 male Jews were arrested in Oslo, Norway’s capital. During the night of November 25-26, 1942, all remaining Jews in Oslo, including women, children, the sick, and the handicapped, were arrested and interned. They were deported on the “Donau,” a ship requisitioned by the Quisling government, which took them to Germany. From Germany, they were deported to the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp.

In the weeks that followed, despite protests by Norwegian church leaders and some segments of the population, the internment and deportation of Jews from Norway continued intermittently. Fortunately, many Jews received advance warnings of the roundups from Norwegian policemen and members of the underground. More than half of Norway’s Jews, about 900, escaped to neutral Sweden with the aid of the underground. Many others went into hiding.

Between 1940 and 1945, more than 760 Jews were deported from Norway. Only about 25 returned after the war; most of the others were murdered in Auschwitz. On May 8, 1945, German forces in Norway surrendered to the Allies. Quisling was arrested and found guilty of treason. He was executed on October 24, 1945.
Norway’s Jews after World War II

After the end of the war, in 1945, when some of the refugees returned, the Jewish community in Oslo was re-established. They found the synagogue in Oslo unharmed, miraculously. It had been used as a storage place for Nazi-literature and confiscated Jewish belongings during the war. Even the Torah Scrolls were still there, unharmed. The synagogue could, therefore, be used again as soon as it was cleaned up. The new rabbi of the community was Rabbi Zalman Aronzon. However, the level of activity, at the time, was much lower than before the war and there were long periods without a rabbi, limited teaching capability and little spiritual leadership. In 1947 the Norwegian government permitted the immigration of several hundred Jewish refugees, mostly from Hungary. In 1960, a community center was built next to the synagogue.

In the late 1970’s a serious revival of the community began, with the appointment of a new, young rabbi, Michael Melchior and new community leadership. The rabbi made many changes in the education system. Besides intensifying the intellectual challenge of the studying, he also tried to build on the principle that “Jewish culture should not merely be learned but also lived.” The “classroom-education” was extended to include obligatory weekend-seminars and camps, which would let the children actually experience what they were learning. Since then, many institutions have been established: kindergarten, well-attended synagogue services, Cheder (afternoon classes) for all school children, an old aged-home, a supply of kosher food imported from Israel and America, study-circles as well as other cultural and religious events. During the last 25-30 years, organizations such as WIZO, B’nei Akiva (being the only active youth organization, in Norway, today), Maccabi Sports Club, B’nai Brith and Keren Kayemet L’Israel have become popular among the Norwegian Jews.

Today approximately 950 Jews live in Oslo and a smaller community of 100 Jews lives in Trondheim (about 100 members).

*Based on material from the Jewish Community of Oslo, The Jerusalem Report, The Jewish Virtual Library, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
Freedom is Never Free: Norway and the Jews

The exhibition focuses on two relatively unknown aspects of Norwegian Jewish history: Jewish contributions to Norwegian arts, culture, and literature, and the disproportionately large contributions of Jews to the heroic Norwegian resistance to the Germans during World War II. It was curated by DreAnna Hadash, with assistance from Sarah Rutman.

Jewish artists

The term “Jewish artists” is a highly complex one: a long history of Jewish ceremonial and ritual art dates back to biblical times. However, not until the 19th century and the period of Jewish emancipation and greater participation in surrounding European society is it possible to discern a growth in the number and types of Jewish artists in Europe. While many of these developing artists may have been Jews, it is hard to point to the development of a specific field of “Jewish art.” In the realm of music, Jewish musicians in the Western European classical tradition have long debated the question of what is Jewish music. Most musicians of Jewish origin in the 19th century composed music that could not be considered Jewish in any sense, either by critics or by the musicians themselves. Still, at the end of the 19th century, there were many Jewish musicians (like Joel Engel and Ernest Bloch) who strove to create a specifically Jewish national music.

A few Jewish artists and musicians came on the brief guest allowance to Norway already in 1851, when the ban on Jews was lifted. These were artists from Central Europe or from neighboring countries with a long tradition of European culture. Many of them came to play an important role in Norwegian theater and music.

The majority of the early Jewish immigrants to Norway came from Eastern European cities and poor shtetls (villages), and had very different cultural roots. As a thriving culture emerged, in addition to lectures, reading circles and sports events, frequent theater productions were presented. Yiddish theater was very popular with singing and music heard frequently at social gatherings.

During the 1920s and 1930s, new avenues in Norway opened up for musicians and performers in orchestras as well as theatres and revue stages. Many Jewish performers gained acclaim, both as amateurs and as full- or
part-time professional musicians. The roster of gifted Jewish musicians who took active part in Norwegian music life prior to WWII is impressive. For parents, however, a career as a professional musician, or a life as a klezmer, was rarely seen as a path to secure the future they dreamt of for their children.

The Holocaust destroyed much of this nascent intellectual generation. Yiddish theater in Norway died suddenly out of the war and the harsh attacks against the Jewish population meant that many of the enthusiasts and the young talents were deported and killed.

**Jews in the War Effort**

Following the German invasion of April 9, 1940, the Norwegian Army, Navy and Air force was re-established in the United Kingdom and Canada, and in the latter half of the war Norwegian authorities also created light infantry units in Sweden. More than 140 Jews with Norwegian citizenship, representing nearly ten per cent of the total Jewish population, served in the Norwegian armed forces. This greatly exceeded the percentage for the Norwegian public at large. The participation of Norwegian Jews in the struggle against the Nazi regime has not been widely publicized, as most attention has been focused on stories of the arrests, deportation and murder of the nearly 800 members of the Jewish population of all ages. The Jewish minority in Norway is often depicted as a rather passive group that was either killed at Auschwitz or took refuge in Sweden. But this view does not do justice to the courageous individuals who fought alongside their countrymen to regain Norway’s freedom. Some of these individuals are presented in this exhibition.
Irene Berman, a longtime resident of Bloomfield, CT is a native Norwegian Jew who as a very young child was among the fortunate to escape to Sweden in 1942 with her immediate family. Her memoir, *We are Going to Pick Potatoes: The Story of Norway and the Holocaust*, was originally published in Norwegian by the Orion Publishing Company in September 2008, sponsored by Norway’s Resistance Museum. The English publication of the book, by Rowman and Littlefield (2010), chronicles a largely unknown chapter in World War II history. It is also the story of one woman’s rediscovery of her childhood role and her family’s war experiences, and the resilience of the human spirit.

“We are going to pick potatoes.” That’s what the family housekeeper told four-year-old Irene Levin when she was whisked off from her playgroup in the park to flee German-occupied Norway. In 1942, Irene Levin was one of 1,200 Norwegian Jews who escaped to Sweden during World War II. Nearly 800 remaining Jews were deported and murdered in Auschwitz. Irene’s memories of life in Norway during and after the war are the subject of her book. Rabbi Michael Melchior, Chief Rabbi of Norway and former Israeli Cabinet minister calls the book “an important personal and passionate story which gives new perspective to the greatest crime humanity has known - the Holocaust.”

The book describes the integration of Jews into Norwegian society from 1854 through the war years. Irene offers a poignant account of what happened to her family during the war, including the loss of seven members of her father’s family.
They were among the 771 Jews who were sent to Auschwitz. After the war, the book focuses on the silence and denial among the returning Jews who only referred to those who perished in Auschwitz as “having disappeared.” She hauntingly recalls the gaps in the Jewish community created by these missing relatives. One family member and her husband and children lived in Aalesund, a city in northwest Norway and were the only Jewish family in that city. Ms. Berman has done extensive research on the history of that family and has recreated the story of their lives for the year 1942-43 in detail ending with their deportation to Auschwitz in 1943, never to return.

The book also describes the return from Sweden to Norway after the liberation and the resettlement and rebuilding of the Jewish community during the post-war years.

A significant chapter of the book is devoted to the work of Ms. Berman’s father, Marcus Levin, who was involved in refugee work before and during the war, as well as after his return to Norway. He worked as a voluntary representative for the American Joint Distribution Committee, which was instrumental in providing funds through the Claims Conference and other sources to resettle refugees who had survived the Holocaust and resettled in Norway. In addition the story includes how Norway became the first country in the world to accept the so-called “minus” refugees. Marcus Levin was honored with King Olav’s Gold Medal of Honor for his work in 1959, three years before his death. The story of Marcus Levin is written by Bjarte Bruland, historian and curator of the Jewish Museum in Oslo. Mr. Bruland was also one of two persons responsible for the restitution of funds to the Norwegian Jewish citizens in 1999.

Ms. Berman has lived in the US for a number of years, but keeps in very close contact with friends and family in Norway. For more information, please visit Irene Berman’s website: http://www.norwayandtheholocaust.com/

Avinoam J. Patt
Philip D. Feltman Professor of Modern Jewish History
Director, Sherman Museum of Jewish Civilization
Maurice Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies
University of Hartford