FOR 50 YEARS: 
A Ringside Seat to Jewish History

by Cynthia Dettelbach

Many are the ways to chronicle the life and times of The Cleveland Jewish News on this, its 50th anniversary: Through its creators. Its brick and mortar presence(s). Its headlines and stories. Its staff. Its community leadership. And most importantly, its distinctive flavor or ta’am.

When The Cleveland Jewish News debuted on Oct. 30, 1964, weighing in at 32 pages, it differed markedly from its journalistic ancestors. The latter were two family-owned papers: The Jewish Review and Observer controlled by the Wertheimer family for 65 years; and the Jewish Independent guided by the brothers Weidenthal for 47 years. The CJN, by contrast, is owned by a much larger “family”– namely the entire Jewish community of Cleveland, for whom it is held in trust and governed by a board of directors.

Presiding over the birth of the fledgling tabloid was the Cleveland Jewish Publication Company, comprised of 29 business, professional and community-minded men. They arranged for a credit line of $155,000 to secure the assets of the two existing Jewish papers, creating in their stead The Cleveland Jewish News.

Similar to any new venture, the CJN needed financial assistance. This was provided by the Jewish Community Federation. By the early 1980s the paper became financially independent, and in the many glory years following, the not-for-profit publication contributed much of its profits to the Federation’s annual campaign. These donations ceased when the rising popularity of the Internet led to the shrinking of size, circulation and revenue in virtually all print publications.

The CJN’s initial home was in an office building on Payne Avenue in downtown Cleveland. Following the migration of the Jewish community itself, the CJN moved progressively eastward. First, to Cedar Center in University Heights. It remained there for 20 years before relocating to 3645 Warrensville Center Road in Shaker Heights. In 2002 it moved to 23880 Commerce Park, Beachwood, its current home. Each CJN office complex was larger, more attractive and, in keeping
with the times, more technologically advanced than its predecessors.

The beating heart of any publication is its people: the men and women and young summer interns who work there. The CJN was and is no different. The CJN’s first editor was Arthur Weyne. His modest editorial staff included city editor Bernice Green, reporter Vivian Witt and enduring Cavalcader Violet Spevack.

Weyne was followed in 1970 by Jerry Barach, a St. Louis newspaper man who moved here with his young family to take the job. Now a semi-retired media liaison for the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerry was CJN editor for the next decade. Contacted by email (unimaginable in his days at the paper), Jerry shared his most vivid CJN memories, “some of a happy nature; some unforgettably traumatic.”

Of the latter he cited the Munich Olympics of 1972 and the slaughter of 11 Israeli athletes. Among them was weightlifter David Berger, an oleh to Israel from Shaker Heights. “I recall making up a special, black-bordered front page then, and of shedding tears on the page while doing so,” Jerry writes.

Another “traumatic edition” followed the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Since many at that time “harbored dark forebodings of the destruction of Israel...it was not an emotionally easy edition to put out.”

One of his most exhilarating moments occurred thousands of miles away from the CJN during a Jewish journalists’ trip to Fez, Morocco. Hosted by an elder of the Fez Jewish community, the group visited an abandoned synagogue in the old Jewish ghetto, or mellah. There they came upon three intact Torah scrolls “incredibly left behind” by the former congregants. Jerry took part in the “holy rescue” of the scrolls which were then “turned over to our host for, hopefully, restoration and transfer to active congregations.” He wrote a prizewinning story about that experience.

Closer to home, Jerry faced pressure to “promote certain Jewish candidates” running for local, state and national offices. He agreed only to provide brief biographical backgrounds, a non-endorsement policy that exists to this day.

In 1980, Jerry announced that he and his family were fulfilling their dream of making aliyah; the CJN board then began looking for its next editor.

I had been a freelance reporter at the CJN since 1978, and after watching a parade of candidates for the editor’s job pass through the door, I decided to submit my own name for consideration. Encouraging me in that endeavor, and a valued supporter of the CJN and my work throughout the years, was Wilton Sogg, the incoming-president.

After extensive interviews with the board, including what would now be considered politically incorrect questions as to how I could work fulltime and take care of my family, I was selected. As “acting editor.” On half-salary. Six months later the “rehearsal” was over, and my proper title and full salary commenced.

When I first began reporting for the CJN, staffers wrote their stories on finicky manual typewriters. Non-local news was transmitted over a teletype machine that clacked incessantly, spitting out reams of barely legible copy. The copy was edited and headlined, usually by Bernice, and then turned over to the typesetter. On Wednesday afternoons Vivian Witt and I cut and pasted the typeset material onto dummy pages. Our low tech tools were Xacto knives and slant boards we crafted out of discarded cardboard packing boxes!

The advertising department, headed for many years by Marcia Sollisch, did the same with its ads. The pasted up pages were collected every Thursday morning by a “runner” sent from the printer. By midnight, the printer had delivered that week’s newspapers to the post office ready for delivery to subscribers’ mailboxes on Friday.
“We are challenged with continuing to engage and grow our audience each day.”

Kevin S. Adelstein
Publisher and CEO

As soon as I became editor I campaigned for electric typewriters - considered a bold step forward then. (To this day, Vi Spevack admits she prefers a manual typewriter!) As the years rolled by, so did the increasingly sophisticated technological toys and procedures we adopted: fax machines, computers, electronic transmission of data, e-editions of the CJN and its other publications, daily and breaking news updates on the Web and more. As always, however, the print edition is delivered each Friday to area subscribers via the U.S. Post Office.

A favorite memory of mine from those early years spent at the Cedar Center address involved founding CJN trustee Irving Stone. In addition to attending all our board meetings, once a year the American Greetings magnate would mount the heart attack flight of steps to our office to renew his CJN subscription. This while his car and driver idled in the parking lot waiting to take him to his office.

Me: Irving, how nice to see you. But instead of climbing those impossibly steep steps, why don’t you just mail in your check for the subscription?
He: I wanted to save the postage.

His real reason, of course, was to feel the pulse of the CJN on a working day, a paper he truly loved and admired.

While important events the CJN covered during my 29 years as editor are too numerous to list, a few do standout:

The denaturalization trial of death camp guard John Demjanjuk and his many subsequent trials. The saga of the former Seven Hills resident began in U.S. Federal Court here in 1980 and the CJN continued to cover him until his death over three decades later.

While Demjanjuk was our singular local Nazi (whom we never did get to interview), the CJN was privileged to interview numerous Holocaust survivors. Meeting survivors, listening to their incredible stories, and marveling how they created new lives in Cleveland are among the interviews I will never forget.

A related highlight for me was covering the opening of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., which fellow Clevelander (and my former tennis buddy) Sara Bloomfield serves as executive director.

Other memorable interviews often coincided with my trips abroad for the paper:

Meeting with several brave Refuseniks in the Soviet Union in 1985. Then, the joy of meeting some of them again resettled in Israel thanks, in large part, to the Herculean efforts of Soviet Jewry advocates in Cleveland and around the country. Following the lifting of the Iron Curtain, we covered the absorption of tens of thousands of Russian Jews both locally and in Israel.

Visiting Ethiopian Jews airlifted to Israel through Operations Solomon and Moses. Their tribulations and accomplishments in adjusting to a country and a culture vastly different from their own continues to be an evolving story.

Other groundbreaking stories my staff and I covered in Israel included two intifadas, the Gulf War (during which then CJN reporter Marcy Oster transmitted her stories from her hotel room wearing a gas mask), numerous acts of terrorism, and various unsuccessful efforts at peacemaking.

Nor was the local scene without its own drama - covered as news stories and in often impassioned letters to the editor. These included the ultimately failed efforts to save the Mayfield JCC; the controversial move of the Jewish Community Federation from downtown to Beachwood; and the long-simmering brouhaha over establishing an Orthodox Jewish campus on Green Road in Beachwood.

We also covered various synagogue mergers and reconfigurations as well as creation of the first LGBT synagogue here. To expand both our coverage and our journalistic footprint, we entered the arena of magazines. Starting with a modest 16-page bridal supplement, the brainchild of advertising director Marcia Sollich, we grew over the years to six full-fledged, full-color magazines including Weddings, four JStyles and The Source. Subsequent administrations would add Bar/BatMitzvah, Balanced Living and Guide to Museums of Northeast Ohio (now known as “Canvas”).

My editorial staff and I, as well as graphics designer Frida Kon won numerous awards over the years, both in the Jewish and general press. To this day, the CJN continues to win coveted awards.

After general manager Rob Cernter, longtime receptionist Alice Fingerhut and I retired in 2009 (all of us feted at a wonderful community-wide event), the board selected Michael Bennett as publisher/editor.

Michael served in that position until the end of September, 2012. During that time, the CJN moved more deeply into the digital age with the creation of the Digital Archive and the first
e-newsletter, now morphed into Boker Tov. “One reader told me how much he appreciated being able to find articles in the archive about his daughter’s birth and school accomplishments, which he could include in her bat mitzvah video,” Michael recalls.

In an effort to diversify revenue sources, particularly during the recession, an events division was created. It included producing Mahjong tournaments, wedding planning events, and health fairs, and partnering to produce Simchapolooza.

Bob Jacob became Managing Editor in 2011. A lifelong Clevelander and longtime reader of The CJN, Jacob was a freelance sports reporter for the CJN in the late 1990’s. “I had no idea that in February, 2011, a little more than ten years later, I would become the CJN managing editor,” he marvels. That’s when he finally realized, he adds, what the CJN “means to our community, entrusting it to be the record of our community, providing the news and information needed weekly in print and daily through digital media platforms.”

Cleveland native Kevin S. Adelstein was named CJN publisher and CEO in June, 2013. Kevin “grew up with the newspaper reading it with my parents and brothers religiously,” he recalls. His subscription followed him to Ohio State University and to each of the other cities he’s lived in for the past 25 years. “At no point during that time did I ever imagine I would have a voice in what words and pictures appear in these pages,” he admits.

Looking at the larger picture, he adds, “This is a crucial time in history for our organization as we are challenged with continuing to engage and grow our audience each day, as opposed to just Friday, and across multiple platforms and devices.”

Always present in the background and emerging many times to the foreground was the CJN’s Board of Directors. In fact, at least two CJN Presidents, Jim Yasnow and Marc Freimuth, practically became de facto staff. That’s because, in each case, the men had to fill in vacancies for upper-level management.

Between the departure of the CJN’s General Manager and the hiring three or four months later of Rob Certner as his replacement, Jim was the point person for all things general managers do. “I didn’t see much of my family in those months,” recalls Jim, because “I was at the CJN office at least three or four times a week. Generally before and after my job at American Greetings.”

Marc Freimuth had a similarly daunting role while looking for a new publisher. During what he termed a “long and arduous” search, he stepped in to assume additional management responsibilities. This in addition to his full-time job!

The board hired Kevin Adelstein “for his business and management leadership and his experience in the digital world,” notes Marc. In addition to hiring Kevin, Marc is most proud of spearheading the digital archive project.

When it’s completed, he says, it will be “the single most comprehensive source of the history of the Cleveland Jewish community going back to 1890.”

As editor, my closest connection to the board, after the President, was the editorial committee. To this committee I brought the kinds of issues that I didn’t want to field alone and that I knew needed broad consensus. These included policies regarding interfaith marriages (we decided to include the announcement but not the officiating clergy) and same-sex couples. With the latter we agreed to accept announcement of commitment ceremonies, though very few were ever submitted.

I began, over 2,000 words ago, by citing the CJN’s distinctive flavor or ta’am. I cannot speak for those who either preceded or succeeded me. But for my part and that of my wonderful, loyal staff, we saw the CJN as more than a job and each other as more than a disparate group of people yoked together by common deadlines. We were, in good times as well as difficult ones, a family. Meshpochah. We felt connected to each others’ lives and, by extension, connected to the lives of the larger Jewish community. That loyal feeling informed both the stories we chose and the way we connected to the lives of the larger Jewish community. That loyal feeling informed both the stories we chose and the way we covered them.

Everyone who worked at the paper or has been a CJN reader during some part of the last 50 years has had a ringside seat to Jewish history. It’s a privilege and a responsibility that I hope will survive and thrive for the next 50!

Cynthia Dettelbach was the editor of The Cleveland Jewish News from 1980 to 2009.

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