

THE BOSTON WORKMEN'S CIRCLE 1979-2015

I came to Boston from DC in 1979, when I was appointed Director of the NE Region of the US Civil Rights Commission. I had been a member of a NY branch of the WC since 1956, transferred to the DC branch in 1965, and then to Boston Branch 711. There were three or four branches—700, 711, 716 and 687 (?). The WC had moved from Blue Hill Av. to Beacon St. in 1962. The activists that I remember included Gladys Klitzman Heitin, Evelyn Bernstein, Israel Neiman, Jack Rottenberg and Ed Gutoff.

Staff included Esther Ritchie, office manager, and Herman Brown, half-time director. Through the 1980's, the older members became less active, and Herman did his best to recruit new members. There was an ill-fated effort to create a Russian branch. The undertaking that revived the WC was the creation of branch 2001, a group of young people that wanted to be involved with "their" kind of Jewish organization—secular, progressive, culturally Yiddish. I switched my affiliation to 2001.

Most activities were branch-centered. There were WC events: lectures, Yiddish programs, musical programs, annual meetings. There was a Shule and adult Yiddish classes. Soon after I came to Boston, I took an intermediate Yiddish class with Hinda Gutoff as teacher. The Shule had fewer and fewer enrollees and was abandoned. However, with the growing activity of 2001, the Shule was revived, and membership increased. I played an active role, eventually becoming president, and did what I could to help the organization grow. We were involved in the Jewish Community Relations Council, worked with member Michal Goldman in the establishment of the Boston Jewish Film Festival, and with Hankus Netsky in the early days of the New England Klezmer Conservatory Band,

The day-to-day operation was in the hands of Herman Brown, the half-time director, who also was the half-time director of the Jewish Labor Committee. His salary was paid by National WC. The structure of the Boston Workmen's Circle was divided (for tax or CJP purposes?) between the BWC and the I.L. Peretz Shule of the BWC. We followed the by-laws which had been in effect from before the BWC moved from Blue Hill Av. to Beacon Street in 1962.

With the coming of the 21st century, there were a great many changes. A new director: Lisa Gallatin, a new dues structure, the disappearance of the branches, with the exception of branch 716, the growth of both the Shule and the WC Yiddish chorus, A Besere Velt, and a more involved lay leadership, and a growing membership. The Boston Workmen's Circle was one of the few districts that was active and growing.

I can't remember how often I was greeted with surprise when I mentioned I was a member of the Workmen's Circle. "Does the Workmen's Circle still exist? My grandfather was a member." (Barney Frank proudly told me his father was a member of the "Arbeiter Ring.) I would then be regaled with stories about the Workmen's Circle doctor, the meetings at the Labor Lyceum addressed by Norman Thomas, the family's

subscription to the Forward and the Workmen's Circle Call, the fundraising for Jewish refugees and survivors of the Holocaust. But that was then.

The Workmen's Circle fulfilled a very important role for tens of thousands of first generation American Jewish workers.

Mutual help---medical care, life insurance, cemetery plot, extension and absorption of the role of "landmanshaftn."

Education---lectures, discussion groups, shules,

Jewish cultural identification---holiday celebrations

Political involvement---social democratic, anti-fascist, anti-communist

Today: