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New history trail shows resilience of Portland's Jewish community

The Portland Jewish History Trail was launched Sunday by the Maine Jewish Museum.

Community: **Portland**Posted September 14
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Gift Article



Historian Riva Krut speaks outside the Maine Jewish Museum in Portland while Bobbie Lamonte holds up an old photo of the building during a walking tour of the new Portland Jewish History Trail. (Derek Davis/Staff Photographer)

Standing on the other side of Fore Street across from Dock Fore Tavern, you might not pay attention to the faint yellow lettering of “Zeitman’s Grocery Store” that can be read on the bricks above the sports pub’s red awning. But once Riva Krut points it out, you won’t miss it again.

Moments later, as Krut tells the story of the grocery store run by a Jewish couple who immigrated from Ukraine at the start of the 20th century, the history of the building is also illuminated. The tale of 336 Fore Street is one of familial love, loss, prevalence in the face of antisemitic rulings from City Hall, and a Jewish businesswoman who stood under 5 feet tall, lived to 97 years old, and shaped the commercial district of Portland.

This stop along the new Portland Jewish History Trail is one of 28 that highlight the often unnoticed Jewish history of Portland.

The trail unveils the history of Jewish neighborhoods, congregations and synagogues, businesses, and involvement in the welfare and politics of the city from the end of the 19th century through the present. Using standing buildings, historic photos and research, the trail weaves together a portrait of Portland’s Jewish community as they made space for themselves while also developing their identity as Americans and Mainers alongside other immigrants in Portland.



The former Shaarey Tphiloh Synagogue on Newbury Street, which is now condominiums, is one of the stops on the new Portland Jewish History Trail. (Derek Davis/Staff Photographer)

“Portland’s history and future has been and will be made of many, many communities,” said Krut of Cumberland, who created the trail.

Launched with its first tour on Sunday, the trail consists of 28 locations, divided into five walking routes sorted by location and topic: the East End and Munjoy Hill, Middle and Fore Street businesses, Portland’s downtown, Woodford’s Corner and Deering Center, and Jewish cemeteries.

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While anyone can walk the five trails with the map and historic background available **online** or in an app, the guided walking tours begin in front of Maine Jewish Museum and currently combine segments of three trails in a two-and-a-half-hour, three-mile loop.

During the inaugural tour, 20 participants stood outside 11 Portland buildings as they listened to Krut, 67, tell stories of their residents and activities over the centuries. With so many buildings standing in Portland for over 100 years, the tour “let the bricks talk.”

“We’re here all the time. It’s nice to see it in a new light,” said tour participant Kim Levy, 52, of Cape Elizabeth.

The trail emerged from the research of Krut’s husband, Harris Gleckman, who grew up Jewish in Portland. After a career working for the United Nations in New York and retiring in Maine, Gleckman began researching Jewish history in the state as a hobby, compiling the database using sources such as census records and annual business directories.



Historian Riva Krut, center, stops on India Street while speaking about the former North School, where in the early 20th century up to 40% of students were Jewish, records show. The building is now home to apartments. (Derek Davis/Staff Photographer)

Over 20 years, the project became **Documenting Maine Jewry**, a website containing over 40,000 biographical records, and 10,000 photographs, newsletters, and other documents, and pictures of over 7,800 Jewish headstones.

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The Maine Jewish Museum adopted Documenting Maine Jewry's catalogue this spring in collaboration with Colby College, exemplifying the museum's emerging effort to tell the stories of all Jews in Maine, not just Portland, said the museum's executive director, Dawn LaRochelle.

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"We really want to capture Jewish history in all of Maine, and hopefully these walking tours will ultimately be replicated in different parts of Maine, not just Portland," said LaRochelle.

The Jewish History Tour – the first Jewish historic tour offered in Portland and first tour by the museum – was created by Krut in honor of her husband's research. A historian of Jewish immigrant history herself, she is versed in linking location and dates to create an understanding of the past.

"Place and identity for me are connected. A place is also about time. What that building meant in 1912 is different than today," she said.

Stops on the guided tour include the North School, a former public school where up to 40% of a class appeared to be Jewish on attendance records; the original location of the synagogue that is now condos and a hair salon; the former Jewish Community Center, a hub of activity and culture on Cumberland Avenue, and City Hall, where Linda Abromson served as the first Jewish female mayor starting in 1982.

Debbie Wineberg, 68, took the walking tour on Sunday with her husband, Howard Wineburg, 71, of Wells. Her Jewish grandparents and mother lived on Portland's Vesper Street and attended the Etz Chaim Synagogue, where the Maine Jewish Museum now also resides on Congress Street.

Debbie Wineberg said that in the face of increasing antisemitism, she thought twice about attending a public Jewish event like the tour. But ultimately, she felt like it was important to show up.

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"We want to support organizations like the Maine Jewish Museum," she said.

"We're not big synagogue goers, so we wanted to come and get the education side of things," said Howard Wineberg.

At a time where the Jewish community faces both prejudice and division over the war in Gaza, the tour and its participants instead focused on what connects Jewish Mainers to each other and to other communities. This was particularly accomplished by viewing Portland Jewish history through the lens of immigration and building community.

This building, at 23 Hampshire Street, housed Jewish families in the 1890s through the early 20th century and is one of the stops on the new Portland Jewish History Trail. The building is now condominiums. (Derek Davis/Staff Photographer)

“I am not interested in talking about antisemitism. I’m interested in our commonalities, and the immigrant story is that story,” said Bobbie Lamont, 62, who helped lead the tour group.

As the tour moves through locations and time periods, it takes participants through the arrival of Jewish immigrants, primarily from Eastern Europe to Portland to how they integrated and shaped the city over the generations in all areas of life.

Krut said the Jewish history of resilience in the face of prejudice is one that she hopes will resonate with all types of immigrants in Portland today as they face challenges and persist in building a life here.

“I looked at it as a series of events for minorities now to look at and see how the Jews found success in the face of antisemitism,” said Krut.

Both Krut and tour participants noted how the Jewish History Trail intertwines with other historic walking trails in Portland such as the trail about Black and abolitionist history, the women’s history trail, a queer history trail, and a tour of Chinese-American history. Just as the histories of marginalized groups are connected

through the city's past, Krut hopes that the growing network of historic trails will inspire more of these histories to be told.

“Every group has a story, and we should go out and tell it,” said Krut.

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