

THE HISTORY OF HUG IVRI OF DELAWARE

by Rabbi David Geffen

The Histadrut Ivrit, the central organization for the dissemination of Hebrew culture in America, celebrated its 30th anniversary in 1946. While its main activities were centered around New York, its influence was present in other cities as well. In January of 1946, a Hebrew seed was planted in Wilmington, and it blossomed into the Hug Ivri which will celebrate in this Bicentennial year, its 30th anniversary on May 30 at the Jewish Community Center.

The impact of Hebrew in America thirty years ago was limited. The Histadrut did have its own publishing house so it issued a certain number of books in addition to the weekly Hebrew newspaper HaDoar. In New York city, a Hebrew theater group existed, but in the United States Hebrew, as a living language, had little appeal. Why then did Wilmington prove to be the exception?

The fall of 1945 had brought to Wilmington a new director of the "Y". His name was Harry Bluestone, and he spoke Hebrew beautifully. In addition there was resident in Wilmington the head of the Associated Hebrew School, Dr. Philip Birnbaum. When they were united in Wilmington, it was a most fortuitous event. Furthermore, the interest of the two of them in the Hebrew language was complemented by that of Rabbi Simon Krinsky, a noted Hebrew author and poet, and director of the Beth Emeth religious school. Louis Schwartzman, assistant director of the "Y," Rabbi Joseph Wertheimer, the rabbi of Mahzikey HaDas and Rev. Simon Feldhorn, an extremely learned individual. Hence Bluestone and Birnbaum realized that there were these individuals plus others who would be interested

in a Hebrew speaking group.

Harry Bluestone believed that the Hug Ivri should have the following objectives:

1. It should enable people to hear spoken Hebrew.
2. It should enable the individual to improve his or her Hebrew and thereby help people to express themselves in Hebrew.
3. It should make Hebrew a living language.

Dr. Birnbaum agreed with these objectives. Moreover, since he had the academic background, he would help bring these goals into actuality.

On the last day of 1945, the year the first atomic bombs were dropped, the year the Germans and the Japanese surrendered, the invitation to the first Hug Ivri meeting was sent out on the stationery of the "Y". The meeting was to be held on the first Sunday of the new year, at the "Y" at Sixth and French at 3 in the afternoon. The letter clearly defined the objective of the group.

"The purpose of the new group is to bring together twice a month those who are interested in becoming more familiar with Hebrew as a living spoken language. It is gratifying to know that at least fifteen persons in this community have expressed sufficient interest in the formation of such a group. There are many others who understand Hebrew although they do not speak it, therefore, at each meeting both Hebrew and English will be the languages of expression thus giving all an opportunity to participate."

That initial week of the year went by very fast for Bluestone and Birnbaum, and on January 6, 1946, the first meeting was held with eleven

local people attending and a visiting speaker from New York. Dr. Birnbaum presided. He reemphasized the purpose of the group, and he noted that for the next few weeks English and Yiddish could be used until people got accustomed to Hebrew. When Dr. Birnbaum asked about having outside speakers, the group expressed the feeling that "the purpose of the organization was to encourage individual members to express themselves in Hebrew and that they were not expected to come to meetings simply to listen to outside speakers." Although this was the feeling of the group at that time, it was not until the 1970's that this was actually implemented.

The Hug Ivri met twice a month at the "Y" after its initial meeting. Dr. Birnbaum presided at each meeting. He would speak on a topic, and this was followed by lively debate. When Rabbi Kraft returned from service as a chaplain, he began to attend. Mr. Lazar Lebovitz, another knowledgeable Hebraist, became a regular attender as did other teachers and interested people in the community. A tenth anniversary was held in 1956, and the speaker was Reuven Avinoam Grossman, an Israeli author. In 1963, Dr. Birnbaum had completed seventeen years as president, but now he was moving to New York so there was some question as to how to continue the Hug.

It was decided that Rabbi Kraft would be the acting president of the Hug, but Dr. Birnbaum would come from New York to present a paper at each meeting. The members of that era recall how Dr. Birnbaum would carefully take out of his pocket the proofs of his next article for the HaDoar and read it to the group. This arrangement continued until 1967

when Rabbi Shalom Eisenbach, the educational director of Beth Shalom and principal of Gratz, became the president of the Hug Ivri.

During his term as president, the meetings were held in homes and Rabbi Eisenbach would speak at each meeting. The JCC was now about to move into its new building so the Hug Ivri felt it was time to shift its meetings back to the center.

At the 25th anniversary banquet held on June 7, 1971, at the Center, Dr. Birnbaum was the speaker and over sixty people attended. At that celebration, Simon Steinberg, a faithful member of the Hug since the early 1950's, became the president of the group.

Simon Steinberg, a survivor of the Holocaust, had received his training at the Tarbut Gymnasium in Rovna, Russia, and he had continued to study the Hebrew language and literature ever since coming to the United States. Steinberg believed that it was time that the members of the Hug began to participate in a fuller sense by making presentations themselves at the meetings. There were skeptics, but Steinberg persevered. In truth, the last five years of the Hug have been the most productive in its history.

Through the encouragement of Simon Steinberg almost every active member of the Hug Ivri, well over fifty different people, have spoken in the last five years. Guest speakers have also given talks at the meetings, but the members have been made to realize that, as Bluestone saw it initially, they must use their Hebrew in order to improve their Hebrew. Surely no other community of this size or even much larger has had so many people giving papers in Hebrew which they researched and wrote.