

Johnny Abush

Johnny Abush was a gay Jewish man born in Toronto, Canada in 1952 to Holocaust survivors who emigrated from Poland. While Abush grew up feeling pride in his gay identity, he did not always hold the same sentiments for his Jewishness. When complications from AIDS forced him to retire in 1989, Abush embarked on a mission to collect and document as much about LGBTQ+ Jewish experiences as he could. This personal project would eventually become the 10,000-item International Jewish GLBT Archives, run for the remainder of his life out of Abush's Toronto apartment. On a quest for gay Jewish materials, Abush joined Chutzpah, a social group and support organization for LGBTQ+ Jews in Toronto, which eventually disbanded to found an LGBTQ+ synagogue, Keshet Shalom. While the group began following traditional Orthodox-style worship, the community quickly developed their own queer-affirming liturgy and rituals. Abush remained involved in queer Jewish organizations worldwide until his death, such as bringing Keshet Shalom into the World Congress of Lesbian and Gay Jewish Organizations. To learn more about Johnny Abush, visit:

<https://digitalexhibitions.arquives.ca/exhibits/show/johnny-abush-twice-blessed>

Document A: "Chutzpah Info Sheet," *The ArQuives Exhibitions*,

<https://digitalexhibitions.arquives.ca/items/show/1251>



WHO WE ARE

The origins of CHUTZPAH go back at least a dozen years when an informal group of Jewish lesbians and gay men began to meet as "Hamishpacha", Hebrew for "The Family". Soon afterwards, this group decided to become a Jewish religious congregation, Bnai Kehillah. Finally, about 7 years ago, a new organization was initiated as CHUTZPAH. Although secular in its philosophy, CHUTZPAH was established specifically to provide for the cultural and social needs of the homosexual component of the Jewish community in Toronto. The group now has a formal executive and has re-focussed its efforts towards providing activities that are uniquely Jewish in nature, such as celebrations of Jewish festivals and traditions. Moreover, we have made important steps towards our goal of becoming a respected and integral part of both the Jewish community and the gay and lesbian community in Toronto.

CHUTZPAH is self-funded by its members, strictly non-profit, and open to anyone who wishes to join and contribute to its success.

ACTIVITIES

Throughout the year, CHUTZPAH hosts a number of activities, focussing on Jewish cultural and social events. Some of these have included Succoth, Chanukah and Shavuot parties, as well as our annual Passover Seder. In addition, CHUTZPAH organizes an annual symposium or lecture concentrating on various topics of concern to Jewish gays and lesbians. We are endeavouring to expand our range of activities in order to fulfill our mandate as a vital component within both the gay and lesbian community and the Jewish community in Toronto.

Document B: “Congregation Keshet Shalom Mandate and Functions,” *The ArQuives Exhibitions*, <https://digitalexhibitions.arquives.ca/items/show/1251>

CONGREGATION KESHET SHALOM

P.O. Box 6103, Station A, Toronto, Ontario M5W 1P5
Rainbow Line (416) 925-1408

*A Progressive Congregation Dedicated to Meeting the Needs
of the Greater Toronto Lesbian and Gay Jewish Community*

MANDATE AND FUNCTION

CONGREGATION KESHET SHALOM is a progressive congregation dedicated to meeting the needs of the greater Toronto lesbian and gay Jewish community. The Congregation has been in existence (in one form or another) since the mid-1970s.

Keshet Shalom:

- Provides an opportunity for lesbian and gay Jews to interact and express themselves socially, spiritually, and culturally;
- Fosters the growth and development of its members and the community at large;
- Educates lesbian and gay Jews about Judaism, including Jewish culture, history, languages, art, religion, and traditions; and,
- Informs and educates the wider Jewish community and lesbian and gay community about issues relevant to the lesbian and gay Jewish community through outreach.



Keshet Shalom
קשת שלום



Document C: “13th International Conference,” by Howard Goldstein,
Koleynu, June 1993.

CONGREGATION KESHET SHALOM

Koleynu

June 1993

Sivan / Tammuz 5753

13th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

A report by Howard Goldstein, President

The 13th International Conference of Gay and Lesbian Jews was held April 30 - May 3, 1993 in London, U.K. Sponsored by the World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Organizations, of which Congregation Keshet Shalom is a member, and hosted by three London member organizations — the Jewish Gay and Lesbian Group, Hineinu, and the Jewish Lesbian and Gay Helpline — the conference brought together almost 250 participants from virtually every corner of the globe.

Billed as a “unique Bar/Bat-Mitzvah celebration,” this 13th International Conference of Gay and Lesbian Jews was also the 13th anniversary of the formation of the World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Organizations in 1980. The conference combined educational workshops, religious services, and entertainment in a fun-filled three-day weekend which allowed participants the chance to meet up with old friends and make new ones from around the world, including Gay and Lesbian Jews from Canada, the United States, every country of Western Europe, Israel, Budapest, and Moscow.

The conference began with a Bar/Bat-Mitzvah Kabbalat Shabbat service, during which 13 *shabbes* candles were lit by representatives from each of the thirteen international conferences, which have been held since 1976 in various U.S. cities, Tel Aviv, and Amsterdam. Friday’s keynote speaker was Rabbi Lionel Blue, who came out publicly in 1988 and is widely known for his much loved breakfast-time “thoughts for the day” on BBC Radio.

Saturday morning began with a choice of Shabbat morning observances: traditional, reform, women only, Jewish spiritual renewal, and a workshop entitled “No Shul for Me.” Two series of workshops followed kiddush and lunch, with diverse subjects such as lesbian sexual health and HIV prevention (for women only), enjoying sex (for men only), Gersh Kaufman’s “Haunted by Shame,” kaballah and homosexuality, ballroom and Latin American dance, Israeli folkdance, neo-fascism in Europe, and a workshop for non-Jewish partners of Jews. Saturday evening’s Bar/Bat-Mitzvah Ball featured ballroom and Latin American dancing, the Klezmer Klub, and a DJ.

Sunday began with two additional series of workshops, including Jewish Lesbian mothers, working with the straight (Jewish) community, creating life cycle cele-

brations, Jewish ethical politics of AIDS/HIV, nigun, coming out, and growing old disgracefully. Sunday afternoon was left open for touring London or taking part in a walking tour of the Jewish East End, a walking tour of suffragette London, a boat trip to Greenwich and Westminster, or viewing the films “My Grandma’s Lady Cabaret,” “Just Like Sarah Bernhardt,” “Oy Gay,” and “Swoon.”

Sunday evening featured an almost professional cabaret hosted by San Francisco comedienne Lisa Geduldig, “an adult survivor of Jewish guilt.” Performers included the Pink Singers, London’s lesbian and gay community choir which is part political, part satirical, and part camp; jazz pianist, singer, and songwriter Ian Shaw; the “average, all-American Jewish lesbian folk singer” Phranc, and; the Uncles, a pair of buskers (street performers) whose two comic minds produce an explosion of subtlety, brilliance, and lots of bickering.

Monday morning’s (final) series of workshops including enjoying sex (for women only), growing up lesbian and gay, creating new women’s rituals, and commitment ceremonies. The plenary session was held following lunch, followed by tearful goodbyes as the participants began to depart.

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The World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Organizations was established in 1980 at the 5th International Conference of Gay and Lesbian Jews in San Francisco. (Gay and Lesbian Jewish groups have existed since 1972, with the formation of London’s Gay and Lesbian Group and Los Angeles’ Beth Chayim Chadashim, and international Gay and Lesbian Jewish conferences have been taking place since 1976.)

With 48 member organizations in 12 countries on 5 continents, the World Congress functions as the center of a communications network for member organizations; provides advice and assistance to both new and existing groups, and; prepares material for dissemination in the wider Jewish and Gay and Lesbian communities to combat — through education — homophobia in the one and anti-Semitism in the other. The World Congress publishes a newsletter — the *Digest* — maintains a reference resource library, and participates at both the local and

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Document D: “Johnny Abush: Proud Life,” by Marie Robertson, *Xtra!*, 2000, *The ArQuives Exhibitions*, <https://digitalexhibitions.arquives.ca/items/show/1285>

Johnny Abush

April 7, 1952 —
November 26, 2000

PROUD LIFE

Marie Robertson

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY has lost one of its most amazing members. Johnny Abush was born in Toronto, lived here all his life and for the most part was a quiet and very private gay man.

Ironically, it was only after he went on long term disability because of AIDS-related illness, that he figured out what he was supposed to be doing with his life. In 1990, he began the incredible work of creating the international Jewish GLBT Archives, which would become the major focus of the last 10 years of his life.

Johnny was the son of a Holocaust survivor. For the first 38 years of his life, most people did not know that. In fact, most people did not even know he was Jewish because he took great pains to keep his Jewish background a secret. By his own admission, he was proud of being gay but he was ashamed of being Jewish.

In 1989, he began a personal quest to discover a sense of pride in being Jewish. He started to search for information about other gay Jews' experiences. He found virtually nothing. And thus began Johnny's long, arduous and ultimately award-winning work to collect, catalogue and

make available everything that is gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and Jewish.

The first book Johnny ever purchased for the archives was *Twice Blessed* (edited by Christie Balka and Andy Rose). Many years later, *Twice Blessed* would become the name for the website that he created to help make the archives available internationally. At the time of his death in November, the archives included more than 10,000 artifacts — print, film, video, audio, events and ceremonies, music, performances, ephemera. In addition to the countless hours he devoted to building the collection, Johnny spent well over \$30,000 of his own money.

In 1995, the Toronto Centre For Lesbian And Gay Studies recognized Johnny's contribution with an Achievement Award. Already beginning to suffer from the painful neuropathy that would cause him great agony until his death, he gratefully accepted his award at a ceremony at Toronto's Inside Out Lesbian And Gay Film And Video Festival.

But Johnny will be remembered in Toronto for more than his archival work. Over the years, he did volunteer work at Keshet Shalom, the Jewish Queerculture Events Committee, the AIDS Committee Of Toronto, Holy Blossom Temple, and the Thyroid Foundation, as well as serving on care teams for friends who were dying of AIDS.

He was a caring and loyal friend to many and a devoted son to his mom, Gertrude. Johnny will be greatly missed by those of us who knew and

loved him, as well as by thousands of people who knew him through the ground-breaking work he did creating and maintaining the Jewish GLBT Archives. Johnny did his last update to the website on Nov 24, two days before he died. To honour him with a visit to the Jewish GLBT Archives on-line, go to www.usc.edu/isd/archives/oneigla/tb.



FINDING HIMSELF. Johnny Abush created the Jewish GLBT Archives, after hiding his Jewish roots for many years.

XTRA! DEC 28, 2000

Close Reading & Reflection Questions

Please reflect on the following questions based on your reading of this Case Study. Then, discuss your findings with your group.

1. Abush's archive provides a nearly complete historical arc of Chutzpah's evolution into Keshet Shalom. Why do you think the community felt the need to reinvent itself when their mission largely remained unchanged?
2. Why was it historically, culturally, and/or religiously appropriate for queer Jewish organizations around the world to be united under one "World Congress?"
3. Johnny devoted the last decade of his life to collecting historical and cultural artifacts of queer Jewish life. Why is it so important for people, especially those from marginalized communities, to have access to the histories, successes, and struggles of their communities?