

# Queer Kinship: (Re)discovering Histories of the First LGBTQ+ Synagogue

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When I applied to write for the Rainbow Issue, I did not expect to write a reflection during this political moment. As a PhD candidate in uncertainty—yet living an unapologetically queer life—I am grateful to share a glimpse into the work I have done (re)discovering histories of the first LGBTQ+ synagogue, Beth Chayim Chadashim (BCC), and finding a moment of queer love for Holocaust survivors.

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I am a PhD candidate at the University of Southern California (USC), where I research queer histories of the Holocaust. Many of you familiar with USC may also know the Shoah Foundation, a video archive that holds over 57,000 video testimonies from Holocaust survivors.<sup>i</sup> When beginning my research, I felt confident I could find *something* in the vast archives ... but I knew that because of my positionality, it would be best if these testimonies didn't stand on their own.

My next stop at USC was the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archive, which holds the largest repository of LGBTQ+ materials in the world.<sup>ii</sup> I was not sure if there was anything connected to the Holocaust in the BCC holdings, but in taking the chance to search these documents more thoroughly, I found the seeds of a deeper part of my dissertation.

Looking into files related to the Holocaust, it became clear rather early on that when it came to memorials and education on the Holocaust, BCC did a lot. This was not only in educational programming, but trips to the local Museum of Tolerance and donation efforts for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. And while this piqued my interest, their involvement remained broad in its scope and not as directly connected to individuals as I hoped. Until one day, I stumbled across a newspaper clipping highlighting the work of "Harold" (pseudonym):

"Harold, a Holocaust survivor in his late 50's, spends much of his time visiting the sick, especially those with AIDS. He is a member of the gay congregation Beth Chayim Chadashim, and the driving force behind its Bikur Cholim Committee—an informal group of 10 or so that volunteers to visit the sick."<sup>iii</sup>

I was so excited at that moment—here was a Holocaust survivor who was a part of BCC! But then the uncertainty set in: would I be able to find "Harold" again? With this, a new part of my journey began. I embraced the archive and set out to go through the piles of boxes that ONE had collected throughout the decades.

After weeks of flipping through financial records, conference programs, and newsletters, I came across an article celebrating the seniors of the synagogue, including an Ison Rovell. Ison—in his lifespan—moved from Germany to the British Mandate of Palestine and, finally, the United States. "Ok," I thought, "so that is not the exact trajectory of Harold. But it may be someone else, right?" Eventually, I discovered his relationship with Gary Wolf, whom he met after arriving in the United States.

I now had two names to look for, which for those of us researching marginalized histories is in and of itself quite amazing. But the question remained: Who was Harold? My search continued, and as I rubbed my dry eyes, I felt a sudden chill come over me. There, in the obituary in front of me, was the mention of creating "bikur cholim" and visiting the sick, the experience of fleeing from Germany with the family. The name ... *Gary Wolf*. What started as a chance archival encounter grew to connections I couldn't have possibly expected: not only was Gary Ison's partner but he was *Harold*, the one who organized and started the committee to help others during the height of a ravaging pandemic.

## *How did one's own experiences in the Holocaust inform future activism work and how could I use Gary's story to tell this?*

Immediately my mind started racing through the many twists and turns that Gary's life took, and how I as a historian could try to tell his story. What did it mean for Holocaust survivors to take part in care efforts at a time when stigmatization led to a lack of support for victims of an—at the time—untreatable disease? How did one's own experiences in the Holocaust inform future activism work and how could I use Gary's story to tell this? These are only some of the questions that came to mind while learning more and more about Gary's life, questions that I intend to pursue in the future. These questions for sure have not gone away, but that is not where I want to end.

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Researching the Holocaust and the multiplicity of intersecting identities effected by its horrors is laborious, depressing work. Even when focusing on survivors, there is the overbearing reality of *what* they had to survive that informs their relationships with other survivors and future generations. Yet, when I looked for more mentions of Gary and Ison, what came up was not their identities as Holocaust survivors, but the love they shared for each other and the community of BCC:

"Gary and Ison met over 32 years ago ... they loved the company they found at synagogue. Loved the days of stuffing envelopes after services for the newsletter mailing, loved the joy at BCC, and the good humor (much of which Gary added)."<sup>iv</sup>

"Gary looked at Ison with an impish smile and said 'Where is mine?' Ison said 'Your what?' Gary chuckled and said, 'Where is my ring?' There was a very tender moment when lovers of 32 years looked at each other and knew what they had in each other, knew that the world was a better place than it had been in their youth, a freer place than they had known most of their lives."<sup>v</sup>

It can be so easy to languish in desperation, looking forward and backward in queer history to see nothing but doom either way. That is why stories like Gary's matter: present in his life are queer joy and sadness, a demonstration of the complexity of his own identities. When fostering community, we can build relationships that make the world a better place. So, when things get tough, maybe go to your local archives, and spend some time reading through things you wouldn't normally think to look through: who knows, you might just find your own Ison and Gary.

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i <https://vha.usc.edu/home>. The work done here has been supported through the Beth and Arthur Lev Student Research Fellowship through the Center for Advanced Genocide Research.

ii <https://one.usc.edu/about>.

iii Box 12, Folder 6, Beth Chayim Chadashim Records, Coll2012-133, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

iv Box 11, Folder 15, Beth Chayim Chadashim Records, Coll2012-133, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

v Box 8, Folder 18, Beth Chayim Chadashim Records, Coll2012-133, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.