

# School 'museum' shows students' family stories

---

## Heirlooms reflect struggles, successes of Jewish ancestors



Jacob Kibel of Edison shows candlesticks that have been in his family for about 200 years. They were on display June 3 at the Solomon Schechter Day School Living Museum of Jewish Heritage in East Brunswick.

Photos by Debra Rubin

by [Debra Rubin](#)  
NJN Bureau Chief/Middlesex

June 24, 2008

As Jacob Kibel held the shiny silver candlesticks that have been in his family for about 200 years, the fifth-grader at the Solomon Schechter Day School of Raritan Valley reflected on what they have meant to generations.

“They were handmade in Russia; I didn’t know that,” said the Edison resident. “My grandma never told me how old they were. I have been to her house to celebrate Shabbat when she used them.”

That the candlesticks, brought to the United States by Jacob’s great-great-grandmother, Betsy Weinstein, in the 1880s, have been used by so many relatives over the years has given Jason new insight.

“I thought they were new because my grandma keeps them really polished and everything,” he said. “I think it’s kind of cool that you could make a lot of things by hand.”

The candlesticks were included in the Shabbat section at the Solomon Schechter Day School Living Museum of Jewish Heritage on June 3. The exhibit of family heirlooms was organized and conducted by the fifth grade under the guidance of social studies teacher Wendy Dobbs and enrichment teacher Marsha Koster.

The display of precious objects was patterned after the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City, which the students and teachers visited in preparation.

The kiddush room of the East Brunswick Jewish Center, where the school is located, was turned into a museum for a day, said Dobbs. “We connected artifacts from the students’ own families to the Jewish heritage to create our exhibits,” she said.

There was even a small Jewish gift shop; sales of bracelets, photo frames, and bookmarks resulted in \$102 raised for the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

With fifth-graders as docents, the museum had two day sessions and an evening session to allow fellow students, parents, and community members to view the exhibits.

Isabel Weinberg of East Brunswick displayed a Kiddush cup used by her grandparents, Michael and Helen Kaplan, at their wedding. The cup was later used by her older sister and brother at their bat and bar mitzva celebrations. Isabel said she plans to use it at her own bat mitzva and, hopefully, at her wedding.

“This family Kiddush cup is really, really special,” she said. “It has been passed on from generation to generation. My grandparents were in the Holocaust and I’m pretty sure they had it with them during the Holocaust. Although I’m not sure how they hid it, it’s really cool that they did that.”

Parent Lisa Heskes of Edison said she was enthralled by the exhibits and the stories told by such articles as prayer books, *tefillin*, and prayer shawls, some of which survived the Holocaust and nearly all cherished by generations.

“I thought this was fantastic,” said Heskes. The students “got to learn about their ancestors. We all got to learn about all the other families and it was a fascinating way to learn about our Jewish heritage.”



Teachers and fifth-grade students in the museum’s “Hall of Immigration” are, seated, Haley Schneider of Edison; and, from left, Landon Kestlinger of South River; social studies teacher Wendy Dobbs; enrichment teacher Marsha Koster; Esther Shoulson of Highland Park; and Jacob Rothberg of Highland Park.

Visitors entered the museum through the Hall of Immigration, which Koster said was inspired by Haley Schneider of Edison who brought the manifest from the ship, the S.S. Rydan, that carried her nine-year-old great-grandmother, Dora Wyszynski, from Rotterdam to the United States in 1921. Soon after their arrival, Haley said, the family changed its last name to Winson and Dora became Dorothy.

Exhibits were divided into categories, including Shabbat, the synagogue, and the home. Among the sentimental items was a faded child’s dress emblazoned with what would become Israel’s flag and a black and white photo of a small girl wearing the dress and waving a small flag in each hand. Esther Shoulson of Highland Park said the girl in th

e picture was her then four-year-old “great-great-grandma Helen.” She wore the dress in 1917 in honor of the signing of the Balfour Declaration affirming the British government’s support for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

Esther said the dress and photo were “very special” because “it tells us that a design for the flag was created before they had a country.”

“I am named for the person who wore the dress,” she added. “She also has family living in Israel today. That was her family’s dream in 1917.”