

The following commentary by Robin Doroshov, the executive director of the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest, is both an historic and a timely supplement to the article “Tikkun Olam: Jewish Women Serving Their St. Paul Community” by Kate Dietrick, Gabrielle Horner, and Janet Kampf. Please see the link above or visit [www.rchs.com](http://www.rchs.com) to order a copy of the Fall 2021 issue of Ramsey County History magazine.

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*Making a Comeback?*

## Mutual Aid Organizations: Then and Now

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On December 24, 2020, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* ran an article that caught my eye: “Grassroots efforts spring up to help Twin Cities families in need” by reporter Kelly Smith reminded me of just how much good can be accomplished by determined individuals and small groups of dedicated people. Smith highlights community members—many out of jobs themselves because of the COVID pandemic—who set out to provide towels and bedsheets and clothing and meals for those in immediate need. Some people cleaned up looted stores after the murder of George Floyd; others set up portable toilets or started community gardens in hard-hit areas of the Twin Cities. Of one volunteer Smith wrote, “She’s not moving mountains. She’s not exacting change. She’s not trying to end poverty. She’s a neighbor helping neighbors.”<sup>1</sup>

While not described as such in that article, the idea of neighbors helping one another is the essence of mutual aid. This term is defined eloquently by Rebecca Solnit in “‘The way we get through this is together:’ the rise of mutual aid under coronavirus,” which published last spring in *The Guardian*:

Mutual aid has generally meant aid offered in a spirit of solidarity and reciprocity, often coming from within struggling communities, empowering those aided, and with an eye towards liberation and social change. Generally, it meant volunteer coalitions doing work such as rebuilding or food distribution or supporting resistance camps.<sup>2</sup>

Solnit describes the explosion of mutual aid that has occurred during the COVID crisis and its resulting economic conditions, commenting that

(a) dozen years ago, the term ‘mutual aid’ was, as far as I can tell, used mostly by anarchists and scholars. Somehow it has migrated into general usage in recent years and now, in the midst of the pandemic, it is everywhere.<sup>3</sup>

Recently, I started to see the reference in emails from my synagogue with notes of remote mutual aid Shabbat services and mutual aid Hallel services during Chanukah. While I assumed that, in this context, mutual aid referred to the partnership of two or more congregations collaboratively providing a religious service via Zoom, I asked Rabbi Arielle Lekach-Rosenberg for confirmation. Her response expanded my understanding:

We call it Mutual Aid Hallel for the way that this space and the collaboration have allowed us to access spiritual uplift and heartfelt yearning in a time of incredible challenge. This mutual aid has been life-giving for *tefillah* (prayer) leaders in the space and has allowed for continued exploration of new/deepening ritual and liturgical practice.<sup>4</sup>

I love the use of this term to encompass various actions and interactions for outcomes—not only material, but also spiritual.

Indeed, the concept of mutual aid had fallen out of the common lexicon, as Solnit suggests, but it has a long history. In the first half of the twentieth century, mutual aid societies were common in the Jewish community, when immigrants, mainly from Eastern Europe, established societies to help their *landsleit* (their fellow countryman) as they adapted to their new country and established new lives for themselves and their families.

One such mutual aid organization was the Workmen's Circle—in Yiddish—*Der Arbeter Ring*. The Workmen's Circle, known in 2020 by the non-gendered descriptor The Workers Circle, is an American Jewish nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting social and economic justice. Formed in New York City in 1900, it had hundreds of branches in the US and Canada and more than 84,000 members at its height in the 1920s. In its first one-hundred years, the Workmen's Circle provided many services to members, including life insurance, unemployment relief, healthcare, and burial assistance, along with social and educational opportunities.<sup>5</sup>

In St. Paul, the Workmen's Circle chapter also had a credit union in Highland Park. My brother Mike Bernath remembers going there with our

father as a teenager in the 1960s and meeting with Mr. Joseph Krawetz, an insurance agent and active member of many Jewish communal organizations, who assisted in arranging a loan for Mike's first car. Mike also reminded me that our grandfather Jacob Gottlieb had been active in many mutual aid organizations, including the Workmen's Circle, often serving as the organizational treasurer.<sup>6</sup>

The Workmen's Circle promoted Yiddish education and had socialist ideals, becoming influential in the then-nascent American labor movement and recently established Yiddish newspaper, *The Forward*. They also operated medical clinics and homes for the aged. Around the time of the New Deal, the Workmen's Circle shifted from socialism toward liberalism. A decline in membership was seen in the 1960s as Jews joined the middle class in large numbers and found the organization to be less essential than in earlier years. Still based in New York City, The Workers Circle today focuses on secular Yiddish culture and social justice activism, with a membership of 11,000.<sup>7</sup>

An Internet search using the terms "mutual aid" and "Minnesota" today yields many results. For example, a website for the Twin Cities

The board of directors of the Workers Alliance Mutual Loan Association in 1923. This arm of the local Workmen's Circle provided interest-free loans to its members, as many men often were unable to secure credit in the general community. The author's grandfather, Jacob Gottlieb, served on the board (back row, third from left). Courtesy of Nathan and Theresa Berman Upper Midwest Jewish Archives.





Mutual Aid Project, which was created in June 2020 to help citizens find places to volunteer, donate, and access assistance, describes mutual aid as one of its core values:

We believe in mutual aid, and approach our work as a form of reciprocal care. What this means, simply put, is that we reject capitalist notions of charity and instead see our project as direct action. TCMAP supports interdependent communities who collaboratively work towards an equitable future. Our work supports networks of freely given assistance and shared resources in order to make us all stronger and safer.<sup>8</sup>

A TCMAP map identifies nearly 500 separate organizations from Stearns and Blue Earth Counties to Winona County, with the vast majority situated in the seven-county metro area.<sup>9</sup>

The Twin Cities, a regional hub for immigrants, has seen growth in the number of mutual aid organizations for many, including both Hmong and Somali immigrants. Such grassroots groups are usually formed with few internal or external hierarchies, and the members may be both giving and receiving aid. A few include the Confederation of Somali Community in Minnesota, based in Minneapolis, and the Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association, which is headquartered in Rochester.<sup>10</sup>

Like Jewish immigrants a century ago, members of diverse communities are banding together to help one another during these

unprecedented times. Last February, the East Side Freedom Library in St. Paul hosted a Zoom discussion entitled “Solidarity not Charity, Twin Cities Mutual Aid Organizers Community Panel.” Panelist Jae Yates of the Community Aid Network of Minnesota, which focuses on food security, distinguished mutual aid from philanthropy stating that philanthropy may be viewed as a gift, coming from one with means to one without means, while mutual aid is not hierarchical in that way. They also highlighted the important relationship between mutual aid and activism stating that when people have their needs met they are freed up to organize more effectively.<sup>11</sup> And so, many have in recent months.

Mutual aid organizations were vital in helping my Jewish forebears in the 1920s. A century on, it appears these small groups of neighbors assisting neighbors—grassroots community-led organizations giving a helping hand—are making a comeback and making a difference in the lives of more recent immigrants and members of other diverse communities all over the Twin Cities area and beyond.

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The National Jewish Workers Alliance was one of several Jewish mutual aid organizations in the Twin Cities in the 1920s. The socialist-Zionist fraternal organization provided education, insurance for members, and other services. The author’s grandmother, Golda Parasol Gottlieb (*second row standing, eighth from left*), and grandfather, Jacob Gottlieb (*first row seated, seventh from left*), were members.

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## NOTES

1. Kelly Smith, "Grassroots efforts spring up to help Twin Cities families in need," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, December 24, 2020, accessed October 25, 2021, <https://www.startribune.com/grassroots-efforts-spring-up-to-help-twin-cities-families-in-need/573473981/>.

2. Rebecca Solnit, "'The way we get through this is together:' the rise of mutual aid under coronavirus," *The Guardian*, May 14, 2020, accessed October 25, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/14/mutual-aid-coronavirus-pandemic-rebecca-solnit>.

3. Solnit.

4. Rabbi Arielle Lekach-Rosenberg with Shir Tikvah Congregation in Minneapolis, conversations with author, November-December 2020.

5. "About Us," The Workers Circle, accessed October 25, 2021, <https://www.circle.org/about-us>.

6. Mike Bernath, conversation with author, December 10, 2020.

7. "Records of The Workmen's Circle," Center for Jewish History, accessed October 27, 2021, <https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/3/resources/5706>.

8. "Values," Twin Cities Mutual Aid Project, accessed October 25, 2021, <https://tcmmap.org/values/>.

9. "Mutual Aid Map," Twin Cities Mutual Aid Project, accessed October 25, 2021, <https://twin-cities-mutual-aid.org/>. A few Ramsey County-based mutual aid organizations include iHelp MarketSquare, run by members of the City of Reconciliation Church; American Indian Family Center; and Youthprise, which provides free supper and snacks for BIPOC youth under age eighteen.

10. See <http://www.csc-mn.org/> and <http://imaa.net/>.

11. "Solidarity not Charity, Twin Cities Mutual Aid Organizers Community Panel and Q&A," Zoom program, Eastside Freedom Library, February 14, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5OD683RHZw>.