

## New exhibition shows how one year can change the world



The Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia. Photographed March 16, 2017.  
Julia Hatmaker | [jhatmaker@pennlive.com](mailto:jhatmaker@pennlive.com)



By [Julia Hatmaker | jhatmaker@pennlive.com](mailto:jhatmaker@pennlive.com)

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One year can make all the difference.

That's the thesis of "1917: How One Year Changed the World," a new exhibition at the National Museum of American Jewish History, which opened on March 17. You can take a mini, virtual tour of the exhibit in the gallery at the top of this post.

- **MORE:** The exhibition was funded in part through the National Endowment for the Humanities. [Read how the proposed budget cut of the program will impact the National American Jewish History Museum.](#)

The exhibit looks at three key events: America joining World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the Balfour Declaration (in which Great Britain stated its support for a Jewish state in Palestine).

Those events changed the political and social landscape in America and led to more stringent immigration policies, conflicts in the Middle East and an obsession with appearing "American" above all else.

The exhibition is meant to get people thinking about what it means to be American. What does it look like? What does being an American mean? Can one still be a patriot if they identify also ethnically with another culture? Should one question their government?

"Every century or so a society has to ask itself really hard questions," said Rachel Lithgow executive director of the American Jewish Historical Society, which partnered with the museum for the exhibit. "I think what this exhibition hopes to do is inspire those questions amongst all the visitors and attendees."

These questions were faced by many Jews in America in 1917.

"In WWI Jews fought disproportionately to their population in the United States," Lithgow said. "13 percent of the army was foreign speaking, foreign born."

"These men and women laid down their lives for a country that at the time was questioning whether or not they were true citizens," she continued. "That is a story that I think is extremely relevant to today."

The highlight of the exhibit is the Balfour Declaration, which is shown in two different versions. There's the original handwritten draft (composed on hotel stationery) and a typed version with handwritten edits. It's the first time the original draft has ever been on display in the United States.

"You can really see, looking at the document, the pain and struggle and care that its authors went through to draft this small paragraph," Lithgow said. "To look into the future now, we see what was created out of this single sheet of paper. It's remarkable."

1917 also saw Emma Goldman fighting for reproductive rights, distributing cervical caps as an early form of birth control. Goldman would eventually be deported from America for being an anarchist. Her story is one of those told in the exhibit.

Another is that of William Shemin, a Jewish soldier in World War I that, because of anti-Semitism, wasn't honored with a Medal of Honor until 2015, decades after he had died.

There's also a larger story concerning immigration.

"The xenophobia that comes out of America's entry into World War I and the other events we talk about in the exhibition -- it gets worse and really culminates in the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act," said Ivy Barsky, CEO for the museum. "That, in essence, closes the door to immigration for a lot of ethnic minorities who are seeking safety in the United States."

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"Those stringent immigration laws which came out of that anti-immigrant sentiment participated in many hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people perishing in Europe that might not have had America's doors been open to them," Barsky said "History is history but it also has important implications for today and understanding the implications of our actions."