

A New Address for B'nai B'rith

Move to K Street Forces Organization to Downsize Museum, Close Gift Shop

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It's been a good run, they say, but now it is time to move on. The leaders of B'nai B'rith International -- the nation's oldest and largest Jewish social service organization -- are leaving behind their decades-old headquarters at 1640 Rhode Island Ave. NW, a building whose very address has become synonymous with Jewish identity and activism.

B'nai B'rith officials said they could not afford to spend tens of millions of dollars on repairs to the structure. Come mid-July, they will begin renting the seventh floor of a newer, more corporate building at 2020 K St. NW.

The move will force B'nai B'rith to close its Klutznick Museum and replace it with a smaller gallery accessible only by appointment. Open access is simply not feasible at an office building with many other tenants, the group's officials said. Also closing is the museum gift shop, which is holding a "going out of business sale" and has already sold about half of its roughly 4,000 items.

The 5,000-square-foot museum, opened in 1957, contains archaeological Jewish artifacts as well as works by contemporary Jewish artists and has drawn 10,000 to 15,000 visitors a year. Arguably the museum's most well-known possession is a 1790 series of letters between George Washington and the sexton of the oldest U.S. synagogue, located in Rhode Island.

Mark D. Olshan, B'nai B'rith associate executive vice president, said he contemplated trying to save the building but decided it made more financial sense to sell it. Human Rights Campaign, the country's largest advocacy group for gays, lesbians and transsexuals, has purchased the eight-story, white-brick property for nearly \$10 million.

The new owner plans a complete renovation of the building, but Human Rights Campaign officials said they will include a tribute to B'nai B'rith, which built the structure and occupied it for nearly a half-century.

Olshan said one of the chief problems with the building is its climate control system, which takes weeks to complete the change from heat to air-conditioning. "You don't just flip switches like you do in most office buildings," Olshan said.

Because of B'nai B'rith's new space crunch, parts of the museum will become traveling exhibits, while others will be lent to other institutions.

The museum's Philip Klutznick exhibit, which documents the life of one of the most influential Jewish businessmen of the 20th century, will be shipped to Omaha.

Klutznick's granddaughter, Amy Saltzman, said she realizes that the money raised by the sale of the building will help fund outreach efforts in the Jewish community. Still, she laments that the museum collection will be less visible, increasing the likelihood that Washington tourists will see only one aspect of Jewish history -- the one documented by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

"It's not all completely grim and horrible," Saltzman said. Although the move to K Street will not wrap up until July, the museum will be closing much sooner. Visitors can catch one last glimpse of it from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. tomorrow.

"There's a lot of packing to be done," said B'nai B'rith President Richard D. Heideman.

One of the heavier items to pack will be Yankel Ginzburg's "Hearts and Hands of B'nai B'rith" mural, which has decorated the headquarters since the late 1970s. The mural will be taken apart and stored in hopes that it can one day be put back together. B'nai B'rith officials said the K Street location will not be permanent and that, in a couple of years, they hope to have a more expansive headquarters.

Ginzburg, a B'nai B'rith member for about 25 years, began painting the mural in 1977, the same year that a small group of Hanafi Muslims stormed three buildings in the city, including B'nai B'rith headquarters, and took 124 hostages.

The 12 armed Hanafis surrendered after nearly two days, but not before killing a local radio reporter and injuring future mayor Marion Barry during a takeover of the District Building. Ginzburg was painting the mural the day the Hanafis came, but he was not taken hostage. He had walked down the block for a moment and encountered a police blockade when he returned.

Ginzburg is saddened that B'nai B'rith could not find the money to fix 1640 Rhode Island Ave. NW. He also worries that, without an infusion of youth, the organization's membership will end up shrinking just as its headquarters has. "I'm an incurable optimist, but I think we're in a temporary decline, and that really hurts me," He said.