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Rabbi Morton Narrowe: From Gratz College Student to Chief Rabbi of Stockholm

The “typical” part of Rabbi Narrowe’s life began in Philadelphia, where he graduated from Central High School in 1950. During his high school years, he attended Gratz College and credits his teachers there with cultivating his love for Judaism, in particular, for Bible studies. In fact, more than 65 years later, he still describes his Bible class at Gratz with Dr. Pinchas Wechter as the best course he ever took. Rabbi Narrowe attended college at Yeshiva University in New York, and later, received his rabbinical ordination from The Jewish Theological Seminary.

The rabbi began his career as a chaplain in the Navy, stationed in Japan. Upon returning to the United States, he accepted a position with a congregation in Satellite Beach, Florida, not far from Cape Canaveral. Given the synagogue’s proximity to the space center, some of his congregants jokingly referred to him as the “rabbinaut.”

During a convention in Mexico, Rabbi Narrowe had the opportunity to spend an evening with Rabbi Marshall Meyer. Rabbi Meyer was working in Argentina, where he dedicated much of his professional life to human rights and to revitalizing the Jewish community. Rabbi Meyer explained that to be the leader of a congregation outside the United States, a rabbi must be able to function independently, with little collegiality.

Given that criterion, Rabbi Narrowe realized that for him, the chaplaincy in Japan and the synagogue in Cape Canaveral had been the optimal training ground for an overseas rabbinate. So he contacted the rabbinical placement bureau, inquiring about openings in European congregations. He eventually accepted a position under the chief rabbi in the Great Synagogue of Stockholm, and assumed that he and his young family would return to the United States after a three-year Swedish adventure. Before the Narrowe Family left for Sweden, however, the chief rabbi died suddenly of a heart attack, leaving Narrowe, who did not speak a word of Swedish, as the synagogue’s only remaining rabbi. Nevertheless, he and his family continued with their plans to move, and now, over 50 years later, he still describes this move as the best decision they ever made.

The Jewish population in Sweden is about 20,000, with the largest percentage living in Stockholm. Anti-Semitism has been on the rise in certain parts of the country, particularly in the city of Malmö, which has a large population of Middle Eastern Muslim immigrants. However, despite the presence of volunteer guards outside synagogues and Jewish schools in Stockholm, Rabbi Narrowe believes that the Jewish community in this city is blossoming. Jews have excelled in the arts and in other fields, and there is a plethora of Jewish-themed programs and activities in Stockholm.

On a professional level, serving as a rabbi in Stockholm was a wonderfully unique experience for Narrowe. The Great Synagogue of Stockholm, built in the 1870’s and representing one of the country’s

greatest architectural works, is the major house of Jewish worship in the city. Described by Rabbi Narowe as the city's "flagship of the Jewish community," this synagogue has been the site of visits by the king and queen of Sweden.

As rabbi of the Great Synagogue of Stockholm, Narowe had the opportunity to participate in some fascinating work. In 1974, for example, he was elected to the board responsible for overseeing the new translation of the Bible into Swedish. The board consisted of religious leaders and scholars from different faiths. Although Rabbi Narowe felt well prepared for this task because of the training he had received in the United States, including his coursework at Gratz, he still marveled at the fact that this "little boy from Philly was sitting there with all of these great intellectuals." The project took 26 years to complete, and the rabbi's translations helped shape the final version.

During his tenure at the Great Synagogue of Stockholm, Rabbi Narowe had the opportunity to meet many prominent individuals. For example, when former Israeli foreign affairs minister Abba Eban visited Sweden, Rabbi Narowe and other members of the Jewish community were invited to attend the state dinner in his honor. On several occasions, Rabbi Narowe also met Nobel Laureates. With the Nobel Prize being awarded in Sweden, he would invite the Jewish prize winners to visit his synagogue. Finally, the rabbi's retirement ceremony in 1998 was attended by many notable figures, including actors from the Swedish stage. During the ceremony, the rabbi was awarded the title Commodore of the Order of the North Star by the Swedish monarchy and parliament, which is the highest honor that can be awarded to a person without Swedish citizenship. (At the time, Sweden did not recognize dual citizenship, but the law has since changed, and Rabbi Narowe now has both American and Swedish citizenship.)

That three-year Swedish adventure that Rabbi Narowe embarked on with his family in 1965 turned into a lifetime of serving the Jewish community of Stockholm. Rabbi Narowe feels privileged to have had what he describes as "a very varied and blessed career."