

CHAPTER XVI

JEWES IN PUBLIC LIFE SINCE 1924¹

Since the early 1920's, the Jewish community of Portland grew not only in numbers but in civic importance, due to the increasing participation of its members in the professions and in civic projects. At the same time, the community's social status was enhanced by the improvement of its economic position. The gradually increasing prosperity of Jewish people provided not only a solid foundation for Jewish community development but also was the occasion for a greater responsibility toward the general community of Portland.

POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

Until the adoption of the city manager form of government in 1923, several Jews had served on the Common Council and the Board of Aldermen. As pointed out previously, this was made possible through election of members by wards and the concentration of Jews in Ward 3. The new city charter abolished ward voting limitations in favor of a city-wide balloting system. Thus the large concentration of Jews in one section of the city did not constitute a political advantage to them.

Despite the absence of Jews from the City Council, many Jewish citizens continued to serve in important posts on the city, state and national levels. Jacob H. Berman became County Attorney in 1916 and served as a United States Commissioner for Maine from 1925 to 1929. Max L. Pinansky, a native of Boston who settled in Portland in 1913, was Judge of the Municipal Court from 1927 to 1931, and a member of the School Board in 1932. Pinansky was elected to the State Senate in 1934, where he served on the Commerce, Education and Legal Affairs committees.

As a result of the Democratic victory in Portland, Silas Jacobson and Udell Bramson were elected to the Maine House of Representatives from 1935 to 1937. Louis Bernstein served on the Portland Civil Service Commission from 1934 to 1941. During this period Albert Abrahamson entered upon his long career of government service.

Born in Portland in 1905, Albert Abrahamson, the son of Laz-

arus and Rose Abrahamson was graduated from Bowdoin College in 1926 and, after studies at Columbia University, was appointed economics instructor at Bowdoin College in 1928. In 1934 he went to Washington D. C. as an economist for the President's Cabinet Committee on Price Policy, then returned to serve as W.P.A. Administrator for Maine from 1935 to 1937.

After serving as executive director of the National Refugee Service in New York City from 1941 to 1943, he went into military service and was assigned to the Office of Strategic Services, better known as the O.S.S. Because of his special background and experience, he was discharged from the army in 1944 and appointed assistant executive director of the War Refugee Board in Washington. In 1945, he was appointed special assistant to the United States Secretary of Labor, and in 1951 served as a consultant to Stuart Symington, who was then head of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation.

It is worth noting that during this long period of public service, Albert Abrahamson was still on the faculty of Bowdoin College, becoming assistant professor of economics in 1930, associate professor in 1936 and full professor in 1947. In addition to his government service, Professor Abrahamson has been a consultant to several national Jewish agencies. Recently, in 1954, he was economic consultant to the Israel Study Mission sponsored by the United Jewish Appeal. This group consisted of American business and professional leaders who spent six weeks in Israel, Europe and North Africa, studying Jewish needs.

On the Portland scene, Barnett I. Shur and Louis Bernstein, prominent attorneys long active in Jewish communal affairs, have held high positions. Since 1946, Shur has served as city corporation counsel for Portland. Louis Bernstein, a major in the United States Air Corps from 1941 to 1945, was appointed Recorder of the Municipal Court in 1948 and Judge of the same court in 1952. The promising career of another Portland Jew, Abraham Breitbard, was brought to a premature end by his death in 1947. From 1943 until his death, Breitbard was a deputy attorney general of the State of Maine.

Among the young Jewish attorneys who have served in public office are Morris Cox, Oscar Cox, Jules Greenstein and Saul Sheriff. Morris Cox, also active in Jewish communal affairs, was appointed clerk of the United States District Court for the District of Maine in 1948. His brother, Oscar Cox, served as corporation counsel for the city of New York until 1940, when he went to Washington, D. C. as assistant to the general counsel in the

Treasury Department. From there he went to the Lend-Lease Administration and was co-author of the Lend-Lease Bill, enacted into law in January, 1941. Among other federal government positions held by Oscar Cox were general counsel in the Office of Emergency Management, assistant solicitor general, general counsel and later deputy administrator for the Foreign Economic Administration, and administrative legal assistant to President Franklin D. Roosevelt.²

Jules Greenstein was appointed to the State Boxing Commission in 1947 and has served as its Chairman since 1950. Saul Sheriff was chairman of the Maine State Liquor Commission in 1952 and 1953. In 1954, Sheriff was appointed to the Maine Port Authority. In the same year Arthur M. Waterman, a prominent automobile dealer, was designated chairman of the Maine State Motor Vehicle Dealers Board.

PROFESSIONS

In 1900, Portland Jewry was still principally an immigrant community. However, children of the earlier immigrants were beginning to partake of advantages their fathers did not have in their land of origin. One of these was higher general education.

Due to the relative poverty among Jews in the early period, only a few persons were able to take advantage of the opportunities for higher education. Many young Jewish boys did not even attend secondary schools regularly.

The first Portland Jew to be graduated from college was John L. Davis. Born in Portland in 1884, the son of the late Israel and Rose Davis, he attended Portland High School and in 1906 received his M.D. degree from the Bowdoin College Medical School of Maine. He was Portland's first Jewish doctor and served as city physician in 1908 and medical inspector for Portland schools from 1910 to 1914.

The second Jewish physician was Dr. Elias Caplan who came from Des Moines, Iowa in 1911 and practiced medicine here until his retirement in the 1940's when he moved to California. Shortly after Dr. Caplan's arrival, Drs. William Deixel and Jacob Melnick opened offices.

William S. Wolf, the son of Joseph H. Wolf, was the first Jewish registered pharmacist in Portland, about the year 1906.

The first Jewish dentists, Drs. Cyrus Briggs and George Goldberg began their practice in 1916.

There were only these few doctors in Portland when Dr. Harry E. Davis, a brother of John L. Davis, began his practice of medi-

cine in 1921. He has been in charge of the Health Clinic in Portland for nearly thirty-three years.

The number of Jewish physicians began to grow in the 1930's and 1940's. One of Portland's native sons, Dr. Benjamin Zolov, served as a surgeon of the United States Public Health Service, from 1943 to 1945, and at present is City Physician.

Only a few Portland Jews entered the field of public education in Maine. Professor Albert Abrahamson already has been mentioned. His educational activity has been on the college level and outside of Portland. In Portland schools, it appears that Edith Briggs Myers was the earliest Jewish teacher, beginning her career in 1919. Samuel C. Rosenthal, who teaches chemistry in Portland High School, entered the profession in 1921. The first Jewish principal in Portland is Philip Gerber of the Jackson Elementary School. Lewis H. Kriger served as an educator for many years, although outside of Portland. He first taught in Fryeburg Academy in 1916. The following year he went to Fort Fairfield, where he served as principal and athletic coach of the Fort Fairfield High School until 1946.

At this point in our record of Jews in public life, we mention the few Portland Jews who have served in leading positions in general veterans organizations, for they require a special category of their own. Philip Resnick and Solomon Crasnick served as commanders of the Harold T. Andrews Post, American Legion. Solomon Crasnick also served for fourteen years as state department service officer of the American Legion. Harold A. Myers was vice-commander of the Ralph D. Caldwell Post, American Legion, at the time of his death in 1934. Finally, Philip Gold served as a commander of the Portland Chapter, Veterans of Foreign Wars.

In another separate category we mention Hiram Abrams, active in the entertainment business in Maine, who became nationally prominent. He was born in Portland in 1878, the son of Isaac Abrams, and operated several theaters in Portland and other parts of New England before going to Hollywood. There he was one of the founders of the Paramount Pictures Corporation and served as its second president. In 1919, he founded and organized the United Artists Corporation and became its first president, holding that position until his death in 1926.

Another pioneer in the theatrical field in Portland was Abraham Goodside, brother-in-law of Hiram Abrams, who opened the Empire and Strand theaters.

CIVIC WELFARE

Since the first World War, Jews of Portland have been active in all organizations for general civic improvement and community advancement. Among those who have served as directors of the Portland Community Chest are Mrs. Edward J. Berman, Israel Bernstein, Mrs. Israel Bernstein, Louis Bernstein, Barnett I. Shur, Sidney W. Wernick and Sumner T. Bernstein. On the Executive Committee of the Council of Social Agencies have been Mrs. Israel Bernstein, Louis Bernstein, Mrs. Sumner T. Bernstein, Norman I. Godfrey, Dr. Henry Pollard, Mrs. Jesse Rosenberg, Barnett I. Shur, Mrs. Caspar Sutton, Victor H. Taylor and Mrs. Lester M. Willis.

In 1952, Judge Louis Bernstein served as general chairman of the successful Portland Community Chest campaign, the only Jew ever to serve in that capacity.

Several Jews have been active over the years in organizations such as the Red Cross, the Chamber of Commerce, the Better Business Bureau and the Maine Medical Center. Abraham S. Levey has been a director or trustee in each of these organizations. Israel Bernstein is past president of Pine Tree Council, Boy Scouts of America, and Mrs. Benjamin E. Finn served two terms, beginning in 1951, as president of the Camp Fire Girls, Hitinowa Council of Portland.

JEWISH INTEGRATION IN PORTLAND'S ECONOMIC LIFE

From the beginning of the Jewish community in the 1860's until the turn of the century, the Jews, economically speaking, were a fringe community. They earned a livelihood as peddlers, small shopkeepers, or junk dealers. Most of them eked out a bare existence and hardly made an impact on the business life. A few persons became established in more stable businesses, mainly in clothing and dry goods, and were regarded as the "rich men" of the community.

With the beginning of the present century, Jewish business enterprise grew. New undertakings were launched and smaller business expanded. Around 1900 the American Clothing Company was already doing business on Middle Street, owned and operated by Louis and Bernard Kamber. The Kamber brothers set a new pattern for their time, advertising extensively in newspapers, pamphlets and billboard displays throughout the state. These pioneer efforts in large-scale advertising soon encouraged other business establishments to follow suit. The Kamber business grew rapidly and branch stores were later opened in Bath, Lewiston

and Waterville, Maine, as well as in Springfield, Massachusetts, Hartford, Connecticut, and New York City.

The first Jewish manufacturing company opened on Middle Street about 1906. It was managed by Morris Maiman who came from New York City with his crew of workers and settled here. His enterprise was known as the Coronet Shirtwaist Manufacturing Company. In later years, Elder and Maurice Markson built up an extensive clothing business by introducing what was then considered an unusual innovation — credit purchasing. The purchasing of furniture on credit was introduced by the Hub Furniture Company, established by Samuel Novick and Max W. Simonds in 1914. They were followed in this practice by Harry Potter, Jacob Potter, Abraham S. Levey, Samuel Davis, and Benjamin Goldberg. These pioneers in the credit business thus introduced a new technique in Portland's economic life which has enabled many other enterprises to expand their volume of business and increase the wealth of the city and state.

We have indicated here only some of the Jewish pioneers. Since the 1920's the economic status of the Jewish community has improved rapidly and at present Jews are engaged in nearly all business pursuits and have achieved prominence in many. It is beyond the scope of this section to furnish a directory of Jewish entrepreneurship in Portland. It is apparent that a fringe community has been transformed into a most essential element of the city. And with this ever-increasing expansion and success of Jewish business enterprise has come not only improved economic status but a more eager and responsible participation in the life of the general community.

SPORTS

Until the early 1900's, few Jews attended the higher schools and there was little opportunity for them to participate in the athletic activities sponsored principally by schools. Until 1907, no Portland Jew was known to have played on any high school team. However, in 1906, an all-Jewish football team called the "Trojans" was organized and played with distinction against local and out-of-town teams. In 1907, the "Trojans" played an undefeated season,³ and the following year the team was augmented by younger replacements, the "Trojan Juniors." However, when many of the players joined school teams, the "Trojans" disbanded.

The Jewish boys who congregated around Franklin and Middle Streets, in the heart of the Jewish district, organized a baseball team that played under the name of W. A. Flaherty's Drug Store,

the headquarters of the neighborhood youth.

From 1907 until the end of the First World War, several local Jews distinguished themselves in high school and college sports. At the beginning of this period, eight Jewish boys and girls were attending Portland High School. Football and baseball, so characteristic of the American environment, had remained the exclusive monopoly of the non-Jewish students until Herman O. Goffin and Lewis H. Kriger qualified for the Portland team.

Herman O. Goffin played football for Portland High School in 1907 and later qualified for track and baseball. He continued his athletic career at Westbrook Seminary, Coburn Classical Institute and Colby College.

Lewis H. Kriger played football for Portland High School from 1908 to 1912, and during the latter two years he made the baseball team. Kriger continued in sports for four years at the University of Maine, where he was the first Jew to qualify for a varsity athletic team.

In 1910 Cyrus K. Briggs became the first Jew to make the basketball team in Portland High School.⁴ Somewhat later, William R. Needleman played football, baseball and basketball at Portland High School, and qualified in the same sports at Bowdoin College where he served as baseball captain in his senior year, 1922.

Lewis H. Kriger and William R. Needleman also succeeded in making the grade on local baseball teams, such as the Portland Independents and Scribner's Independents. Soon more Jews began to participate in athletic activities. Among other earlier stars were Mose Rudman, David Needleman and Lewis Abramson. Rudman played football for Portland High School, the University of Maine and Harvard College. Later, in Portland, he became the first football coach of Portland's Cheverus High School, a Catholic school.

After the first World War, greater numbers of Jews began attending Portland High School. This increase in attendance was accompanied by a sharp increase in the number of Jewish athletic stars, of whom only the most outstanding can be mentioned here.

From 1925 through 1928, David Diamon was a four-letter man at Portland High School for one year, and a three-letter man for three years. His sports were football, basketball and tennis, and in his final year he served as captain of the football team.

For three years, 1925 through 1927, Robert Agger was a three-letter man at Portland High School, in football, baseball and

basketball. He was captain of the basketball team in 1927. In that year, Louis Seigal managed the basketball team and Julius Elowitch starred in baseball and track. The following year Elowitch became a three-letter man, when he qualified for football.

Many other Jews at Portland High School qualified for one or more teams during this period, the high water mark for Jewish participation in established sports in Portland. During the early 1920's Jewish boys dominated athletic teams at the Portland Boys Club, which year after year competed successfully with the best clubs in Maine. Philip Erlick won the first marathon race sponsored by the club in 1923. Among other Jewish stars of the Portland Boys Club during this period were Jules and Fido Brownstone, Jack and Teddy Goldstein, Maurice "Murphy" Gerber, Harry and Sam Modes and Barnett I. Shur.

Starring in other activities were Harold Beckelman and Saul Gerber, city golf champions, George Bress, state handball champion, and Nathan Cohen, state checkers champion.

A few Jewish girls also starred in high school sports during the 1920's. Edith Finn was the first to participate in regular sports, qualifying for the Portland High School basketball team. Jane Kodis played basketball for the same school in 1925-1926, and Anna Katz, Ethel Levine and Edith Greenstein also made the team during this period.

The growing participation of Jews in sports from the first decade of the present century to the end of the 1920's coincided with the period of rapid adjustment of the Jews in Portland to the larger community. Participation in sports assumed the character of a mode of adaptation and succeeded in achieving community recognition and a greater confidence on the part of Jews in themselves.

Among the young Jewish athletes of the succeeding period were David Astor, who played football for Portland High School and the University of Maine, and Sumner Gordon, who starred in basketball in Deering High School and later in football and golf at the University of Maine. Donald Herman, an outstanding tennis star at Portland High School, won the city championship.

An interesting sidelight on Jewish activity in sports is the absence of Jewish boxers from the local ring after the first decade of the present century. In the early 1900's a few did engage in professional boxing. Among them were "Scotty" Cohen (Harry Waterman), "Cyclone Zip" (Harry Carvel), Abe Nathanson, known professionally as Jimmy Pearl, and Jimmy "Kid" Rice, who was a contender for the lightweight crown.

REFERENCES IN CHAPTER XVI

¹In this chapter we will continue the story of Jews in public life begun in Chapter VIII. Here we will call attention not only to individuals who held political office but to men who were prominent in economic life and the professions. In the latter category we will refer only to those who were pioneers in their field or who served professionally in a public office.

²Morris and Oscar Cox are the sons of Sarah and the late Jacob Cox.

³Members of the "Trojans" included Hyman Berenson, William Goodman, David Blumenthal, Harry Sacknoff, David Rosen, Abraham Goffin, Harry Cohen, Benjamin Levi, Herman Goffin, David Kriger and Harry Blumenthal. Herman Sivovlos was manager.

⁴In later years, Cyrus K. Briggs was active in soft ball. He organized the Soft Ball Association of Portland in 1933, and the State Soft Ball Association in 1935. Since 1945 he has served as State Commissioner of Soft Ball.

⁵Among the others were Bernard Abrams, H. Beckelman, Mitchell Bernstein, Saul Brenerman, Mitchell Cope, Benjamin Cox, Abraham Elowitch, Philip Erlick, Harry Finkelman, Henry Finks, Jack Finn, Harry Garon, Maurice Gerber, Morris Glovsky, Morris Greenberg, Sidney Greenberg, Carl Kopel, Sidney Levine, Sidney Miller, Eber Resnick, Robert Rosenberg, Jacob Rubinoff, David Schwartz, Hyman Shepard, David Shulman, Sam Shible, Bertram Silverman, William Silverman and Henry Troubh.

CHAPTER XVII

IN RETROSPECT

Having concluded our cursory survey of the rise of the Jewish community in Portland, Maine, we are now in a position to evaluate the course of its development, and to highlight those factors that have figured prominently. We will also indicate the most glaring lacunae and those problems which should engage the attention of future investigators.

From our present perspective, it may be unlikely that significant quantities of additional source material will be forthcoming in the near future, dealing with the prehistory and the early decades of the Jewish community. It appears that little attention was given to the preparation or preservation of records of early Jewish experiences. The only significant additions which may be expected are kernels of fact and details that can be culled from official public records, newspapers and other non-Jewish literary material. Unfortunately, limitations of time did not permit an exhaustive study of these sources.

It has been the author's conviction that for the period covering the last fifty years, the historians who follow him can expect to accumulate more significant quantities of source materials than he has had at his disposal. Several came to his attention after the preceding chapters had been written. They have not affected the general structure of fact that has been outlined in this study, but these and future finds may enable us to throw more light on obscure issues and personalities. At any rate, the preparation of this preliminary study will have proved worthwhile if it can spur not only individual students, but the community as a whole, to renewed efforts to uncover its old sources and preserve them for posterity.

Little information is at present available on Jewish life in Portland prior to the 1860's, and it may be safely assumed that although individual Jews may have lived here previously, no organized Jewish community had been founded. The Jewish community of Portland, to the best of our knowledge, was formed after the Civil War.

From all indications, the growth of the Jewish population pro-