

# **The United Nations Fraternity: Tau Delta Phi**

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Since the 1830s, the Greek letter system has been a dominating presence on college campuses in the United States. For young men and women, these student organizations provided housing, lasting friendships, social status, and membership into a network of powerful and influential people. However, despite the various social benefits and advantages offered by fraternities, many of these exclusive brotherhoods perpetuated both racial and religious discrimination on college campuses. Fueled by waves of immigration, both World Wars, and a rapid growth in those seeking higher education, fraternities quickly became a barrier that separated young men and women based on their racial, ethnic, or religious identities.

Between the years 1881 and 1924, there was an explosion of over two and a half million Jewish immigrants from various Central and Eastern European countries. These immigrants were driven from their native lands by threats of persecution as well as the scarcity of economic opportunity and mobility. Such economic difficulties were the result of the industrialization and urbanization of societies in the 19th century. Millions who struggled to even feed their families traveled across the Atlantic to what they hoped would be the "land of opportunity." Many Central and Eastern European Jews also sought refuge in the United States from political upheaval, including the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the formation of the Third Communist International two years later. In response to the surge of immigration into the U.S., the government imposed the National Origins Act of 1924, a quota limiting the number of immigrants that could be admitted into the country annually. This act would end an era of mass

migration into the United States. Despite their desires to escape persecution, Jewish immigrants began to be associated with the Communist movement in Russia, cultivating a strong sense of antisemitism towards the Jewish people in the United States. Combined with the threat that Jews posed to the social elite, together they would come to trigger the development of an increasingly anti-Semitic culture on college campuses and within their Greek letter systems.

As the population of the United States grew, so did student enrollment. In 1910, the total number of undergraduate students in post-secondary institutions summed to a mere 150,000. However, as World War I came to a close in 1918, the influx of immigrants as well as the return of the men and women who had chosen to set aside their educations and serve their country boosted enrollment numbers exponentially. In the span of less than 20 years, the population of undergraduate students in the United States had grown tremendously, reaching over one million young men and women. Jews, despite the financial and social hardships accompanied by immigrating to a foreign country, found themselves contributing significantly to that total sum. Ten percent of all college students in the United States identified themselves as Jewish. The growing population of qualified Jewish students pursuing higher education began to blur the lines that had once defined the social elite. In *Going Greek*, Marianne Sanua writes, "Merely being a college student was no longer automatically an indicator of high social status."<sup>1</sup> In attempt to maintain the White Anglo Saxon Protestant ideals and control the number of minority applicants, many prominent institutions set enrollment quotas, similar to the government-imposed limitations of the National Origins Act. Just as the National Origins Act was established to manage the flow of immigrants and preserve the cultural identity of the United States, admissions offices used quotas to check the number and type of applicant being admitted into their respective universities. Inquires of the student's religious affiliation on college applications

proved to be an effective method of identifying Jewish applicants. Many prestigious institutions such as Harvard used this information to enforce their quotas.

Colby College, however, was an exception. Throughout World War I and the years following, Colby College pursued a much more liberal and progressive approach to admissions. Unlike many other prominent institutions, the Colby admissions office did not require a student's religious affiliation during the application process. During a time when many universities feared for the preservation of their traditional WASP identities, Colby encouraged any qualified student to apply regardless of their financial or religious background. This ideology reflected the admissions procedures of Arthur J. Roberts, who served as President of Colby College from 1908 to 1927. He known for his personal, active involvement in the recruiting and enrollment of promising young men, some of who were Jewish, as well as his goal to make Colby College a place that was both appealing and accepting. In *Colby College: 1820 – 1925 An Account of It's Beginnings, Progress, and Service*, Edwin Carey Whitmore recounts, "A writer in the Echo said, as early as 1910, that 'the President had given to every Colby graduate, student, and sympathizer confidence in the college.'"<sup>2</sup> Franklin W. Johnson, president of Colby College from 1929 to 1942, continued to cultivate his predecessor's legacy of embracing Jewish students. From 1919 to 1941, records indicate that during President Roberts and President Johnson's time at the helm of Colby College, the enrollment of Jewish students grew at more than five times the rate of total annual enrollment.<sup>3</sup> However, despite their efforts for more progressive admissions policies and equal opportunity for young minorities seeking higher education, the social aspect of the college experience for these Jewish students was dictated by the fraternities of Colby College.

During the drastic shift in student enrollment of the early 1900's, fraternities experienced a period of rapid growth. Because of the tremendous increase in the student population, the

services and benefits that these organizations offered to its members were in greater demand. As a result, the number of fraternity chapters in the United States more than doubled, mirroring the influx of undergraduate enrollment. By the mid 1920's, roughly 35% of all male and female students in the United States belonged to a fraternity or sorority. However, due to the antisemitism fostered by World War I and the events of the interwar era, fraternities responded in a manner similar to that of many prominent post-secondary institutions as well as the United States. Having the opportunity to pursue higher education once stood as a symbol of social and economic status, separating the social elite from the lower class. But as a college education became more accessible and enrollment numbers grew, the preservation of the WASP ideals within higher education became more difficult. In response to the growing diversity in the student population, fraternities became progressively more and more exclusive. As the surge of an increasingly diverse applicant pool in college admissions had led to the imposing of enrollment quotas, the older American fraternities chose to tighten the discriminatory clauses in their national constitutions, denying memberships to Jews, Blacks, Asians, and other minorities. Alpha Tau Omega, a prestigious and established fraternity, was "founded at the close of the Civil War at the Virginia Military Institute by a group of young Confederate veterans, and consistent with Southern mores limited its membership to Christian whites, thereby barring blacks, Orientals, and Jews."<sup>4</sup> Such membership policies and any alterations in the membership clauses of many prominent brotherhoods made to increase exclusivity significantly impacted the Jewish student body and social atmosphere at Colby College.

In the early 19th century, Colby College was the proud home of several nationally recognized fraternities, none of whom had opened their doors and welcomed Jewish students into their midst. Though a select few Jewish students, such as Ludy and Pacy Levine, pledged some

of Colby's oldest and established fraternities, this was rare occurrence. Despite these isolated cases, Colby was not immune to the feelings of antisemitism being cultivated in the Greek letter system and college campuses across the country. For the Jewish student body, fraternities stood as a social barrier that segregated them from the white Christian majority that dominated Colby College. With the tightening of the national constitutions of these student organizations, fraternities denied membership to many Jewish students. Even fraternities that chose not to alter their national constitutions refused to pledge Jewish students in fear of the damage that such pledging practices would have on their reputation. Ernest C. Marriner, who served as Colby's Baptist historian during Arthur Robert's time as President, writes in his unpublished autobiography, "What I hoped for was the absorption of the Jewish students into the existing eight fraternities."<sup>5</sup> When his expectations failed to become a reality, Jewish students found themselves longing for the companionship, security, and camaraderie that fraternities offered its members. Fraternities had grown to become a domineering presence on the Colby campus. Not only did they provide their members with lasting relationships, comfortable housing, and social activities, these brotherhoods believed, above all else, in the assembly and communion of individuals of similar social standing, class, and status.

In response to the denial of such social opportunities to the Jewish student body, Julius Sussman, class of 1919, along with six of his Jewish peers informally organized Gamma Phi Epsilon during the fall of 1918. Since the beginning of the Greek letter system at Colby College, no existing student organization offered such opportunities to the minority student body. Julius Sussman and his Jewish classmates longed to fill that void which fraternities had satisfied for so many of their peers and the faculty saw reason in their pursuit. The following year, President Roberts and the Board of Trustees authorized the formation of Gamma Phi Epsilon. Marriner

recounts the reasoning behind the administration's support of Gamma Phi Epsilon. "If Jewish boys could not be admitted to the existing chapters, they should be allowed to have one of their own."<sup>5</sup> Although Gamma Phi Epsilon was able to gain approval of President Roberts and the Board of Trustees, the Student Council, also known as the Interfraternity Council, voted against the recognition of Gamma Phi Epsilon in the Greek letter system. The Interfraternity Council was composed of a student representative from each chapter and together they were responsible for determining whether or not recognition should be granted to any student organization aspiring to join the Greek letter system. Over the next decade, Gamma Phi Epsilon sought the recognition of the Interfraternity Council, and on five different occasions the Interfraternity Council voted unfavorably for Gamma Phi Epsilon and denied their request. Finally, on November 21, 1932, after 13 long years, this local fraternity solidified a six to two vote in favor of Gamma Phi Epsilon's recognition, entitling them to all the rights and privileges enjoyed by the other eight national chapters at Colby. The 1933 edition of *The Colby Oracle*, the college's yearbook, states, "The forerunner of the new chapter of Tau Delta Phi existed for fifteen years on the campus as a local fraternity, Gamma Phi Epsilon. Struggling against the difficulties confronting any local group, the organization survived many years of hardship and gained the final step on its upward climb by receiving official college recognition this past fall."<sup>6</sup> The faculty and student body's joint recognition of Gamma Phi Epsilon and Gamma Phi Epsilon's assimilation into Tau Delta Phi and their ideals signified the acceptance and approval of a creed that was unique to Colby College's Greek letter system.

Following their acceptance into Colby's Greek letter system, the Jewish men of Gamma Phi Epsilon sought to affiliate themselves with a nationally recognized brotherhood. However, their objective was to find a nonsectarian fraternity rather than an exclusively Jewish organization.

Members of the fraternity, along with the administration and faculty, felt that the future of Gamma Phi Epsilon was as a brotherhood uninvolved and unrelated to any specific religious sect. Ernest Marriner shared their vision and felt that "Colby should not foster that kind of segregation, that we did not want a Baptist fraternity nor a Knights of Columbus fraternity any more than we wanted a Jewish fraternity."<sup>5</sup> The recognition of a strictly Jewish fraternity would only perpetuate the segregation and discrimination from which these Jewish students had sought refuge. Maurice Jacobs, the executive secretary of Phi Epsilon Pi, a prominent nonsectarian fraternity, was charged with the responsibility of scouting out institutions potentially suitable for beginning a new chapter. In a 1932 report, Jacobs writes, "Colby College has given these boys a list of five National Jewish fraternities which will be permitted on the Colby Campus. The fraternities are Phi Epsilon Pi, Tau Delta Phi, ZBT, SAM, and Phi Sigma Delta. Consideration has been narrowed down to two fraternities, our own and Tau Delta Phi."<sup>7</sup> Tau Delta Phi, very similarly to Phi Epsilon Pi, was a nonsectarian fraternity where neither race nor religion were factors of membership. It was because of their nonsectarian principles that Tau Delta Phi and Phi Epsilon Pi remained in consideration. On February 11, 1933, Gamma Phi Epsilon officially announced their affiliation as a nationally recognized chapter of Tau Delta Phi with the approval of the President Johnson, the administration, and the Interfraternity Council.

Despite Tau Delta Phi's general acknowledgement and nonsectarian foundation, Colby's Jewish students were the only ones interested in pledging and becoming a member of this new fraternity. Due to the stigma surrounding Jews and sense of antisemitism remaining from the post World War I era, communing with Jewish student was perceived as undesirable. During a period when their actions were both uncommon and unpopular amongst their colleagues, both President Roberts and President Johnson, as well as their respective faculty, chose to support

rather than alienate the Jewish student body. Their progressive meritocratic approach to student enrollment and their pursuit of social equality amongst Colby students were guiding forces to the hard fought acceptance of Gamma Phi Epsilon and influential to their affiliation with the Tau Delta Phi fraternity.

World War II, which broke out in 1939 and was resolved in 1945, had a significant yet different impact on the relationship between minorities and fraternities. Since the explosion of fraternity activity and involvement during the interwar years, this generation of men and women had been divided by their social status, class, race, religion, and Greek letter affiliation. However, as young Americans across the U.S. were called into service, fraternities and their senses of brotherhood were tested as they extended past the physical boundaries of college campuses. Marianne Sanua shares, "For the men, even though the system as such almost ceased to function and scores of fraternity houses were taken over by the armed forces to quarter men in campus military training programs, fraternal bonds and friendships reached perhaps the apogee of their strength."<sup>1</sup> However, unlike World War I, World War II had a unifying effect for its participants, including Jews. Lester Jolovitz, a member of Colby's class of 1939 and the Tau Delta Phi fraternity, served in active duty following his graduation. Jolovitz shared a vivid memory from his tour in Africa, he was asked to translate between an English speaking doctor and a young wounded French soldier. "The doctor said to me, or the officer who happened to be the doctor, if I was French, and I said, 'No, I'm Jewish.' And at that time, this young man, who ... of course didn't know anybody, was away from family and couldn't speak the language, his face lit up and said, 'You Jewish? Me Jewish.'"<sup>8</sup> Twenty years prior, identifying yourself as a Jew was extremely rare for fear of discrimination in an increasingly antisemitic culture. This anecdote demonstrates the ways in which the war crumbled social and racial barriers that once

had been the norm for many Jews and other minorities.

With the conclusion of World War II, the focus of segregation and discrimination seemed to shift away from religious affiliation to racial differences. Jews and other minorities had willingly laid down their lives for the protection and service of their country. Yet the very country that they had bled for and died to protect would not even acknowledge them equals, granting them full rights. This sense of guilt and immorality temporarily reduced the social barriers that had divided Americans for decades. Sanua observes, "After generations of taken-for-granted strict segregation by religion, race and class, sometimes de facto and sometimes de jure, a complex variety of factors and historical forces caused a post war movement to far greater democratization of American social and educational institutions."<sup>1</sup> One such factor that shifted the scope of discrimination from Jews to racial minorities was the Civil Rights Movement. The target of discrimination and segregation transferred to African Americans leaving the Jewish people in a unique predicament. Sanua writes, "great pressure was placed on them, from both within and without the Jewish community, to go along with what appeared to be the longed-for dawning of a new day in America."<sup>1</sup> For Jews, the change in the focus of discrimination was a long awaited relief and would economically and socially benefit the Jewish community. However, their alleviation resulted in the weight and scope of cultural injustices and inequality being transferred onto African Americans and women.

At Colby College, its minority student body responded to the shift in discrimination and was an influential presence during this period of social change, participating actively in both the Civil Rights and Equal Rights Movement. Jacqueline Nunez, a member of the class of 1961 and Chi Omega sorority, proposed that Colby College take a firm stance against discrimination in an article she wrote in the Colby Echo relating to the discriminatory membership policies of

fraternities and sororities on campus. Despite being a member of Chi Omega, Jacqueline's plea for equality, which would come to be known as the "Nunez Proposal," put the entire Greek letter system into question. In *The Strider Years*, Ernest C. Marriner records, "An anti-fraternity movement that swept the country was felt at Colby. It was the civil rights movement that set off an anti-fraternity crusade. Discrimination against minority groups, denying them membership in many fraternities, became intolerable to the civil rights supporters, and many young people were deeply stirred by that cause."<sup>4</sup> In 1962, the Board of Trustees and President Strider approved the motion reading that no fraternity, sorority, or student organization can select their members based on criteria pertaining to their race, religious identity, or national origins. The exclusivity and elitist ideologies that many of Colby's fraternities perpetuated had been done so by membership, and through the leadership of Jacqueline Nunez, it became increasingly difficult for fraternities to maintain the high social class and status that fraternities had traditionally stood for.

For the students of Colby College during the 1960s and early '70s, they believed that their mandate was a effect change in the world. Colby graduate ('69) and Tau Delta Phi president, Charlie Miller, explains simply that it was "our obligation to fix the world. Our generation's obligation was to fix the world."<sup>9</sup> Amidst the Black Campus movement that was swept through U.S. post secondary institutions, nineteen African American Colby students occupied Lorimer Chapel on March, 1970, in protest. Frustrated by the enrollment policies of President Strider and his administration and emboldened by the rampant civil unrest, the students of Colby College felt it was time to be proactive in their desires to inflict change. Ellie Miller, wife of Charlie Miller and Colby graduate ('70), shares her involvement during this historic take over. "It was a time where black students said this has to be done by us. You can support us from the outside but you can't come in and you can't be part of this and they shut themselves in. And one of my very good

friends, Carlie Terrell, who was very involved in that, I made a pot of chicken soup and brought it up."<sup>9</sup> Charles Terrell was an African American Tau Delta Phi brother of Charlie Miller.

Tau Delta Phi's involvement during this time of racial tension was extremely influential. Tau Delta Phi's ideals appealed to students seeking membership into an organization that disregarded their racial or religious identities. Because their ideology attracted such a large number of Colby's minority students, it is no surprise that their members were not only active but took leadership roles during this movement on campus. As Tau Delt Phi had been a haven for minorities, such as Jews when they were considered undesirable, Tau Delta Phi continued to play that role in the 1960s and '70s.

Tau Delta Phi's doctrine, opposed to the other nationally recognized fraternities at Colby College, encouraged a diversity amongst its pledges and members, not only religiously but racially and ethnically as well. Just as Tau Delta Phi had been a sanctuary of sorts for Jews when they were unwanted and excluded, its governing ideologies appealed to minorities at Colby College throughout the years following the World War II. Harold Kowal, a Tau Delta Phi president and Colby graduate of the Class of 1965, shares, "It was frequently referred to as the United Nations fraternity. Not the Jewish fraternity, but the United Nations fraternity because we probably had the most liberal group acceptance of people at Colby. We had I think only one black student at Colby in the early sixties, Jimmy Johnson. He was Tau Delt."<sup>10</sup> The reputation as the "United Nations" fraternity is clear during this time of great racial tension. Tau Delta Phi took in African Americans who were experiencing similar forms of discrimination and segregation that the Jews had endured. And even into the 1960s, despite the shift in the focus of discrimination and segregation, Jews were not immune to the racial and religious divide. Harold Kowal shares his rushing experience and his encounter with another fraternity on campus.

I had become friendly with a lot of the fellows who were on the varsity basketball team, who all happened to belong to the Lambda Chi fraternity house ... The president of that fraternity ... met with me one day and said that they were very interested in my rushing their fraternity house. And I said I was very interested in doing that because I liked the guys that I had met. But he told me there was going to be a problem with it ... He said, "Well, we're not allowed to admit Jews as members of the fraternity."<sup>10</sup>

Despite the social progress that Jews experienced following World War II, Colby's Jewish students were still very much considered as minorities within the Greek letter system. Tau Delta Phi, however, welcomed Harold Kowal into their brotherhood where he flourished into a prominent student who excelled academically and athletically. Even following the passing of the Nunez Proposal, it is clear that discriminatory membership policies were still in affect. This would be a pivotal factor in Colby College's decision to disband the Greek letter system in the early 1980s.

Since the dawn of higher education in the United States, fraternities have played a central role in the college and post graduate experience for many students. Despite the services and advantages that the Greek letter system provided for a large portion of the student body, fraternities were not exempt from an increasingly antisemitic culture ensuing an era of mass migration and World War I. Similarly to college admissions offices and the United States government, fraternities established restrictive policies to increase exclusivity in hopes of preserving the WASP origins and values that had defined the social elite. Colby College's local fraternity, Gamma Phi Epsilon, was the spawn of the religious and racial segregation dividing the student body. Gamma Phi Epsilon went on and affiliated themselves with the nationally recognized, nonsectarian brotherhood, Tau Delta Phi, whose "United Nations" reputation would

be a beacon for those in Colby College's minority student body seeking the fraternity experience. Even following World War II and the shift in the focus of social inequality, Tau Delta Phi continued to welcome those who were seen by the other fraternities as unfit to commune with. Playing leadership roles in the civil rights movement of Colby's campus, the minority members of Tau Delta Phi were an influential presence. Tau Delta Phi, which was founded as a result of the social dissension and segregation dividing the student body, would become a driving source of social change and equality for minorities at Colby College.

## Works Cited

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- <sup>8</sup> Transcription of Oral Interview with Lester Jolovitz.
- <sup>9</sup> Transcription of Oral Interview with Charlie and Ellie Miller.
- <sup>10</sup> Transcription of Oral Interview with Harold Kowal.