

**A Time to Build Up and a Time to Break Down:  
The Jewish Secular Institutions of Portland, Maine**

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## Introduction

As a child growing up in the suburbs of Portland, Maine, I never felt different from my classmates until one day in fourth grade my friend told me, “My mother says you can never trust a Jew.” Confused and hurt by my friend’s words, I stared at her, unable to come up with a retort for such a baseless attack. For the first time in my life, I understood that being Jewish made me different. I noticed how few of my classmates celebrated Hanukkah or Passover and how many of them went to church on Sunday mornings. Although I was one of only four Jews in my graduating high school class, thankfully I never felt ostracized or marginalized. I simply had to separate my school life from my Jewish life. During the week, I was just another student at Cape Elizabeth High School, but on Sundays, I became part of a vibrant and welcoming community at my synagogue’s Hebrew school. While my Jewish experience formed a large part of my identity, most of my high school friends were unaware that a Jewish community existed in Maine, a state that is ninety-seven percent white and the most homogeneous in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Upon entering college, I was surprised to meet many more Jewish students than I had expected. I no longer felt so different, yet I still received incredulous looks when I told people that I was a Jew from Portland, Maine. As others marvelled at the presence of a Jewish community in Portland, I, too, began to wonder about the origins of Portland Jewry.

In the process of uncovering the past of the small, yet forceful, Portland Jewish community, I discovered that little written history existed on the Portland Jews.<sup>2</sup> I thus

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<sup>1</sup>United States Census, 2000

<sup>2</sup>In 1955, Benjamin Band wrote a book called Portland Jewry: Its Growth and Development, which provides a wealth of factual data about the growth of the Portland Jewish community up through 1950. In 1976, Dr. Konnilyn G. Feig of the University of Southern Maine, in conjunction with the Jewish Federation of Portland, conducted a series of forty-four interviews with prominent Portland Jews entitled Portraits of the Past. While these oral histories contain a treasure trove of information that has been helpful in writing this thesis, once again, no comprehensive analysis of modern Portland Jewish history has been conducted. In 2000, Michael

embarked on an examination of the modern Portland Jewish community. This resultant study marks the first time that the story of Portland Jewry's secular institutional life has been told. By telling the story of this community, I hope to make two significant contributions to the field of American Jewish history. First, exploring the development of the Jewish community in Portland leads to a critical understanding of what it means to be an ethnic and religious minority in a small, homogeneous city like Portland. Second, because the study of American Jewish trends is usually based on communities in larger cities, the general historiography lacks analysis of smaller Jewish communities. Studies of small Jewish communities like Portland, Maine are crucial to providing a fuller picture of American Jewish history. I will attempt to place the Portland Jewish community's experience in the larger context of American Jewish history. While the evolution of the Portland Jewish community reflected national trends, it also departed from these trends at critical moments that highlight the unique experiences of small Jewish communities.

First incorporated as a town in 1786, and later as a city in 1832, Portland is a seaport and maritime center located on the Atlantic coast in Southern Maine. Portland achieved its status as a major seaport by the end of the eighteenth century and experienced subsequent economic prosperity and population growth due to its shipping industry and trade with foreign ports. By 1930, Portland's population had grown to 70,810 as a result of heavy immigration, and approximately half of the city's residents were foreign-born or had foreign-born parents. The largest percentage of these immigrants came from the French regions of Canada, while a great number were also of Irish, Scottish or English descent. In

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Cohen wrote a senior thesis at Brown University entitled Jerusalem of the North that analyzes religious modernization in Portland's Jewish community between 1860 and 1950.

1930, Jews comprised less than ten percent of Portland's immigrant community.<sup>3</sup>

Although records indicate the presence of individual Jews in Portland as early as the eighteenth century, an identifiable Jewish community did not begin to form in Portland until the 1870s, when a group of East European Jewish immigrants founded a cemetery and B'nai B'rith Lodge. In 1883, Portland Jews were of sufficient number to establish two Orthodox shuls. Because the Jewish community was comprised almost entirely of Orthodox East European Jews, Portland became known as the "Jerusalem of the North." The community grew from 2,000 Jews in 1912 to 3,000 in 1920. While most community members initially worked as peddlers and shopkeepers, Portland Jews quickly achieved professional and economic success. By the 1930s, many college-educated Jewish professionals resided in Portland, determined to create a place for themselves in a city that excluded Jews from most of its civic, cultural, and social institutions.

Beginning in 1938, with the establishment of the Jewish Community Center, Portland Jews embarked on a path of institution building that resulted in a strong network of internal organizations. Prior to World War II, the major waves of Jewish immigration to the United States had ended and the second generation of American Jews sought to leave behind their parents' immigrant past and become equal players in American society. Instead of easily integrating into mainstream America, however, Jews encountered discrimination in housing, education, employment, and social life. Anti-Jewish sentiment caused Jews to turn inward and develop their own communal resources. Rather than trying to push societal boundaries prior to World War II, American Jews focused on the internal strength of their communities.

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<sup>3</sup>Michael R. Cohen, Jerusalem of the North: An Analysis of Religious Modernization in Portland, Maine's Jewish Community, 1860-1950 (Providence: Brown University, 2000).



In the late 1930s, Jewish community centers throughout the United States became the principal vehicles to achieve internal strength. Now some Jews identified with other Jews through secular instead of religious institutions in order to achieve a sense of communal identity. The traditional rituals of the Orthodox synagogue appeared strange to Gentiles and emphasized the foreign heritage of American-born Jews. Thus, rather than identifying with other Jews through religious institutions, these Jews attempted to maintain a cohesive community by focusing on their ethnic commonalities. According to historian Nathan Glazer, the Jewish center ideal was based on the assumption that Jewish life could be maintained without Judaism.<sup>4</sup> This desire for a secular lifestyle highlighted a central paradox of American Jewish life. How could Jews maintain a sense of Jewish identity while integrating as fully as possible into American life? The Jewish Community Center (JCC) allowed members to identify themselves as Jewish without having to espouse specific religious beliefs. While the initial goal of the JCCs had been to help immigrant Jews adapt to life in America, by the late 1930s, the focus shifted to providing recreational and cultural activities that mimicked the activities of Gentiles in America.

When World War II started, Jews had just begun the process of strengthening their communities by creating Jewish secular institutions. The war proved, however, to be a watershed for American Jewry. The post-World War II era was characterized by increased affluence and upward social mobility for America's Jews as they took advantage of a decline in anti-Semitism and increased economic opportunity. Because most Americans after World War II associated anti-Semitism with Hitler and Naziism, obvious anti-Jewish sentiment became unacceptable in American society. Furthermore, personal contact between Jewish and Gentile servicemen during the war allowed Jews to begin to integrate into American life. In addition, the G.I. Bill enabled many Jewish servicemen to receive a

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<sup>4</sup>Nathan Glazer, American Judaism, second edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 89.

college education after World War II, resulting in an increase in the number of Jewish professionals. American Jewry shifted from being a predominantly working-class community to a professional and business-oriented group of people. Through their newfound professional prominence, Jews formed business relationships with Gentiles, thereby furthering the integration process. According to historian Will Herberg, the post-war generation of American Jews emerged as a secure and confident community, able to establish its Jewishness by virtue of being American, not in spite of it. In other words, American society allowed Jews to become more integrated while still maintaining a sense of Jewishness.<sup>5</sup> The community's challenge would be to enter mainstream society while continuing to keep Jewish communal life alive.<sup>6</sup>

In order to solidify their new middle-class status, many Jews relocated from the cities to the suburbs. As they left areas of residential concentration in the cities, they came into increased contact with Gentiles and in the process began to conform to the values of their non-Jewish neighbors. Some historians assert that Jews moved to the suburbs specifically because they wanted to become more American.<sup>7</sup> Nathan Glazer argues that suburbanization was a distinctly American phenomenon linked to a post-war economic and social shift in American culture. This new American society was characterized by a canon of values based upon the notion of "respectability." When Jews moved to the suburbs, they adopted this new value structure as a means of improving their social status among non-Jews, who now comprised, on average, over fifty percent of their neighbors, as

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<sup>5</sup>Will Herberg, Protestant - Catholic - Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday and Company, 1960), p. 198.

<sup>6</sup>Arthur Hertzberg, The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), p. 315.

<sup>7</sup>See, for example, Will Herberg, Protestant - Catholic - Jew, p. 189.

compared with less than twenty-five percent in the cities.<sup>8</sup> While historians such as Herberg and Glazer argue that Jews wanted to integrate into the mainstream as fully as possible, historian Deborah Dash Moore contends that Jews chose suburbia and homeownership reluctantly. When they did move to the suburbs, they tried to replicate their urban experience by looking for convenience in location and for social and cultural opportunities. Furthermore, Moore cites the fact that Jews remained residentially segregated in the suburbs as evidence of their desire to remain as Jewish as possible in a predominantly Gentile community.<sup>9</sup> Regardless of their motivations for moving to the suburbs, the exodus enabled Jews to achieve middle-class status, improving their chances of entering the social mainstream.

Throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, however, a “gentleman’s agreement” mentality characterized social relations between Jews and Gentiles. While the two groups interacted on a professional level, all social contact ceased at five o’clock when the work day ended. Country clubs and fraternal organizations remained closed to Jews, as did the executive boards of most civic and cultural institutions. Secular Jewish communal institutions thrived because Jews were forced to create their own social and cultural opportunities. Jewish community centers across the country provided a wealth of programming in an effort to provide a safe and comfortable environment for Jews of all religious affiliations. According to historian Jacob Rader Marcus, “The importance of the center lies in its desire to serve the community as a whole; it is an all-embracing, unifying

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<sup>8</sup>Nathan Glazer, American Judaism, pp. 117 -118.

<sup>9</sup>Deborah Dash Moore, “At Home in America,” in Jonathan D. Sarna, ed., The American Jewish Experience (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986), p. 261.

force.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, JCCs served to unify and strengthen Jewish communities in the face of ongoing discrimination and enable Jews to participate in the same activities as their Gentile neighbors, although in a separate arena. Wealthier Jewish communities even founded their own country clubs. As Marcus states, “With the coming of the automobiles and good roads, Jews, like their Gentile counterparts, turned to golf and tennis. . . In some communities, the Jewish country club was originally set up as an extension of an existing city club; like the Gentiles, the Jews wanted to play their eighteen holes of golf. . .”<sup>11</sup> Jews tried their utmost to mimic the customs of non-Jews, even if they were unable to participate directly in Gentile American life.

American Jews took part in the religious revival that swept the country as part of the shift towards a more “respectable” post-war society. Because religious affiliation became an acceptable means of group identification after World War II, Jews took advantage of this characteristically American religious pattern. With the post-war “revival” of Judaism, the number of synagogues grew rapidly, as did the number of children enrolled in some form of Jewish education. In 1930 only twenty percent of American Jews were affiliated with a synagogue, but by 1960 that number had tripled to sixty percent.<sup>12</sup> During this period, membership in the Conservative movement nearly doubled, the Reform movement experienced significant growth, and Orthodoxy continued to flourish. Despite this evidence of an increase in religious affiliation among American Jews, the revival was more ethnic than religious in nature. American Jews built a multitude of synagogues after World War II, yet

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<sup>10</sup>Jacob Rader Marcus, United States Jewry 1776-1985, Vol. IV (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), p. 797.

<sup>11</sup>Jacob Rader Marcus, United States Jewry, p. 795.

<sup>12</sup>Gerald Sorin, Tradition Transformed: The Jewish Experience in America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 199.

religious practice in many of these synagogues was secondary to recreational and cultural activities that met the social and communal needs of Jews in much the same way as the Jewish community centers.<sup>13</sup>

By the early 1960s, the American Jewish “revival” had ended, as evidenced by a decline in Jewish school enrollments after 1962. Despite the end of the religious revival, Jews as a group continued to adopt American norms in hopes of gaining wider social access. By the late 1960s, almost forty percent of American Jews were employed as managers or administrators, a rate three times that of the general population. Twenty-nine percent of Jewish men worked in professional positions, as did twenty-four percent of Jewish women.<sup>14</sup> Despite their economic and professional success, American Jews had yet to attain social status equal to that of their non-Jewish neighbors. Most Jews still experienced some level of social discomfort in Gentile-dominated situations. According to Hertzberg, the Jews comprised the only group in America with a social prestige lower than their income level.<sup>15</sup>

In order to obtain wider social access, Jews tried to play a more active role in city culture. By the late 1960s in most larger cities, American Jews occupied prominent positions on the executive boards of civic, cultural, and financial institutions. Through these positions, they established relationships with prominent leaders in the Gentile community that improved their social status. Jews focused on achieving equality for themselves, while they also worked to achieve social justice for other minority groups. Moore argues that the “essence of Judaism is the struggle for universal justice and human brotherhood.” While

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<sup>13</sup>Hertzberg, The Jews in America, p. 324.

<sup>14</sup>Sorin, Tradition Transformed, p. 206.

<sup>15</sup>Hertzberg, The Jews in America, p. 353.

Moore presents an idealistic view of the religion, an integral relationship existed between liberalism and Judaism.<sup>16</sup> Jews directed this liberal sensibility towards the Civil Rights movement, in which they worked particularly hard to achieve social equality for African Americans. According to Hertzberg, Jews played a larger role in the push for black equality than any other white group.<sup>17</sup> For example, Jews were instrumental in the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and black and Jewish clergy worked together to attack restrictive housing covenants. Although Jews no doubt felt some affinity for blacks because they too had suffered from discrimination, Gerald Sorin argues that the partnership between Jews and blacks was not really a “comradeship of excluded peoples.” Rather, it developed out of the Jewish tradition of seeking justice for the oppressed. Furthermore, Jews found a meaningful role for themselves in American society by working to combat discrimination.<sup>18</sup>

Just as Jews fought for social equality for blacks, they were unwilling to accept their own exclusion from Gentile society. As a group, American Jewry employed two main tactics for fighting discrimination in the 1960s: education and the law. Jewish community centers and synagogues across the country conducted programs to educate both Jews and non-Jews in their communities about the effects of prejudice and the ways to combat stereotypical attitudes. From a legal perspective, Jews lobbied the courts and various legislative bodies to outlaw discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations, and fraternal organizations. The Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, the American Jewish Congress, and the American Jewish Committee led much of this push to end legal

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<sup>16</sup>Moore in Sarna, ed., The American Jewish Experience, p. 265.

<sup>17</sup>Hertzberg, The Jews in America, p. 348.

<sup>18</sup>Sorin, Tradition Transformed, p. 210.

discrimination. Because American Jews had developed strong institutional structures in earlier decades, they knew how to use organizational power to achieve their goals. While many of the battles were long and hard-fought, by the end of the 1960s, American Jews had succeeded in legally overcoming most official exclusionary policies.

American Jews no doubt benefitted from their increasingly solid status as American citizens, yet their integration into mainstream society also created new challenges. Jews had to learn how to balance their American and Jewish identities in a manner that enabled them to feel both integrated and distinctive at the same time. According to historian Stuart Svonkin, the central paradox in post-war American Jewish life was that even as Jews felt more “at home in America,” they still felt “uneasy at home.”<sup>19</sup> As Jews experienced higher degrees of assimilation, they struggled to understand its implications for them as members of the Jewish community. The Six Day War in 1967 renewed American Jews’ sense of their Jewishness, and forced them to examine the evolution of their community. The threat to Israel shook the very foundations of Jewish identity and renewed the fear of another genocide. This fear caused Jews to confront their repressed Holocaust memories and in turn shift their focus away from general social causes and towards the cause of Jewish survival and unity. The Six Day War emphasized the sense of aloneness and distinctiveness felt by Jews, and forced them to confront the factors that threatened to undermine their cohesiveness as a community.

In the early 1970s, the American Jewish community began to seriously evaluate the consequences of assimilation. Since Jews became increasingly integrated into the societal mainstream, the need for exclusively Jewish communal institutions declined. According to historians Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, distinctiveness enables ethnic groups to endure. Thus, when a group no longer occupies a unique position in society, it loses its

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<sup>19</sup>Stuart Svonkin, Jews Against Prejudice (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 8.

cohesive force.<sup>20</sup> With assimilation, American Jews no longer had to rely on each other for social and cultural outlets, causing Jewish community centers across the country to decline in strength. Furthermore, historian Gary A. Tobin asserts that the mass adoption of American norms and values by Jews resulted in a breakdown of the barriers between Jews and Gentiles, thereby making Jews less distinct.<sup>21</sup> High percentages of intermarriage and low birth rates combined with this loss of distinctiveness to pose a serious threat to the survival of American Judaism. In 1965 only nine percent of Jews intermarried, yet by 1990 that number had jumped to fifty-two percent. As the communal institutions lost their central role in the American Jewish community and Jews became more assimilated, American Jews were forced to reexamine their Jewish identity and determine what they needed to sustain a vibrant community in the face of increasing assimilation.

Most of the research in the field of American Jewish history relies on Jewish communities in large metropolitan centers, although a few studies of small-town Jewish communities provide useful insight into the situation of the Portland Jews. Between twenty and twenty-five percent of East European Jewish immigrants to America settled in towns and cities with less than 100,000 residents.<sup>22</sup> Given that nearly a quarter of Jews in America settled in smaller communities, it is important to understand how the experience of

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<sup>20</sup>Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, Jews and the New American Scene (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 51.

<sup>21</sup>Gary A. Tobin, "The Future of the American Jewish Community," in Earl Raab, ed., American Jews in the 21st Century: A Leadership Challenge, as part of Ernest S. Frerichs, Calvin Goldscheider, Alan Zuckerman, eds., "Brown Studies on Jews and their Societies," Brown University Program in Judaic Studies (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1991), p. 51.

<sup>22</sup>Ewa Morawska, Insecure Prosperity: Small-Town Jews in Industrial America, 1890-1940 (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. xiv.



small-town Jews differed from those in large urban centers. According to historian Ewa Morawska, who researched the history of the Jewish community in the coal-mining town of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, Jews in small towns lived in social and cultural environments that constrained rather than induced change. Such change came slowly to these communities due to remoteness from metropolitan centers, an undifferentiated economic base, and a small number of Jewish residents. These three factors apply in some respects to Portland Jewry, making Morawska's schematic for analyzing small Jewish communities useful in understanding the situation of Portland Jews.

Judith Goldstein's study of the city of Bangor in northern Maine also proves useful in analyzing the development of Portland Jewry. The small Jewish community in Bangor relied on personal professional contact, tokenism, and the occasional organized effort to combat discrimination, all elements that were present in Portland. Goldstein's study also provides helpful analysis about what it means to be a Jew in Maine, a state whose "history strikes many people as magically removed from the most troublesome aspects of American life and history." Goldstein argues that although Maine Jews did not experience some of the downfalls of immigrant life in large cities, they certainly struggled with "the competing forces of mobility, aspiration, and privilege."<sup>23</sup>

As members of a small Jewish community, Portland Jews experienced unique challenges that they surmounted in their own individual ways. This work will trace the development of the modern Portland Jewish community, beginning in 1938, and attempt to determine how it finally achieved social integration. By studying the growth and subsequent decline of Portland's secular Jewish institutions, I seek to understand what enabled a small, initially Orthodox community in a homogeneous city to create a Jewish community far stronger than its numbers would suggest. What motivating factors led to the

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<sup>23</sup>Judith Goldstein, Crossing Lines: Histories of Jews and Gentiles in Three Communities (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1992), pp. 13-14.

creation of these institutions, and what did Portland Jews hope to achieve? Like their counterparts elsewhere, Portland Jews experienced social exclusion, which caused them to turn inward to create a vibrant social life for themselves. The strength and unity that they developed through these institutions ultimately enabled Portland Jews to combat discrimination and to make a place for themselves in the non-Jewish community. What mechanisms, legal or otherwise, did they use to break down these barriers? The following pages document the extent to which the changes in the Portland Jewish community reflected broad trends in American Jewish life. For the most part, the development of Portland's secular Jewish institutions was indicative of the general patterns of Jewish institutional life in America. At the same time, the small size of the Jewish community, combined with the state of Maine's geographic and cultural isolation, forced Portland Jews to be more self-reliant than Jews in larger communities. Such self-reliance is reflected in the resourcefulness they brought to institution-building and to the fight for acceptance. Although Gentiles had been slow to accept them, Portland Jews did eventually achieve their goal of becoming more "American." The price of integration, however, was the eventual decline of the robust institutions the Jewish community had worked so hard to build.

## Chapter 1

### The Flourishing Of Jewish Communal Institutions, 1938-1945

The Jewish community in Portland has always been cohesive due to both its small size and its relative lack of diversity. Portland Jews used this cohesiveness to their advantage by establishing a number of strong secular Jewish institutions beginning in the late 1930s. What were the motivating factors behind the creation of these institutions and what did Portland Jews hope to achieve? The answer lies partly in the Jewish community's desire to protect itself and to provide Jews with services unavailable to them in Gentile society. In addition to the need to create a safe and comfortable environment, Portland Jews also sought to find a place for themselves in the non-Jewish community. This task would prove difficult in a small homogeneous community like Portland that still held firmly to its Yankee Protestant tradition.

This position of Jews in the city of Portland can be understood by looking at their early immigration patterns. The first Jewish settlement in Maine was established in Bangor around 1830 by a group of German Jewish immigrants, who founded the Bangor Hebrew Center.<sup>1</sup> Shortly thereafter, the group established Ahawas Achim, the first Jewish congregation in the state. While most American communities experienced waves of both German and East European Jewish immigration, there is little evidence of a German Jewish community in Portland like that established in Bangor. The East European Jewish community, in contrast, began to take shape in Portland in the 1860s. In 1866, a small number of Jewish peddlers of East European descent arrived in Portland. Although they initially found little opportunity in Portland, the economic situation in Portland soon changed due to a catastrophic occurrence. A large fire engulfed the city on July 4, 1866,

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<sup>1</sup>Sources differ as to the exact date of its founding.

destroying 1,800 buildings and leaving 10,000 people homeless. The city incurred six million dollars worth of property damage, and lost many of its civic buildings and businesses. East European Jewish peddlers took advantage of the economic opportunity created after the fire by selling their wares and began to settle in larger numbers. Because a majority of the Jews who settled in Portland were of either Russian or Polish descent, they comprised a relatively homogeneous community.<sup>2</sup>

The first evidence of a formal Jewish community in the city of Portland appeared in 1874, when a group established a Jewish cemetery and B'nai B'rith Lodge. The community grew quickly and by 1878, 185 Jews, mostly of East European heritage, had settled in Portland. In the 1880s, America experienced a new wave of Jewish immigration and the Portland Jewish community grew once more. As in previous decades, most of the Jews who settled in Portland were of East European descent and many came from similar social and economic backgrounds. The residential settlement patterns of Portland Jews further enhanced the unity and homogeneity of the community. As is the case with most immigrant groups, Jewish immigrants in Portland chose to live near one another. They initially settled in the Middle Street section of Portland, where nearby Fore Street was called "Jew Town" in reference to the large number of pawnshops and second-hand stores in the vicinity. Later, Jews moved up to the Munjoy Hill section of Portland, also known as "Nigger Hill" because of the large number of blacks in the neighborhood.<sup>3</sup>

In 1883, Portland Jews founded two Orthodox shuls: Beth Judah and Shaarith Israel. The lack of a German Jewish contingent in Portland meant that the Orthodox

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<sup>2</sup>Michael R. Cohen, Jerusalem of the North: An Analysis of Religious Modernization in Portland, Maine's Jewish Community, 1860-1950 (Providence, Rhode Island: Brown University, 2000).

<sup>3</sup>Compiled by workers of the Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Maine, Portland City Guide (Portland: The Forest City Printing Company, 1940), p. 61.

synagogues had no competition from the German Reform synagogues that were established in larger, more diverse Jewish communities. This further solidified the unity of Portland Jews, although some tension did exist between the two shuls. While those in Beth Judah feared interaction with Gentile society and held firmly to their Jewish identity, Bernard Aaronson, the founder of Shaarith Israel, espoused more progressive ideas. According to historian Michael Cohen, "Aaronson looked to shed the traditional image of the pious, socially isolated Jew and convince Portland's wider community that local Jews were willing to adapt their Judaism to the new American context."<sup>4</sup> Despite the Jews' recent immigration and social exclusion, a faction of Portland Jewry espoused a rhetoric of Americanism as early as the 1880s. While it would take more than half a century to shed the image of the socially isolated Jew, the desire to adapt to American society played a large role during the movement to develop Jewish communal institutions that began in the late 1930s.

The similar backgrounds of most Portland Jews caused economic as well as religious homogeneity within the community. Because Portland was isolated from large cities, most Jews who came to the city found their way to Maine through a personal network. Although most of these Jews worked as peddlers and shopkeepers, Portland Jews rapidly achieved economic stability. Phil Levinsky, owner of Levinsky's clothing store in Portland, recounts a common immigrant story. His grandfather came to Portland before the turn of the century, most likely from Moscow, and worked as a peddler, buying army surplus from the nearby fort and selling it to members of the community. Mr. Levinsky's father, Jacob, who was born in Portland in 1897, began to help his father as soon as he was old enough. In 1919, after selling army surplus out of a barn for a number of years, Mr. Levinsky's father and grandfather bought a building on 278 Congress Street in Portland

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<sup>4</sup>Cohen, Jerusalem of the North.

and opened an army surplus store. The store soon prospered, and when Mr. Levinsky went to work there in the late 1940s, his father had become a multimillionaire. Under the direction of father and son, Levinsky's Army Navy Store eventually became a twenty million dollar business that still stands on Congress Street today.<sup>5</sup>

Along with such retail success, many second-generation American Jews in Portland became college-educated professionals.<sup>6</sup> The Bernstein family, one of the most respected Jewish families in the city, provides a prime example of the rapid success of Portland Jews. Abraham Bernstein and his wife, Sarah, came to Portland from Kovno Gubernia, Russia, in the 1880s. Although Abraham Bernstein was a leader in the Jewish community and one of the founders of Shaarey Tphiloh Synagogue, his professional life was less spectacular. He began as a peddler, and eventually opened a second-hand store. Despite their humble beginnings, Abraham and Sarah's two sons, Israel and Louis, both attended college. Israel, who was the first Jew from Portland to attend Harvard, eventually started a successful law practice in the city with his brother, Louis, in 1915. Louis, who attended Bowdoin College and Peabody Law School, also became a founder of the Jewish Community Center and was eventually appointed to the Municipal Court in Portland.<sup>7</sup>

Although Portland Jews managed to attain a degree of economic success by the 1920s, they still faced significant anti-Semitism and discrimination, and lacked social, cultural, and recreational opportunities. In the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan experienced a brief period of popularity in Portland, at one time holding a parade with thousands of participants,

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<sup>5</sup>Phil Levinsky, interview by author (Portland, Maine, 7 October 2001).

<sup>6</sup>Dr. Konnilyn G. Feig, "Background to the Study," archival collection titled "Portraits of the Past: The Jews of Portland" (Portland, Maine: The Portland Jewish Historical Society, 1976), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup>Louis Bernstein and Mrs. Israel Bernstein (Rebecca), interviews by Feig, "Portraits of the Past" (1976).

including many well-respected Portland professionals.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, most anti-Semitic acts in Portland occurred more quietly on a day to day basis. Daniel Epstein, who was born in Portland in 1911, faced blatant anti-Semitism as a child. "I had a next-door neighbor, an Irishman, who didn't go by the house without saying, 'Hey, you Goddam Jew' or words to that effect on Howard Street. Oh, I was very, very aware of it [anti-Semitism]. I still have a hole in my backside. I got picked up and hit with a pellet gun because three or four kids down on Waterville Street knew who I was."<sup>9</sup>

Many Jewish residents of Portland experienced more subtle forms of discrimination. Rather than openly expressing prejudice, Portland residents boycotted Jewish businesses and excluded Jews from social and business organizations. Portland was not unusual in this respect. Anti-Semitism in America grew after World War I and was increasingly institutionalized in the 1920s and 1930s. The mass East European immigration that continued through the first quarter of the twentieth century aggravated anti-Semitism because the recently arrived immigrants were viewed as alien and un-American. The Ku Klux Klan revival of the 1920s was accompanied by the enactment of quotas at leading universities like Harvard, and increased restrictions against Jews in hotels, clubs, charitable organizations, and businesses. The 1924 passage of the Johnson Bill only served to make the situation worse when it placed restrictions on Jewish immigration in order to preserve America's "native stock."<sup>10</sup> Historian Leon A. Jick asserts that the prevalent anti-Jewish sentiments in post-World War I America caused Jews to turn inward and develop their own

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<sup>8</sup>The impact of the KKK affected the composition of the Portland City Council and had long-lasting political ramifications for Portland and the Jewish community.

<sup>9</sup>Daniel Epstein, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past" (8 September 1976), pp. 18-19.

<sup>10</sup>Robert S. Wistrich, Anti-Semitism: The Longest Hatred (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), p. 119.

communal resources. In Boston, for example, the Jewish community established a Bureau of Jewish Education in 1920, Hebrew Teachers College in 1921, and a new Jewish hospital in 1923.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Jews in Portland rarely socialized with Gentiles in the 1920s and 1930s, instead looking to one another for social relations. Phil Levinsky recalled that Jewish fraternities and sororities dominated the social lives of young Jews when he was growing up. He also remembered facing discrimination after his family bought a three-bedroom house on Dartmouth street in Portland. Because the house was located outside of the typically Jewish neighborhoods at the time, as soon as neighbors found out that the Levinsky family had bought the house they tried to buy it back to keep Jews out of the area. As Phil Levinsky put it, "they thought we had horns."<sup>12</sup>

Although Portland Jews turned inward, they initially failed to establish strong communal and social institutions like those found in larger cities such as Boston. This failure can perhaps be explained by the small size and relative newness of Portland Jewry. Unlike Jewish communities in larger cities, Portland did not have a sufficient number of financially stable and well-educated Jews to lead communal institutions. Furthermore, in the early 1900s the community concentrated itself around its Orthodox synagogues, and with almost no dissenting religious voice in the community, there appeared to be little room for secular Jewish institutions. It would not be until 1938, with the establishment of the Jewish Community Center, that Portland Jewry became unified under a strong communal institution and began to make a place for itself in the city.

The few communal institutions that Portland Jews did create in the 1920s were charitable organizations. The Portland section of the Council of Jewish Women was

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<sup>11</sup>Leon A. Jick, "From Margin to Mainstream: 1917 - 1967," in Jonathan D. Sarna & Ellen Smith, eds., The Jews of Boston (Boston: Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston, 1995), p. 95.

<sup>12</sup>Phil Levinsky, interview by author, (Portland, Maine, 7 October 2001).



founded in 1920 to provide educational and social services for Portland Jews. The services provided by the Council included Americanization classes to help recent immigrants adapt to life in Portland. In 1925, Portland Jews founded the Veritans Club, another social service organization that was active in welfare work and planned to perform non-sectarian community service, although all of its members were Jewish. The community's biggest project in the first third of the twentieth century was the establishment of the Jewish Home for the Aged. The Home was founded on December 27, 1927, with the purpose of creating "a home for aged persons of the Jewish faith, and in general to pursue charitable, religious and benevolent activities."<sup>13</sup> While the Home was successful and continues to this day to be one of the most-respected nursing homes in the state, it only served the elderly, who comprised a limited portion of the Jewish community. Portland still lacked a strong institution that united the entire Jewish community.

Most young Jews felt uncomfortable socializing in Gentile establishments in the pre-World War II era due to the existence of anti-Jewish sentiment. Jewish teenagers in Portland instead relied on the Young Men's Hebrew Association (YMHA) and the Young Women's Hebrew Association (YWHA), organizations that provided social and recreational services to Jewish boys and girls. The Portland chapter of the YMHA developed as part of a national trend of Jewish social organizations that preceded the Jewish community center movement. These organizations initially appeared in the late nineteenth century to help recent German Jewish immigrants adjust to life in America. By the 1920s and 1930s, however, this function had essentially become obsolete, and the purpose of YM and YWHAs rotated almost 180 degrees, as they served to halt what Jewish leaders felt was a loss of Judaism among the second generation. Second-generation American-born Jews had no trouble becoming American. Instead, their parents feared that they would forget their

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<sup>13</sup>Harrie B. Coe, ed., Maine: Resources, Attractions, and Its People. Volume II (New York: The Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1928), p. 668.

immigrant Jewish roots. Social organizations like the YM and YWHA provided a place for young Jews to socialize with other Jews in a secular setting, thereby retaining some sense of cohesiveness in the Jewish community.<sup>14</sup>

The YM and the YWHA in Portland met at a small building on Wilmot Street that served as an informal Jewish community center. The YMHA, which had eighty-five members at its peak, approximately twenty of whom attended meetings regularly, held weekly social events for young Jews.<sup>15</sup> In addition to these social events, the group organized athletic leagues, produced minstrel shows, and sponsored combined dances. It was forced to hold these dances elsewhere, however, because the Wilmot Street building was too small. Although the size of the building limited the scope of these social activities, the events nevertheless filled a void in the social lives of young Jews in Portland. According to Julius Greenstein, a leader of the Jewish community, the YMHA “was a group that tried to meld the younger element of Jewish faith, both male and female, in the community into one group, put them under one roof and make them realize that they, first of all, belonged to a Jewish group. But also to make them feel they could enjoy as many of the things that were available to them, such as the dances, other affairs, and cultural activities.”<sup>16</sup>

Greenstein emphasized how crucial it was that young Jews realized they were part of a *Jewish* group. Portland Jews in the first third of the twentieth century were not ready to fully integrate into non-Jewish Portland, nor was Portland ready for them, as evidenced by the continued exclusion of Jews from the city’s social and cultural institutions.

Besides the limited activities of the YM and the YWHA, Jewish children had few

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<sup>14</sup>Jonathan Sarna, ed., The American Jewish Experience (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986), p. 191.

<sup>15</sup>Daniel Epstein, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past,” p. 16.

<sup>16</sup>Julius Greenstein, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past” (14 September 1976), p. 26.

options for social activity. Although they could join the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) or the Boy Scouts, most Jewish children felt ill at ease in these environments. Many parents also believed that their children should associate with other Jews, not with Gentiles. Daniel Epstein joined a basketball team at a church, but in order to be on the team, he had to attend Sunday School. When his parents found out that their Jewish son was attending Sunday School, they immediately pulled him from the team.<sup>17</sup> Such incidents created a desire among Portland Jews to establish an organization in which they could feel comfortable. Leaders of the community thus decided that a Jewish community center should be founded that would be more conducive to the needs of the community than the small Wilmot Street building.

In 1937, prominent Jews in Portland began the work of establishing a newer, bigger, and better Jewish Community Center. A local Jewish leader named Lewis Bernstein called a meeting of the Board of Directors of the Wilmot Street center at his house on November 1, 1937. Shortly thereafter, on November 15, the Board held a mass meeting of the entire Jewish community in the Wilmot Street building for the purpose of getting community approval for a new Jewish community center. The group voted to proceed with the plans, which meant that the first step was finding a building to accommodate the community's needs. Bernstein and his Board of Directors learned that the former Pythian Temple was available. In January of 1938, after receiving community approval, they purchased this building at 341 Cumberland Avenue for \$17,500, which was considered an extremely low price. The building had an ideal location in the center of Portland, within walking distance of many of the Jewish neighborhoods on Munjoy Hill.

After purchasing the building, the Board needed money for renovations, equipment, maintenance, activities, and administration. In February of 1938, the Jewish community

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<sup>17</sup>Daniel Epstein, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past," p. 17.

be limited to solicitation of Jewish contributors.” The Board quickly amended the motion, however, so that “each team captain use his discretion in soliciting (outside) Gentile contributions.”<sup>17</sup> This motion, and the subsequent amendment, indicated uncertainty within the Jewish community about the non-Jewish community’s reception of a new Jewish community center. Nevertheless, the Board of Directors clearly felt that there were some Gentiles in the community who would be supportive of its cause.

After outlining its financial goals, the new Board of Directors worked to solidify the policies and aims of the Jewish Community Center. The minutes from a meeting on December 19, 1937, reported that the Board agreed that “a balanced program was the best solution for the advancement of the Center, that is physical, cultural, and communal.”<sup>18</sup> What exactly did a “balanced program” mean? The founders outlined the balance they hoped to achieve in their first Policy Committee Report, which defined “the ideals which motivated the Jewish Community of the City of Portland to make many sacrifices of time, energy, and means, in order to establish a community center. . .” The Aims and Purposes of the Jewish Community Center included providing programming “that will promote a better understanding of our Jewish people, their problems, aims and ideals; and that will promote fine relationships and harmony among our people in all walks of life.” The group planned to hold activities “that will bring them [Jews] together in a Jewish spirit of friendliness and develop in them a deep consciousness of their duty to their people and country,” and that would “foster and promote a wide and coordinated educational program.” Finally, the JCC strove “to provide and foster a sound and basic understanding

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<sup>17</sup>Jewish Community Center minutes, 23 February 1938.

The word “outside,” preceding “Gentile,” was added to the typed manuscript in parentheses with a pencil. It is unclear whether this was done in 1938 or at a later date.

<sup>18</sup>Jewish Community Center minutes, 19 December 1937.

of American Democracy, to promote good citizenship, to participate in civic activities, and to establish a neighborly attitude in our community.”<sup>19</sup>

One would expect the first three goals outlined by the Board, which sought to unify the Jewish community and provide Jews with a safe environment. The last goal using the rhetoric of American democracy, citizenship, and neighborliness, was significant. This desire to be well-respected in the non-Jewish community hearkened back to Bernard Aaronson’s philosophy in the Shaarith Israel shul of adapting to American life. Despite Aaronson’s desire to integrate into the mainstream, the Orthodox Jewish community in Portland had remained relatively insular in the first third of the twentieth century. While cities elsewhere experienced religious modernization, the Reform and Conservative movements failed to establish synagogues in Portland in the first part of the twentieth century. For many Jews, those of the second-generation in particular, the Orthodox tradition was not always compatible with the American way of life. With the absence of a more progressive synagogue in Portland, the new Jewish Community Center filled a social and communal void for Jews who wished to live a more secular lifestyle, yet retain their Jewish identity. While this need was particularly strong in Portland, partly due to the absence of a Conservative or Reform synagogue in town, Jewish community centers nationwide were enabling Jews to identify themselves as both Jewish and American in a secular environment.

The development of the Jewish Community Center in Portland followed a distinct national trend of the establishment of secular Jewish institutions. According to historian David Kaufman, “By joining a center one affiliates with the voluntaristic American Jewish community, and feels that one has fulfilled the obligation to be a ‘good Jew.’” Kaufman argued that Jewish centers strove to better the Jew through educational and cultural

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<sup>19</sup>Policy Committee Report, The Jewish Community Center, 1938.

programming, thereby promoting a sense of Jewishness. He continued, “The Jewish center thus presents itself *as an alternative to the synagogue*, the traditional and dominant form of public Jewish identification. As such, the creation of the center was a historic departure in the construction of Jewish community, and remains one of the most significant innovations of American Judaism.”<sup>20</sup> The secular nature of the Jewish Community Center allowed Portland Jews to socialize with one another without the constraints of the Orthodox synagogue in the hopes of appearing more American and less Jewish.

In 1938 Portland Jews wished to become more American and improve their reputation in the Gentile community, but they attempted to do so by the creation of entirely Jewish institutions. Because Jews faced exclusion from Gentile society in Portland, they were forced to create a separate arena for themselves in which they could participate in the same activities as their non-Jewish neighbors. The 1938 Policy Committee Report nevertheless recommended that the Center become active in the Portland Council of Social Agencies and that “*eventually*, the Center should become a constituent organization in the Community Chest.”<sup>21</sup> Portland Jews hoped to use the JCC as an organizational entity that would increase their involvement with community-wide organizations.

The new Center received the strong endorsement of many members of the Jewish community. According to Mildred Nelson, the first president of the Center Women’s Club, “It was a marvelous social place. The butcher’s wife and the baker’s wife and the lawyer’s wife and the judge’s wife, let’s talk about the women’s part of it, the same with the men, it really was a leveler. When I look back now I realize that it was a marvelous social

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<sup>20</sup>David Kaufman, *Shul with a Pool: The “Synagogue-Center” in American Jewish History* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999), p. 3.

<sup>21</sup>Italics added. The Portland Community Chest was a city-wide fundraising organization.

equalizer.”<sup>22</sup> The Center’s founders attempted to create an environment in which all Jews could feel comfortable, regardless of social status or religious affiliation. Anyone of “good moral character” was eligible for membership in the Center, and to ensure that it was a truly secular institution, members were forbidden from conducting prayer services in the Center. Leonard Nelson, Mildred Nelson’s son, marvelled, “The great thing about the Center, you didn’t even have to believe in God. You didn’t have to believe in God! You’re not Orthodox, you’re not Conservative, you’re not anything.”<sup>23</sup> For the first time in Portland’s history, all Jews, young and old, had a place to socialize that did not require them to espouse specific religious beliefs.

Along with the all-inclusive nature of the JCC, the physical amenities of the new building no doubt contributed to the warm reception Portland Jews gave to the Center. According to Gerald Boxstein, who was a teenager when the new Jewish Community Center was founded, the Wilmot Street building had been completely inadequate: “Well, I remember the Community Center they had on Wilmot Street and it was nothing. It was just a room. We used to go there as Boy Scouts. That’s about the only time I ever went in that building. It seemed small, it was nothing.”<sup>24</sup> The new Center, in contrast, was a five-story complex containing a gymnasium, a bowling alley, a theater, a 300-seat auditorium, and multiple lounges and meeting rooms. While the JCC was under construction, the *Portland Sunday Telegraph* reported that “the new building will have many outstanding features to answer current needs and provide for the activities of every local Jewish organization. There will be a gymnasium with equipment for basketball, tennis, and handball, locker and shower

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<sup>22</sup>Mildred Nelson, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past” (21 October 1976), p. 12.

<sup>23</sup>Leonard Nelson, interview by author, (Portland, Maine, 11 January 2002).

<sup>24</sup>Gerald Boxstein, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past” (12 October 1976), p. 18.

answer current needs and provide for the activities of every local Jewish organization. There will be a gymnasium with equipment for basketball, tennis, and handball, locker and shower rooms, auditoriums, dining clubs, kosher kitchens, club rooms, libraries, and other features."<sup>26</sup> Phil Levinsky recalls being excited by the showers in particular, since many private homes at that time did not have such modern conveniences.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to these facilities, the Center provided a wealth of social and cultural programming, as well as ample meeting space for Portland's various Jewish organizations. Norman Godfrey, the Center's first executive director, instituted much of this programming. Godfrey learned of the director's position through the National Jewish Welfare Board, the nationwide JCC coordinating organization, and after interviewing with a group of Portland Jews in 1938, decided to take the job. Godfrey's wife, Ethel, recalled the "beautiful" Center dedication dinner attended by over 700 people that was held in the new building in November of 1938.<sup>28</sup> In his dedication speech, Godfrey used the rhetoric of democracy and Americanism to mobilize support from the community: "Consecrated to the noble purpose of perpetuating Jewish life upon the highest possible plane, in consonance with the traditions and ideals of the founding fathers of our great democracy, the Jewish Community Center enters now upon its course of service devoted to the enrichment of the individual personality and enhancement of the group life of American Jewry."<sup>29</sup> The key phrase in

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<sup>26</sup>"One Hundred Volunteer Workers will Launch Jewish Campaigns for Funds Today to Take Over New Community Center," *Portland Sunday Telegraph*, 1938, as quoted in Julius Greenstein, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past," p. 33.

<sup>27</sup>Phil Levinsky, interview by author.

<sup>28</sup>Ethel Godfrey, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past" (27 August 1976), p. 25.

<sup>29</sup>Norman Godfrey as quoted in the Jewish Community Center Bulletin, 31 January 1947.



Jewish identity. By following the American tradition of voluntarism and civil service, Jews in Portland hoped to use the Jewish Community Center as a means of reconciling their divergent Jewish and American identities, and they believed that Godfrey would be the man to lead them. According to his wife, "his dream was to bring to the community a full, rich, cultural life, and not only cultural life, but a rich life that encompassed the physical aspects of living. . . His dream was to bring the very best of Jewish life and combine it with the American life and the American way here in this community."<sup>28</sup>

In order to reconcile the Jewish and American ways of life, Portland Jews would have to pay more attention to their role in the non-Jewish community, which they were not yet prepared to do. In the 1930s and 1940s, most Jewish leaders in Portland focused their energies on *Jewish* institution building. Godfrey, who wanted to reach out more to the non-Jewish community, may have been ahead of his time. Clarice Shur, one of the most active female leaders in the JCC, remembers that Godfrey "was the first person in Portland that ever was concerned about the Jewish image in the non-Jewish community from my frame of reference."<sup>29</sup> Aside from a committee formed in September of 1938 to serve on the Portland Community Chest, most of the Center's initial activities focused exclusively on the Jewish community.

Godfrey directed his energies toward creating a vibrant atmosphere at the Center and by all accounts, he was immediately successful in his pursuits. Those involved with the founding of the Center recalled that there were hundreds of Portland Jews there each day, participating in all types of activities. Godfrey began by instituting a wide range of social and cultural activities for children and young adults. In August of 1938, the YWHA had

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<sup>28</sup>Ethel Godfrey, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past," p. 51.

<sup>29</sup>Clarice Shur, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past" (10 September 1976), p. 8.

voted to “dissolve their present organization and pledge their loyalty to the new Jewish Community Center.”<sup>30</sup> In its place, an active Center Youth developed, and the Jewish sororities and fraternities in Portland used the Center for meetings. During school vacation weeks, the Center ran week-long programs called “vacation jamborees” where parents could send their children while they were at work.<sup>31</sup> These vacation jamborees demonstrated an early understanding of the need for day care so that parents in two-income families could work. The presence of such a program indicated the upward economic mobility of Jewish families in Portland. In 1938, Godfrey also worked with Clarice Shur to create a Hebrew Sunday school that was more liberal than the existing Portland Hebrew School. According to Shur, the two felt that if Jewish children in Portland “had to have any kind of background, they ought to have one that was a little bit more liberal and subjective than the so-called Hebrew schools. . .”<sup>32</sup> Shur admitted that it was unusual to have a Hebrew Sunday school in such an Orthodox Jewish community. The creation of a Sunday school can be seen as another attempt by Portland Jews to reconcile the Jewish and American parts of their lives. Jewish children who had to attend the Portland Hebrew School several days a week were often prevented from participating in school sports and activities. By attending Hebrew school on Sundays, a time when many non-Jewish children were in Sunday school or church, Jewish children could follow a schedule similar to their non-Jewish peers.

The creation of the Sunday school, however, by no means ended the alienation faced by most young Jews in Portland. Jewish children and adults alike, for example, were excluded from Portland Players, the local community theater. Because Jews were

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<sup>30</sup>Jewish Community Center minutes, 31 August 1938.

<sup>31</sup>Dorothy Goodman, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past” (6 October 1976), p. 19.

<sup>32</sup>Clarice Shur, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past,” p. 8.

unwelcome in Portland's theatrical group, Gerald Waxman started an active theater at the JCC called the Center Workshop, in which he directed plays and taught dramatics and dancing to the children. According to Leonard Nelson, the Workshop "was loaded with talented and gifted people" and they produced a multitude of plays.<sup>33</sup> The Center Workshop exemplified the efforts of the JCC to provide Jews with every social, cultural, and recreational activity available to non-Jews in Portland. Many of these programs were organized by the Center Women's Club, which has been described as the backbone of the Center.<sup>34</sup> As the first president of the Club, Mildred Nelson recalls that "what we did was pull into the Community Center in those very early years almost everything that was going on in the [non-Jewish] community itself, so it almost was like a duplicate of all organizations. And don't forget another thing, very few non-Jewish or let's say community things were open easily to Jews."<sup>35</sup> Portland Jews wanted to do everything that non-Jews did, but they were forced to do so in a separate arena. Becoming more American did not mean that Jews were becoming more integrated.

Dorothy Goodman, an early president of the Center Women's Club, organized four scout troops for Jewish children, including a Girl Scout troop and a Cub Scout troop. The club also engaged in fundraising and charity work. As president of the Women's Club, Goodman sat on the Membership Committee and the House Committee at the Center. She recalls that "the Center was really the most important place. . . That was the place where everybody met and everybody got to know one another and everybody worked with one

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<sup>33</sup>Leonard Nelson, interview by author.

<sup>34</sup>Benjamin Band, Portland Jewry: Its Growth and Development (Portland, Maine: Jewish Historical Society, 1955), p. 63.

<sup>35</sup>Mildred Nelson, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past," p. 13.

another and everybody did things for one another. It was a happy group.”<sup>36</sup> In addition to the activities organized by the Center Women’s Club, Norman Godfrey, with the help of Julius Elowitch, founded an athletic program for both children and adults. Elowitch, a long-time resident of Portland, and an avid athlete, set up intramural basketball and softball leagues for all ages, as well as organizing golf, volleyball, and weight classes. The children, in particular, benefitted from these athletic programs. Most Jewish children felt uncomfortable playing in leagues elsewhere, such as the YMCA, due to what Elowitch called “an uncomfortableness” and “underlying discrimination.”<sup>37</sup> The leagues at the Community Center filled a crucial need in the Jewish community and provided a safe environment for Jewish children. According to Elowitch, the athletic program at the Center had “tremendous membership” in the period between 1940 and 1955.<sup>38</sup> Even though they were forced to create these opportunities for themselves, Portland Jews had succeeded in establishing an institution that united the entire community and allowed them to feel that they had the same social and cultural opportunities as their non-Jewish counterparts.

Members of the Center also established a Jewish community newspaper to advertise social events. The Jewish Community Center Bulletin, Portland’s first weekly Jewish newspaper, was intended to be an in-house publication, although its editors attempted to solicit contributions from readers to make it a literary journal as well. The first issue was published on December 9, 1939, with an editorial policy “to encourage creative writing. Every boy and girl, as well as older persons, will be offered the columns of this paper for any story, article, poem or feuilleton which has intrinsic literary merit. Whether this

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<sup>36</sup>Dorothy Goodman, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past” (6 October 1976), pp. 18-19.

<sup>37</sup>Julius Elowitch, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past” (8 September 1976), p. 44.

<sup>38</sup>Julius Elowitch, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past,” p. 43.

ambition can be realized will depend entirely upon the cooperation of the members."<sup>39</sup> The editors did not receive enough cooperation from the members, however, and had to abandon their hopes of creating a Jewish literary journal. The Bulletin remained, instead, an in-house organ for the weekly announcement of social and cultural events.

During World War II, the Jewish community shifted some of its attention to overseas activities and did its best to support both the American war effort and the drive to develop the state of Israel. As all Americans rallied around the war effort, Jews and non-Jews alike became unified in support of various causes. On the homefront, the JCC tried to aid the Jewish servicemen stationed with the North Atlantic Fleet in Portland. A 1942 article in the Bulletin about the Army and Navy Committee at the Center asked for families to host "the approximately 75 Jewish servicemen stationed in this vicinity [who will] have a few hours leave to attend Passover Seder."<sup>40</sup> Portland Jews opened their homes to Jewish servicemen and also made the Center facilities available to the United Service Organizations (USO) for events.

The Center's affiliation with the USO signalled a significant amount of cooperation between the Jewish and non-Jewish communities and was a major step towards the integration of Jews in Portland. In Portland, six agencies of various denominations comprised the USO, and many of the activities, including parties, dances, and social activities, were held at the Jewish Community Center. The YMHA also sponsored many activities in conjunction with the USO to raise awareness in Portland about Hitler's

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<sup>39</sup>Band, Portland Jewry, p. 61.

<sup>40</sup>Julius Greenstein, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past," p. 29.

activities in Europe.<sup>41</sup> In 1941, the group brought Zionist leader Louis Lipsky to the city, where he proclaimed “that the interests of the Jewish people are closely bound up with the forces engaged in defeating Hitlerism. It is our wish to take part in the struggle to beat Hitlerism, not as refugees crowding into every haven that may welcome us but as representatives of a people also fighting to secure its freedom in its own land.”<sup>42</sup> Lipsky’s appearance indicates that Portland Jews were well aware of their place in the international Jewish community, and tried to make the non-Jewish community aware of the Nazi threat. The USO activities conducted at the Center led to national recognition for Portland’s Jewish community, which culminated with the appearance in Portland of Dr. Israel Goldstein, the National Chairman of the United Jewish Appeal. Goldstein came to Portland in 1941 to launch the national appeal for aid to Jews around the world, and particularly for the creation of the Jewish state of Israel.<sup>43</sup> During this period, Zionist activity in Portland also increased as Jews across America mobilized in support of Israel due to Hitler’s persecution of the Jews.

Until the rise of Nazism in Germany, fundraising had not played a significant role in American Jewish life. The first attempt to coordinate the multitude of Jewish organizations in Portland occurred in 1929, when the Vaad Hoir was established. The initial purpose of the Vaad Hoir was to regulate fundraising in the Orthodox community, although it also extended funding to the Portland Hebrew School, the United Hebrew Charities and the Jewish Home for the Aged. The Vaad could not sustain itself through the Depression years of the 1930s, however, and the Jewish community began to look for a new organizational

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<sup>41</sup> Although the YWHA disbanded when the JCC was founded, the YMHA continued to exist.

<sup>42</sup> Julius Greenstein, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past,” p. 34.

<sup>43</sup> Julius Greenstein, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past,” p. 35.

structure for fundraising.<sup>44</sup>

In a 1935 editorial in the Portland Jewish Community Guide, an independent monthly newspaper published between 1934 and 1937, Rabbi Abraham Miller appealed to the Jewish community to establish a fundraising federation, arguing that “the high aim of justice is to establish a perfect balance, adjusting not alone the affairs of local philanthropic institutions, but also between groups and nations; a perfect relationship between all parts, so as to glorify the whole.” Rabbi Miller saw the creation of a federation as a way for the Jewish community to both solidify internal unity and to improve its reputation in the wider community. He continued to defend the balance a federation could create between groups and nations, claiming that “from this principle all the higher aspirations of the nations, as Patriotism, Democracy and others should derive their sanction. This inspiring idea of Unity I claim and advocate not for the benefit of raising the physical and moral status of the Jewish Community of Portland alone, but for all humanity -- all nations of the world. So as to develop a genius and a deathless passion for Seeing Life Whole.”<sup>45</sup> With his rhetoric of unity, patriotism, and democracy, Rabbi Miller highlighted the importance of a unified and well-organized fundraising organization to the internal health of Portland’s Jewry and to its ability to perform a role in the wider community.

As Jews attained economic success and began to recognize the threat to the their brethren overseas, they rapidly took up the cause of raising money for the state of Israel. In 1936, soon after Rabbi Miller’s editorial appeared, Jews formed the Portland United Jewish Appeal to merge the city’s United Palestine Appeal, Joint Distribution Committee, and National Refugee Service. The Portland UJA conducted a fundraising drive that netted five

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<sup>44</sup>Band, Portland Jewry, p. 65.

<sup>45</sup>Band, Portland Jewry, p. 67.

thousand dollars for the member groups. In each succeeding year, the UJA managed to raise more money, until it was disbanded in 1942. All across the United States, support for the UJA increased rapidly throughout World War II. In 1940, American Jews raised \$14 million for the UJA and by 1946, that number had increased to \$131 million.<sup>46</sup> Along with the success of the UJA, the federation movement, in which Jews created umbrella fundraising organizations, grew exponentially in America's Jewish communities. American Jews realized that they could raise money more efficiently with central fundraising and budgeting organizations. The first two federations in Cincinnati and Boston were shortly followed by two hundred others, as every Jewish community large enough to support a federation created one. Historian Philip Bernstein argues that "the Jewish federations were a fusion of the central Jewish commitment to social justice with the operational pragmatism of North American democracy."<sup>47</sup> Once again, American Jews attempted to synthesize their American and Jewish identities through the creation of an internal Jewish organization. Portland Jewry readily followed this national trend.

By 1940, Portland Jews realized that they needed to organize a broader federation to enhance the development of Jewish communal life. Until that point, the Jewish community had developed without any plan or organization and the various community service groups each conducted their own fundraising drives. This resulted in many separate campaigns and solicitations of community support. Organizations often failed to meet their monetary goals because the community at large quickly tired of donating money to multiple fundraisers. To remedy the situation, delegates from the Jewish Community Center attended meetings of the New England Region of the Council of the Jewish Federation and Welfare Funds, where

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<sup>46</sup>Philip Bernstein, To Dwell in Unity: The Jewish Federation Movement in America Since 1960 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1983), p. 14.

<sup>47</sup>Bernstein, To Dwell in Unity, p. 6.



they met with Jews from other communities who had already established successful federations. At the same time, some of the women's organizations in Portland considered forming an umbrella group to coordinate fundraising. These underlying currents in the Jewish community led Louis Bernstein, then president of the Center, to call a meeting on November 17, 1941, of representatives from over forty Jewish organizations in Portland. The representatives voted overwhelmingly to establish a Jewish Federation in Portland, and on March 24, 1942, its first meeting was held in the Center.<sup>48</sup> Despite this positive vote, some organizations initially resisted the Federation because they believed they could raise more money on their own. Many Jewish leaders feared that the Federation's efforts would be harmed if it did not have the full support of the community. Thus, they concentrated on incorporating the few uncooperative institutions. According to Justice Sidney Wernick, the first Jewish justice on the Maine Supreme Court, "it was an extreme exercise in diplomacy and tact and everything else, together with a little force by saying, 'Look, we're going to ostracize you if you don't come in.'"<sup>49</sup> Although Justice Wernick may have been using hyperbole, Federation leaders did apply pressure, and through such efforts, the organization was established with broad communal support.

At its outset, the Federation elected thirty board members and wrote a set of by-laws to define its purpose and objectives, which included coordinating "Jewish philanthropic, benevolent, educational and communal activities" in Portland, developing agencies that "will best promote the welfare of this community," and cooperating "with all non-Jewish groups engaged in a similar effort to the end that the happiness, well-being and cultural life of the entire community may be enriched." Charity, or *tzedakah*, had long been a principle

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<sup>48</sup>Band, Portland Jewry, pp. 69-70.

<sup>49</sup>Justice Sidney Wernick, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past" (30 September 1976), p. 20.

of Judaism, and the federation enabled Jews to continue this tradition in a more modern format.<sup>50</sup> Abraham S. Levey, the first president of the Federation, praised Portland Jews for their attempt at unity and focused once again on the rhetoric of preserving “those values which are equally American and Jewish.”<sup>51</sup> The Federation, like the JCC, became a vehicle for Portland Jews to synthesize their American and Jewish identities. Initially, however, some tension existed between the Center and the Federation. Although the Jewish Community Center and the Jewish Federation were intended to be separate entities with different leadership, in a possible move to save money, Norman Godfrey became the executive director of a combined Federation and Center operation. Although Godfrey was a popular leader, many Jewish members still felt that the programs should be separate. Thus, when Godfrey died unexpectedly in 1947, the Center and the Federation hired separate directors.

While the Federation maintained its independence on some projects, on others it worked with the wider Portland community to raise money for causes such as the war effort. According to Rebecca Bernstein, a community leader, “During the Second World War the city of Portland felt that instead of having different ethnic groups have their drives, that there should be one community campaign; and those agencies doing social service would participate in that cause.”<sup>52</sup> The Federation leaders used the United Community and the War Chest, which had already achieved success in Portland raising money for the war effort, as models of united fundraising. The Federation’s real test occurred in 1943 during its first campaign, when the group outlined an over-all community budget and set a

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<sup>50</sup>Bernstein, To Dwell in Unity.

<sup>51</sup>Abraham S. Levey in Band, Portland Jewry, p. 71.

<sup>52</sup>Rebecca Bernstein, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past” (2 September 1976), p. 38.

monetary goal to satisfy all of the participating organizations. During this first attempt at unified fundraising, the Budget Committee set a goal of \$47,500, an amount that seemed daunting at the time. Despite this relatively large sum, the group far exceeded its own expectations, and under the leadership of Israel Bernstein, Portland Jewry raised \$55,438.<sup>53</sup> The Federation continued to grow and increase its campaign receipts each year. In 1944, Portland Jews raised \$78,000, and in 1945, they collected a total of \$120,000. As the Federation grew, its directors redirected the organization to make it as efficient as possible, and revised its bylaws to ensure that duplicate fundraising did not occur. In 1946, the Policy Committee submitted new guidelines to ensure that fundraising occurred in an orderly manner and that any group doing fundraising “has first procured the permission of the Federation.”<sup>54</sup> This revision of the bylaws reemphasized the necessity of unity to the successful growth of Portland Jewry. The new regulations also reminded Portland Jews that the Federation’s central campaign was the community’s most important cause.

Given that the Portland Jewish community was relatively small, the strength of Portland’s Jewish institutions during the 1940s is noteworthy. The compact nature of the community may actually have helped Jewish leaders create strong organizations. Nathan Glazer argues that Jewish communities in small cities such as Portland were often more cohesive than those in larger cities. In urban areas like New York and Boston, Jews could choose from a multitude of social options that had no religious or institutional affiliation. Thus, the community exhibited less of a need for a Jewish community center or a Jewish Federation. In Portland, by contrast, few social options were available, even for Gentiles.

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<sup>53</sup>Band, Portland Jewry, p. 72.

<sup>54</sup>Band, Portland Jewry, p. 75.

The few civic clubs and organizations that did exist were closed to Jews, forcing them to associate with one another. Because of the limited options, according to Glazer, Jewish institutions that provide a civic outlet in a small city are usually successful. Glazer also argues that Jews in smaller communities form a captive audience since most individuals know each other and have difficulty resisting the pressure to partake in Jewish communal activities.<sup>55</sup> This certainly seemed to be the case in Portland, where the same people served as leaders in every organization and many prominent Portland Jews recalled being pressured into taking various organizational roles. Because Portland Jews socialized almost exclusively with one another, they also tended to support the same institutions.

In the middle of the twentieth century, Jewish communal and social institutions flourished in Portland. If Portland civic society had been more welcoming to the Jews, perhaps Portland Jews would have felt no need to develop their own associations. But because most social and cultural clubs in Portland were closed to Jews, they had to create their own civic culture. Given its small size and limited resources, the Portland Jewish community experienced rapid success in this venture. Through the use of strong organizational and funding structures, Portland Jewry established and sustained the Jewish Community Center and the Jewish Federation. The Jewish Community Center, in particular, served as a catalyst for the strengthening and flourishing of Portland Jewry. Nearly all Jewish groups and committees used the Center for meetings, and children and adults took advantage of the wide offering of activities. Most prominent Portland Jews agree that the community would not have been as strong or cohesive without the existence of the Center. According to Elowitch, "There is no comparison with anything else. From the time of its start -- 1938 -- the whole Jewish community for years and years and years was centered down there. Everybody's activities were there. Everybody thought of nothing

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<sup>55</sup>Nathan Glazer, American Judaism, second edition (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1957), p. 123.

but the Center -- that was THE place. Period.”<sup>56</sup> The Center provided a safe and comfortable environment for Portland Jews that allowed them to explore their Jewishness and develop a strong sense of community. The cohesiveness created by the Center would help anchor Portland Jews in their Jewishness as they attempted to integrate into mainstream Portland in the post-war era.

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<sup>56</sup>Julius Elowitch, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past,” p. 59.

## Chapter 2

### “A Beehive of Activity:” The Jewish Community in Post-War Portland

In the immediate post-war period, Portland Jews refocused their energies away from institution building and towards the goal of integration into mainstream America. Throughout the United States, Jews joined the dominant culture as they achieved economic success and adopted the American suburban lifestyle. Because the Jewish Community Center and the Jewish Federation had achieved a solid status, the leaders of the Portland Jewish community became less internally absorbed. Moreover, after having worked closely with the non-Jewish community in Portland during World War II, the goals of acceptance and integration in Gentile society seemed more realistic. Jews in Portland also embarked on an exodus to the suburbs and participated in the post-war religious revival occurring across the country. Despite their attempts to move outside the Jewish community, however, formidable barriers remained in Portland. The non-Jewish Portland community was not ready to accept Jews fully, either professionally or socially. Because the social barriers seemed impenetrable, many in the Jewish community remained content with the status quo and preferred to continue focusing their energies on internal Jewish institutions. The late 1940s and 1950s in Portland were thus characterized by an excruciatingly slow process of acceptance and integration. Why was it so difficult to combat discrimination in Portland? This chapter will examine the efforts of the Portland Jewish community to integrate into mainstream society beginning in the post-war era and continuing through the 1950s. The Jewish Community Center and the Federation continued to be central to Portland Jewry even when similar institutions nationwide experienced a decline. Although Portland Jewry followed trends in American Jewish life, the small and insular nature of Portland made it difficult for Jews in the city to find as much acceptance as did Jews elsewhere.

The post-war era in American Jewish life was marked by a desire to conform to

non-Jewish values and customs. The third generation of American Jews looked to expand its place in the Gentile world and to leave behind its immigrant past once and for all. In fact, many Jews felt that they could only truly succeed in America if they suppressed their immigrant roots and behaved like Gentiles.<sup>1</sup> Jewish integration into mainstream society was facilitated by a number of factors, including suburbanization, new-found affluence, increased levels of higher education, and a post-war revival of Judaism. These developments enabled American Jews to shed their immigrant roots and adapt to a middle-class lifestyle. Many of these phenomena occurred in Portland as Jews tried to improve their position in the non-Jewish community.

Between 1945 and 1965, one third of American Jewry moved from the cities to the suburbs. The exodus from the city was even more dramatic in Portland, as Jews moved from the Munjoy Hill section of Portland to the Woodfords neighborhood located approximately two miles from the downtown center of Portland. Already by 1942, historian Benjamin Band estimates, almost half of Portland's Jews lived in Woodfords.<sup>2</sup> In 1948, an education survey conducted by Dr. Alexander S. Kohanski, executive director of the Maine Jewish Council, reported that more than fifty percent of the children enrolled in the Portland Hebrew School lived in Woodfords, while only twenty-three percent lived on Munjoy Hill.<sup>3</sup> If they wanted to appear respectable, Jews could no longer live in poor, concentrated neighborhoods in the inner city, but rather had to take part in the so-called suburban American dream. Jews in Portland certainly felt pressure to move from Munjoy Hill to

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Hertzberg, The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), p. 303.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Band, Portland Jewry: Its Growth and Development (Portland, Maine: Jewish Historical Society, 1955), p. 83.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin, Portland Jewry, p. 90.

Woodfords. Those who still lived on the “Hill” were generally poorer and had a lower social status than those in Woodfords. Leonard Nelson, whose family lived on Dartmouth Street in the Woodfords area until 1946, estimates that between twenty-five and thirty percent of his neighbors were Jewish. Many of the early leaders of the Jewish community, including Norman Godfrey and Barnett Shur, lived within a few houses of one another. Even though Jews may have felt that moving to the suburbs would help them integrate into the mainstream, they continued to live in close proximity to one another. While many eventually migrated to the Woodfords area, it was unusual for Jews to live in the wealthier towns on the outskirts of Portland, particularly since some areas still legally excluded Jews by the use of restrictive housing covenants. In 1946, Leonard Nelson’s family moved to Falmouth Foreside, an affluent suburb just outside of the city. At the time, the Nelsons were the only Jewish family in Falmouth Foreside and Mr. Nelson recalls feeling “a pretty good sense of isolation, “ particularly since he and his brothers were the only Jews in the public school system.<sup>4</sup>

The Nelson family also lived near the Portland Country Club, which had a firm policy against admitting Jews. In fact, nearly all of the country clubs and fraternal organizations in Portland continued to deny membership to Jews after World War II. Some of these organizations stated their anti-Jewish policies more blatantly than others. During the 1940s and 1950s, one found signs in front of some clubs and resorts reading, “No Jews. No Dogs.”<sup>5</sup> Usually, however, clubs did not advertise their exclusionary policies. Instead, Jews and Gentiles simply knew where Jews were unwelcome. According to Nelson, “The Country Club did have exclusionary policies, no question about it . . . In

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<sup>4</sup>Leonard Nelson, interview by author (Portland, Maine, 11 January 2002).

<sup>5</sup>Rabbi Harry Sky, interview by author (Falmouth, Maine, 25 January 2002).



the 1950s, if Jews wanted to play golf in Portland, they played at Riverside and Portland Municipal Course [public golf courses].” Although one rarely found outright anti-Semitism in these clubs, one never found Jewish members either. Nelson recalls that an understanding existed among Portland residents that Jews did not join these clubs. He said, “Maybe it’s sort of the same way with blacks [who] knew which restaurants they shouldn’t go in.”<sup>6</sup>

Instead of pushing these boundaries in the immediate post-war era, Jews focused on improving other aspects of their lives. Despite continued discrimination, Portland Jews, like their counterparts elsewhere, improved their professional and economic status after World War II. Upwardly mobile both professionally and economically, Jews ascended to the middle class more rapidly than any other immigrant group in America. Their success was due in large part to the strong emphasis placed on education in Jewish households and a belief that education was a means of achieving status and prosperity.<sup>7</sup> The first generation of American Jews with college degrees emerged after World War II, due in part to the passage of the G.I. Bill. By 1950, American colleges and universities contained three times as many Jews as young Americans generally.<sup>8</sup> Portland Jews such as Phil Levinsky benefitted from the G.I. Bill. Levinsky recalls that a “52/20” club was created in Portland, and that as a member of the club, he was paid fifty dollars a week to attend Portland Junior College. Those who were unemployed and did not go to college were paid only twenty

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<sup>6</sup>Leonard Nelson, interview by author.

<sup>7</sup>Stephen J. Whitfield, “American Jews: Their Story Continues,” in Sarna, ed., The American Jewish Experience (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986), p. 286.

<sup>8</sup>Will Herberg, Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, Doubleday Company, 1960), p. 188.

dollars a week.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, this financial incentive provided young men, like Levinsky, who came from blue-collar families with enough impetus to attend college.

The G.I. Bill and the emphasis placed on education among American Jews resulted in a decline in the number of Jewish small business owners and an increase in the number of Jewish professionals during the 1950s. Portland Jewry experienced a similar transition. In the post-war years, the number of Jewish professionals in Portland rose as did the number of Jews in public life. In 1952, Louis Bernstein became the first Jewish president of a fundraising organization called the Portland Community Chest, a significant achievement for a community whose members still found themselves unwelcome in many fraternal clubs and civic institutions. Bernstein also became a Municipal Court Judge in 1952 at the same time his family law firm, Bernstein and Bernstein, was gaining prominence in the city. Justice Sidney Wernick joined Bernstein on the Municipal Court in 1956, and would eventually become a justice of the Maine Supreme Court. Barnett Shur, another prominent Jewish lawyer, served as corporation counsel for the city of Portland from 1946 to 1970.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, many Jews still felt excluded from full participation in Portland's professional community. According to Barnett Shur, "Well, I saw it [discrimination] in the early stages of my career as a lawyer when we found that most of our business was coming from Jewish people, and it took an awful long time to get involved with others [non-Jews]."<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Jews lacked a forum in which to make business connections with Gentiles because they were excluded from the civic and professional clubs where Portland

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<sup>9</sup>Phil Levinsky, interview by author (Portland, Maine, 7 October 2001).

<sup>10</sup>Benjamin Band, Portland Jewry: Supplement One (Portland, Maine: The Portland Jewish Historical Society, 1961), p. 9.

<sup>11</sup>Barnett Shur, interview by Dr. Konnilyn G. Feig, archival collection titled "Portraits of the Past: The Jews of Portland" (Portland, Maine: The Portland Jewish Historical Society, 8 September 1976), p. 30.

While they made some strides in this direction, the continuing presence of civic exclusion made it difficult for full social integration to occur. According to Shur, "I also saw it [discrimination] socially in the sense that you recognized that those people you met with during the daytime in the business, you might never see again after 6 p.m."<sup>11</sup> Mildred Nelson noted that Portland held on to these notions of social separation longer than larger cities. As she stated in an interview, "Portland was of the old vanguard. It had its 5 p.m. cut-off. For men who respected each other tremendously in business or in the legal profession, there still was a very small amount of socializing. I know that I personally might have met non-Jewish women and establish[ed] a rapport. They didn't have the guts once they knew I was Jewish to really include me in their strata."<sup>12</sup>

The Jewish Community Center, which served as a catalyst for the strengthening and flourishing of Portland Jewry between 1938 and the late 1950s, thus continued to be the locus of Jewish social and communal life in Portland. Nearly all Jewish groups and committees used the Center for meetings, and children and adults took advantage of the wide array of activities. The JCC provided a welcoming environment for Portland Jews, allowing them to explore their Jewishness and develop a strong sense of community. Unfortunately, the community was shaken by Norman Godfrey's untimely death from leukemia in January of 1947. Godfrey had long provided the energy and motivation for much of the Jewish community's achievement. In a memorial edition, the Bulletin lauded Godfrey's efforts as executive director of the Center: "The Center was started as a hope, but Norman Godfrey made it a living force in the community, a force that will continue to

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<sup>11</sup> Barnett Shur, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past," p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> Mildred Nelson, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past " (21 October 1976), p. 14.

live and perpetuate his memory as long as there is a Jewish person left in the city.”<sup>13</sup>

Despite the loss of their leader, Portland Jews remained confident in their ability to sustain a vibrant and cohesive community.

By all accounts, they had every reason to be confident. The athletic programs and children’s activities continued to be strong, and the Center even succeeded in establishing a full community orchestra. The JCC also organized an active program for teenagers called the Center Youth, which provided young Jews with multiple leadership opportunities. Every year, for example, during Center Youth Week, the Center Youth Board was allowed to “take over the Jewish Community Center” and run the entire organization for a week.<sup>14</sup> Leonard Nelson, who was president of Center Youth as a junior in high school, even served as president of the Center Youth of New England. Portland’s Jewish youth and adults alike began to be recognized outside of Maine for their strong leadership skills. In 1949, the National Jewish Welfare Board, which oversees Jewish community centers nationwide, recognized the strength of the Portland JCC when it elected two Portland Jewish leaders, Louis Bernstein and Barnett Shur, to its board of directors. The Jewish Community’s greatest achievement in the post-war era, however, was the creation of Center Day Camp, established in 1949.

Center Day Camp became the Jewish Community Center’s longest lasting and most successful project. Beginning in 1940, the Center had run a camp called Camp Jaysee in its Cumberland Avenue building. In 1949, the JCC, led by Harold Nelson, purchased a camp property on Sebago Lake in the town of Windham, about seventeen miles from Portland. The newly established Center Day Camp provided a place “where Jewish kids

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<sup>13</sup>Jewish Community Center Bulletin 31 January 1947.

<sup>14</sup>Jewish Community Center Bulletin, 26 March 1951.

can go, have a good time, have freedom, not be afraid that they are Jewish, and enjoy the beautiful things that we have to offer out there,” according to Tama Fineberg, a prominent member of Center Women’s Club.<sup>15</sup> In order to help the Jewish Community Center fund the camp and erect buildings, the Center Women’s Club mortgaged itself and solicited donations of buildings in honor of loved ones. The club also raised money to purchase camp equipment, such as docks for the lake. Finally, many of the women in the club donated their personal time and energy to keep the camp running. Volunteers helped clear rocks to build a beach, supervised bus trips to and from camp, and volunteered as counselors to supplement the paid camp director and lifeguards. Center Day Camp experienced great success and grew rapidly, from twenty-five campers initially, to 176 campers in 1959.<sup>16</sup> A scholarship program run by the Center Women’s Club facilitated some of this success. The club held fundraisers and solicited scholarships from bowling groups, sororities, and individuals so that every Jewish child who wanted to attend the camp could. The camp provided a solid foundation for the Center and continues to be one of the JCC’s most lasting contributions to the Portland Jewish Community.

Eleven years after the Center’s establishment, the leadership of the organization asked its members to examine the role the organization played in their lives. A 1949 editorial in the Jewish Community Center Bulletin asked Portland Jews the question, “Did you ever stop to think what it would mean to you if there were no Jewish Center?” The editorial staff reminded Portland Jews of the exclusion they faced before the creation of the Center, writing, “Lots of you remember a time when Jewish groups went from pillar to post

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<sup>15</sup>Tama Fineberg, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past” (30 August 1976), p. 28.

<sup>16</sup>Band, Portland Jewry, p. 16.

looking for meeting rooms. There weren't any signs saying 'No admission' but there weren't any vacancies either! . . . It's good to know we have a building where we're welcome, and we know you want to keep it that way." More significantly, the editorial argued that the JCC was necessary to improve the reputation of all Jews in the Portland community. The Center was lauded as "a medium for acquainting non-Jews with our cultural contribution to the community", because "as a Jew, you benefit from the recognition the Center gains for you, whether or not you use the Center." Furthermore, the cultural activities of the Center "build goodwill and respect for ALL Jews, in the non-Jewish community."<sup>17</sup> Portland Jews now began to view the JCC as a possible mechanism for their integration into mainstream Portland, rather than as a purely internal institution.

In the post-war era, the rhetoric of the JCC changed slightly. Rather than focusing solely on creating institutions where they could feel comfortable and learn to become good American citizens, Portland Jews began to examine their relationship with the non-Jewish community. Although in 1938 Norman Godfrey felt that this was an important task, the majority of the Jewish community did not follow suit until after World War II. This shift was partly due to the increased contact between Jews and non-Jews as a result of the war. The Jewish Community Center actively participated in the United Community War Chest between 1942 and 1947, and remained active after the war when the organization became known simply as the Portland Community Chest.

The Community Chest, comprised of twenty-four agencies of various denominations, attempted to combat social problems in Portland, including juvenile delinquency, infirmity, and poor elderly care. The JCC was proud to be a contributing member of the Community Chest, both because the organization promoted many of the ideals upon which the JCC was founded and because the JCC's involvement improved

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<sup>17</sup>Jewish Community Center Bulletin, 21 October 1949.

Jewish and Gentile relations. As an article in the Bulletin stated, the Community Chest helped “promote a true democratic spirit, inter-religious and inter-racial understanding, and good citizenship and good health among the youth and adults of the city.”<sup>18</sup> Members of the Center increasingly saw themselves not only as Jews who happened to live in Portland, but also as active citizens who contributed to city life. In 1952, the Community Chest held a large parade through the streets of Portland and the JCC eagerly participated, building a float shaped like a beehive that carried the slogan, “Jewish Community Center: A Beehive of Activity.” This was not the action of a group ashamed of its existence, but rather, the action of a group proud of all that it had achieved and determined to share its success with the non-Jewish community.

Despite these attempts to reach out to the non-Jewish community, there was less of an organized drive to combat discrimination in Portland than elsewhere in the country in the 1940s and 1950s. In the post-war era, American Jewish leaders employed two basic strategies to fight anti-Semitism: modifying prejudicial attitudes through the use of education and mass communication; and eliminating discriminatory practices through legal avenues. A wide range of Jewish organizations collaborated to end discrimination and to improve Jewish relations with the non-Jewish community in an effort described as the intergroup movement. According to historian Stuart Svonkin, three organizations, the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, and the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, played key roles in leading the movement, and had a critical impact on Jewish identity and the American political culture. Svonkin asserts that these three organizations were instrumental in forming an American Jewish ethnic identity and became

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<sup>18</sup>Jewish Community Center Bulletin, 13 October 1950.

the new representatives of American Jewry in the post-war era.<sup>19</sup> The intergroup movement gained little momentum in Portland. Aside from a few activities sponsored by B'nai B'rith and the JCC, Portland Jewry did not effectively organize to combat discrimination in the 1950s.

There are a number of possible explanations for the reluctance of Portland Jews to mobilize against prejudice. First, in order to organize a drive against discrimination, a community needs strong leaders with the time and energy to devote to the cause, as well as the resources to finance the organizational activities. The small size of the Portland Jewish community meant that its personnel and financial resources were necessarily limited. Although the community no doubt had strong leaders, most of them devoted their time to running the institutions already in existence, such as the JCC and the Federation. Furthermore, a number of Portland Jews with the education and potential to lead a successful battle against discrimination left the city for greater opportunity in places such as Boston and New York. According to Leonard Nelson, "some of the most gifted people in Portland might have moved to Boston. . . there's always a bleeding away of talent [from the smaller towns]. That's the history of the whole world. Small towns, the talent bleeds away, and the most ambitious will go where the opportunities are."<sup>20</sup>

Second, because Maine is geographically isolated, it often took longer for political and social reform to impact the state. For example, the Civil Rights movement had almost no presence in Portland simply because few African Americans lived in the city and Portland residents thus had little exposure to the social conditions that created the need for reform. Elsewhere in the United States, the fight for racial equality provided the necessary

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<sup>19</sup>Stuart Svonkin, Jews Against Prejudice (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 2.

<sup>20</sup>Leonard Nelson, interview by author.



impetus for Jews to combat their own exclusion. At the same time, along with a lack of exposure, Maine residents tended to do things in their own way. Like other Mainers, Portland Jews may have viewed themselves as unique individuals who did not always follow social trends, and thus remained content to accept the status quo. When Rabbi Harry Sky first came to Portland, he was told, “Don’t stir things up. Why look for trouble. . . .” When asked why Portland Jews harbored such an attitude, Sky responded, “Portland was a small town, it was away from the main line, it knew what was happening in Boston and other places. . . . [But] we have our own way of doing things [in Maine].”<sup>21</sup> While a sense of individualism could explain Portland Jews’ desire to accept the status quo, this explanation is not entirely convincing since Portland Jewry did follow other American Jewish trends. A more plausible explanation stems from the strong, cohesive nature of Portland Jewry. Because Portland Jews successfully created internal institutions, they did not feel deprived socially or culturally. They had succeeded in providing themselves with everything their non-Jewish neighbors had, and were thus content to remain in a comfortable and safe, yet segregated environment. It was only in the late 1950s, as Portland Jews became wealthier and better educated, that they recognized the disadvantages of social exclusion and began to fight back.

Despite the lack of a community-wide movement in the 1950s, certain individuals did try to push the boundaries of discrimination so that Jews could integrate more fully into Portland society. During this period, the few anti-discrimination activities that did occur in Portland used the educational approach to combatting prejudice. Beginning in 1950, under the direction of Dr. Benjamin Zolov, the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith sponsored an anti-hatred radio series on station WGAN in Portland entitled “The New Frontier Series.” The series’ organizers attempted to educate Portlanders about prejudice

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<sup>21</sup>Rabbi Harry Sky, interview by author (Falmouth, Maine, 25 January 2002).

in the hopes of ending discrimination against all minorities in higher education, employment, housing, public accommodations, and clubs. They felt that discrimination undermined Portland's potential to achieve strong community relations and promote human rights world-wide. Thus, the series was "designed to dramatize the vast potential of human resources, energies, and contributions which can be made available to democracy if present barriers of prejudice and discrimination are removed."<sup>22</sup> Portland Jews recognized that they would have to appeal to the patriotic, democratic sensibility of non-Jews in Portland if they wished to end discrimination.

In Portland, however, as Jews began to shift their attention towards integration, their internal institutions began to suffer. Enrollment in the Portland Hebrew School declined significantly after World War II, due in part to its affiliation with the Orthodox synagogues. For many Jews, the curriculum was not progressive enough to serve Jewish needs in post-war Portland. The Portland Hebrew School also had a problematic location in downtown Portland, far from the Woodfords neighborhood on the outskirts of Portland where many Jews now lived. In a 1945 article in the Bulletin, Hebrew School director Reuben Resnick tried to lure Jewish families back to the school by arguing that "we must view Jewish education on the basis of our present living, therefore we are endeavoring to create interesting experiences for the Jewish child in a Jewish school." The school hoped to provide a curriculum compatible with "present living" by "introducing new and modern methods of instruction."<sup>23</sup> These efforts did cause the school's enrollment to increase from sixty students in 1944 to ninety-one in 1945. Despite the new curriculum, however, the number of pupils dropped again in 1948 to eighty-five, a surprisingly small number

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<sup>22</sup>Jewish Community Center Bulletin, 1 December 1950.

<sup>23</sup>Jewish Community Center Bulletin, 28 September 1945.

given that the Portland Jewish community then contained 3,300 Jews.<sup>24</sup> The Sunday School at the JCC, with an enrollment of only fifty-two children in 1948, did not fare much better. It seemed that young Jews did not wish to affiliate with Jewish educational institutions in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Despite this lack of interest on the part of Jewish children, Jewish adults in Portland showed an increased commitment to educational activities. In 1949, the Jewish Federation established the Federation Adult Institute, which provided educational programming for Portland's Jews. The Institute addressed topics of national and international significance, such as "What must the American Jews do to assure the survival of a Jewish Group Life on this continent?" and "Shall Israel be a religious state or shall the principle of separation of church and state, as we understand it in America, apply to Israel?"<sup>25</sup> The presence of these programs evidences a growing awareness among Portland Jews of national and world affairs. Rather than focusing solely on Jewish institution building, the Portland Jewish community began to focus on causes outside its local concerns.

Although Portland Jews exhibited a broader social consciousness, the city's tradition of separation remained strong, making it difficult for Jews to make an impact right away. The Jewish Federation, which continued to grow after World War II, exemplified the gap that remained between Jews and non-Jews. Although the Jewish Federation was initially conceived as a central fundraising organization, Portland Jews quickly realized that the unity created by the Federation could be used to further social welfare causes in the Jewish community as well. Charity and social justice have always been key components of Judaism, as has the idea that "you take care of your own." When Jules Krems became

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<sup>24</sup>Michael R. Cohen, Jerusalem of the North: An Analysis of Religious Modernization in Portland, Maine's Jewish Community, 1860-1950 (Providence, Rhode Island: Brown University, 2000).

<sup>25</sup>Jewish Community Center Bulletin, 4 November 1949.

director of the Federation in 1948, his job description emphasized fundraising, but during his tenure, the focus of the organization changed from fundraising to addressing the issues of social justice and welfare. Portland Jews continued to raise enormous sums of money, particularly for the cause of Israel. In 1948, for example, they contributed \$292,000 to the Federation campaign. According to Charlotte Wernick, who was active in Federation fundraising, "there was a very long time when I was in Portland where the Jews were supposed to take care of their own and this was the pitch: that you needed to help the Jews overseas, to help the poor Jews in the city, to help Hebrew University, Jewish University or whatever you call them, and that was the whole pitch. You know, we have to take care of everything ourselves."<sup>26</sup> In the aftermath of World War II, however, the Federation could not meet all of the community's needs with financial contributions alone. As Portland Jews were called upon to help resettle Holocaust survivors, the Jewish Federation was forced to become a social service agency.

After World War II, when many Holocaust survivors wanted to resettle in the United States, local Jewish organizations often took responsibility for helping them do so. Previously in Portland, two groups, Hebrew Charities and the Council of Jewish Women, had organized all social welfare activities. While Hebrew Charities was known as an alms-giving agency, the Council of Jewish Women acted as a social work agency. When refugees from Europe came to Portland, they were in both dire financial and social need. Because Hebrew Charities and the Council of Jewish Women could not meet these needs on their own, the Federation had to assume a role. Krems, who was trained as a social worker, looked to expand the role of his agency and proposed merging the three organizations into one Jewish social service organization.

The Federation began by forming a Refugee Resettlement Committee, which

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<sup>26</sup>Charlotte Wernick, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past" (27 September 1976), p. 23.

recommended in 1949 that the Federation assume the responsibility of resettling twelve refugee families a year, and that \$10,000 of the overall budget be allocated for this purpose. According to the minutes of a meeting on February 19, 1949, "It was therefore recognized that this request was being made because there is no agency in the community, including the Council of Jewish Women and the United Hebrew Charities, capable of providing such service to the community at this time."<sup>27</sup> By March 1950, although ten displaced persons had already been settled in Portland and assistance had been provided to six non-sponsored individuals, the various Jewish social service organizations in Portland still operated independently of one another. Jewish leaders recognized that closer cooperation among the groups would allow for more efficient programming. Thus, on December 20, 1950, Federation directors voted to establish a unified Jewish social service agency, to be known as Jewish Family Services. The agency would operate independently of the Federation, but be administered by Krems, who would also maintain his position as director of the Federation. The agency proposal outlined the following objectives:

To provide a skilled social service to Jewish families and individuals in need of financial assistance and counselling service.

To bring together under a single and efficient administration the variety of services to families and individuals now being rendered by the Jewish Federation, the United Hebrew Charities and the Council of Jewish Women.

To represent the Jewish community in welfare planning councils on the local, state and national level.<sup>28</sup>

Out of a desire to help their brethren in other parts of the world, Portland Jews united to further the cause of social welfare. Although the city of Portland had its own welfare agencies, most Jews were reluctant to avail themselves of these resources. The belief still persisted among Jews and Gentiles that Jews should take care of their own.

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<sup>27</sup>Band, Portland Jewry, p. 96.

<sup>28</sup>Band, Portland Jewry, p. 97.

Krems tried to eliminate this misconception, but Portland Jews did not begin to take advantage of city services until the 1960s, when a multitude of social barriers fell. Although some of the services offered by Jewish Family Services may have duplicated programs already available in the city, they were more accessible for the majority of Jews, who felt uncomfortable using the city's resources. JFS also tried to fill gaps in Portland's social welfare services. For example, Krems helped establish a shelter for religious transients and a free loan agency, both of which did not exist in Portland. Still, the principal function of the agency remained refugee resettlement. According to Krems, "The refugee resettlement program was the catalyst for the joining of the Federation with the other two groups into the Jewish Family Services. . . The social service functions then included relief, resettlement, counseling, referral to other agencies, free loan, the transient shelter; these were all of the functions developed under my leadership."<sup>29</sup> A multitude of Jewish volunteers taught language classes, found refugees apartments and employment, and helped them adjust to life in Portland. Once again, Portland Jews developed a successful communal institution to provide services unavailable elsewhere to Jewish refugees.

Portland Jews also expanded their religious horizons in the post-war era. Portland, as the "Jerusalem of the North," supported only Orthodox institutions until 1948, when Conservative Temple Beth El was founded. In the mid-1940s, a schism developed between older Portland Jews who wanted to preserve traditional forms of Judaism, and younger Jews who looked for more modern religious practices. Furthermore, all of the Orthodox synagogues were located in the middle of the city in what had previously been the Jewish center of Portland, yet the post-war split in Jewish residential concentration necessitated a new synagogue in Woodfords. As the movement against Orthodoxy and towards

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<sup>29</sup>Jules Krems, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past" (14 October 1976), p. 27.

Conservatism gained momentum nationwide, Portland Jews considered creating a Conservative temple. According to Louis Bernstein, one of Beth El's founders, "What happened was the second generation turned away from it [Orthodoxy]. They went to the Synagogue just to make an appearance, to show their parents that they knew the day was a holiday; but they never stayed for the services, I saw that coming."<sup>30</sup>

In response to the waning enthusiasm for the Orthodox synagogue, Bernstein called a meeting at the Eastland Hotel in 1948, where a large group of Portland Jews pledged over \$100,000 towards the creation of a Conservative congregation. In September of 1949 a groundbreaking ceremony occurred on Wadsworth Street in Woodfords, where Temple Beth El would be constructed. The temple, which cost \$250,000 to build, was completed a year later and dedicated on December 3, 1950. Rabbi Max D. Davidson, president of the Rabbinical Assembly of America, attended the dedication, where he praised Portland Jewry for its achievement. The Portland Evening Express quoted Davidson: "In these times when 'we feel more insecure than ever,' he said, only such acts of faith as the building of the Temple Beth-El 'will give us the courage to meet tomorrow and to project ourselves and our children into the future.'"<sup>31</sup>

The new temple building included a Hebrew school wing for the children of the congregation, and enrollment in the school increased rapidly, from sixty students in 1949 to 110 in 1950. Many of the Portland Jews who joined Temple Beth El were trying to reconnect with their Jewish roots and wanted their children to receive a Jewish education. Although the founders of the new Temple did not wish to deplete Orthodox membership, the Orthodox synagogues still feared such a loss. Bernstein and others tried to reassure the

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<sup>30</sup>Louis Bernstein, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past" (25 August 1976), p. 21.

<sup>31</sup> "New Temple Beth-El Dedicated in Ceremonies Here Sunday," Portland Evening Express (Portland, Maine, 4 December 1950).

Orthodox groups by arguing that a Conservative congregation would help bolster religious participation among the city's Jews. Beth El hoped to draw those previously unaffiliated Jews who were "out on the golf course on the High Holidays when they should be in the Synagogue" and draw them "back into a house of worship."<sup>32</sup> In fact, the Orthodox congregations continued to grow after Beth El's founding, allaying some of the fears of their leaders.

By 1950, the small Jewish community in Portland successfully supported four synagogues: three Orthodox and one Conservative. Bernstein credits the quick establishment of Temple Beth El to the cohesive Jewish population created by the Jewish Community Center. When asked how Portland Jews organized Beth El so rapidly, he replied, "The Center was the combining force. We didn't have Conservative and we didn't have Orthodoxy. We only had Orthodoxy. When we founded the Center, we were a united people. We had the backing of the entire community."<sup>33</sup>

Throughout the 1950s, Portland Jews took advantage of the unity within their community to strengthen both their secular and their religious institutions. Pleased with the vibrant social and recreational life that they had created from themselves, they exhibited reluctance to organize against continued discrimination in the city. Because Maine was geographically and culturally isolated from larger cities, social reform tended to have little impact on the state. The absence of an organized effort to combat exclusion may have been a blessing in disguise for Portland Jewry in the 1950s. Rather than relying on national organized entities such as the American Jewish Committee and the American Jewish Congress, Portland Jewry developed self-reliance and a strong network of leaders that

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<sup>32</sup>Louis Bernstein, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past" (25 August 1976). pp. 22-23.

<sup>33</sup>Louis Bernstein, interview by Feig, p. 22.



would eventually enable the community to vastly improve its social position in the city.

### Chapter 3

#### Portland Jews Become First-Class Citizens

A decade after the end of World War II, Portland Jews had finally achieved solid middle-class status, which resulted in both economic and professional integration with the city's non-Jewish population. Despite this level of acceptance, Portland's Jewish institutions still served a critical social need for the Jewish community. As was the case across America, Jews in Portland experienced varying degrees of social exclusion that prevented them from playing an equal role in Portland's civic community. They thus continued to rely on the services and activities of their own internal institutions. As opposed to the immediate post-war period, when they had accepted the status quo, Portland Jews began to actively fight discrimination in the 1960s. By using a variety of legal, social, and economic tactics, Portland Jews ultimately succeeded in ending discrimination in the city's civic, cultural, and social institutions. As these barriers fell, Portland Jews immediately played an active role in the city and had a sizeable impact given their small numbers. While Portland Jewry was creating a place for itself in the non-Jewish community, its own internal institutions, specifically the Jewish Community Center and Jewish Family Services, became less important. Portland Jews were thus forced to face questions of assimilation and had to learn how to balance their divergent American and Jewish identities. This chapter will examine the motivations and methods of those Jews in Portland who were instrumental in breaking down social barriers. How did they succeed in ending discrimination and what consequences did this have for the vibrancy of Portland's Jewish community? Why were Portland Jews able to play so large a role in the non-Jewish community after having been excluded for so long?

By the mid-1950s, most American Jews had joined the ranks of the middle class and were sharing their suburban communities with Gentile neighbors. Many of the typical

socioeconomic barriers, such as those in housing, higher education, and employment, had fallen. Nevertheless, American Jews still did not stand on even ground with their non-Jewish counterparts. Socially, Jews continued to be viewed as inferior. Despite their newfound wealth and professional success, Jews were excluded from civic institutions and fraternal organizations, and had yet to break into the highest positions in corporate America. Furthermore, Jews and Gentiles rarely socialized outside the office. Most Americans abided by the “gentleman’s agreement” mentality that all interaction between Jews and Gentiles should end at five o’clock when the work day ended. This unspoken tension began to disappear in the 1960s, a decisive decade for America’s Jews.

John F. Kennedy’s election to president in 1960 signalled the start of a period of optimism for American Jewry. To many Jews, the fact that Kennedy, a Catholic, could be elected, meant that “outsiders” had finally conquered the dominant political scene in America.<sup>1</sup> Thus, as a religious minority, Jews had a chance to gain a political and social voice in the United States. Phil Levinsky, owner of Levinsky’s clothing store, felt the impact of Kennedy’s election directly. Up until 1960, his store had been known as New England Army Supply Company. Levinsky and his father did not feel comfortable putting their name on the sign above the store because they feared that their Jewish name would drive away business. With Kennedy’s election, many Jews felt that the period of anti-Semitism had ended. Levinsky credits Kennedy with creating a “true working democracy” and says that he “always felt that he [Kennedy] made us first-class citizens.” In 1960, New England Army Supply became known as Levinsky’s.<sup>2</sup>

The 1960s in American Jewish life were also characterized by a new openness about

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Hertzberg, The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), p. 346.

<sup>2</sup> Phil Levinsky, interview by author (Portland, Maine, 7 October 2001).

the Holocaust, social activism among American Jews, improved inter-group relations, and an increase in the number of Jews in positions of power. In Boston, for example, well-respected Jewish professionals took leadership positions alongside the Yankee protestant elite on the library, symphony, and museum boards.<sup>3</sup> Increased economic prosperity combined with the decline of anti-Semitism helped to open doors in the community for successful Jews.<sup>4</sup> Nationwide, however, as Jews moved into the mainstream, many Jewish communities also lost their cohesiveness and their vibrancy. Although Portland's Jewish community experienced such a loss, it was initially only because of the community's cohesiveness that barriers in Portland fell at all. The Jewish Community Center, the Jewish Federation, and Jewish Family Services all helped facilitate the transition of Jews into non-Jewish society. Through their communal institutions, Portland Jews learned valuable leadership skills and solidified their reputation in the non-Jewish community as an organized and determined group of people. Ultimately, it was their *internal* institutions that enabled Portland Jews to make a place for themselves in the external community.

Socially, Jews still lived the lives of second-class citizens in the post-war era. Portland Jews knew that they would never stand on equal footing with their non-Jewish neighbors until they had full social access. In order to gain access to the city's country clubs and fraternal organizations, Portland Jews relied on two different techniques. In some cases, individual Jews managed to gain access to an organization, thereby opening the door just enough to eventually let in other Jews. In other cases, Portland Jews actively combatted

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<sup>3</sup>Leon A. Jick, "From Margin to Mainstream: 1917 - 1967", in Sarna and Smith, eds., The Jews of Boston (Boston: The Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston, 1995), p. 107.

<sup>4</sup>Gerald Sorin, Tradition Transformed: The Jewish Experience in America (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 206.

discrimination through the use of law.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Jews could not join most clubs or fraternal organizations in Portland. In 1943, the Masonic Order in Portland accepted a Jewish member, long after Masons in cities such as Boston integrated. When Dr. Benjamin Zolov became head of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) of B'nai B'rith, he came into contact with ADL leaders in Boston who were surprised to learn that the Masons in Portland did not accept Jews. He told the head of the Masons in Boston, who was also a member of the ADL, "If you don't believe what I'm telling you, you communicate with Portland and let me know.' And he did about three weeks later. He said, 'It's true, no Jews are going to be taken into the Masons in Portland.'"<sup>5</sup> Although no one can explain why the Portland order followed a different policy than its counterpart in Boston, the pattern was often repeated in Portland, where Jews remained socially excluded longer than elsewhere. In Portland, few Gentiles seemed to be aware of the anti-Jewish policies that were so prevalent. Patients of Dr. Zolov who belonged to various clubs often invited him to join, unaware that their organization excluded Jews. According to Zolov, many of his patients acted surprised when he told them he could not join because he was Jewish. Many investigated the situation themselves, only to find that Jews could not, in fact, join their clubs. According to Zolov, "They [his patients] were nice enough to come back. They are not supposed to carry any tales about the fraternal order. They came back and told me no Jews were being taken into the fraternal organizations."<sup>6</sup>

The fact that many Gentiles in Portland had no knowledge of the restrictive policies of their own clubs indicates that much of the discrimination in Portland remained under the

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<sup>5</sup>Dr. Benjamin Zolov, interview by Dr. Konnilyn G. Feig, archival collection titled "Portraits of the Past: The Jews of Portland" (Portland, Maine: The Portland Jewish Historical Society, 7 September 1976), p. 27.

<sup>6</sup>Dr. Benjamin Zolov, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past," p. 27.

table. People did not discuss the inequalities they observed, and few, Jews and Gentiles alike, challenged the policies until men like Dr. Zolov and Rabbi Harry Sky encouraged them to do so. The Masons admitted one Jew into their order in 1943, when David Diamond, an optometrist and a lieutenant in the army, found an army colleague to sponsor him and was allowed to join the organization. Although Diamond had access to the order, perhaps indicating evidence of tokenism, the club continued to exclude other Jews. Later, in the early 1950s, a lawyer named Paul Powers became the head of the Masonic Order in Portland. Louis Bernstein and others who knew Powers approached him and said, “Paul, what sort of nonsense is this? Maine is the only state where Jews are not members of the Masonic Orders.” Under pressure, the Masons in Portland formed a new Brotherhood Lodge that admitted Jews.<sup>7</sup> The Masons story indicates that organizations in Portland would admit Jews if challenged, particularly when these clubs had abandoned their restrictive covenants nationwide.

The Rotary Club in Portland also became more inclusive when Portland Jews challenged its policies and compared them to the policies of Rotary Clubs elsewhere. The Portland Rotary Club had never admitted a Jew, despite the fact that Rotary was a professional organization and many prominent Jewish professionals lived in Portland. According to Sumner Bernstein, a prominent Jewish lawyer, “there were many . . . Jewish people in the community who were certainly the equal, if not the superior by any standards, of the group of men in the Portland Rotary Club. But nobody ever cracked it; and the reason always given was that there was not a classification available.”<sup>8</sup> In order to join, every member of Rotary had to have a professional, business, or trade classification, yet

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<sup>7</sup>Sumner Bernstein, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past” (16 September 1976), p. 20.  
Note: The exact date of the event is unknown.

<sup>8</sup>Sumner Bernstein, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past, “ p. 20.

whenever Jews had tried to join, they were told that their particular classification was full. Club leaders did not directly express anti-Semitism, but rather found other means to keep Jews out of Rotary.

In the early 1950s, however, the group elected a new president named Percy Dunn, who had worked as a Boy Scout executive with Israel Bernstein. In examining the national Rotary guidelines, Dunn and Bernstein discovered the existence of a "rabbi" classification. Clearly, Rotarians across the country had opened their doors to Jews. Because the Portland Rotary Club could not claim that the rabbi classification was full, Dunn and Bernstein contacted Rabbi Ephraim Bennett of Temple Beth El and asked him to join the organization. Under national Rotary guidelines, the Rotarians had no choice but to accept Rabbi Bennett, thereby admitting the first Jew to the Portland Rotary Club in the early 1950s. Because their exclusive policies had been exposed, Rotary soon admitted more Jews. According to Sumner Bernstein, "Nobody got measles and before you knew it, my father was admitted. They found a classification that was open among all of those. Come on now, there are nine million lawyer classifications. My father became a member; I became a member; Morrie Cox, who was Clerk of Courts, became a member."<sup>9</sup> Shortly after being admitted, however, Bernstein quit the club, creating quite a stir in the community. Many Jews felt that Bernstein should have retained his membership since it had taken so long for Jews to be included in the first place. Nevertheless, Bernstein did not wish to be a member of Rotary, and as soon as he saw that Jews were being admitted, he quit. According to Rabbi Sky, Rotary acted more progressively than other groups because it recognized talent and admitted people based on their professional status. Although some Jewish leaders hoped the Rotary situation would set a precedent in Portland, the majority of Portland Jews still seemed willing to accept the status quo. It would be another decade before the rest of Portland's

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<sup>9</sup>Sumner Bernstein, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past," p. 20.

fraternal lodges and country clubs began admitting Jews. Nevertheless, the small minority of Jews who pushed the boundaries continued to grow and gain support.

Dr. Benjamin Zolov remained a key voice in speaking out against discrimination in Portland. As president of the Anti-Defamation League of B'Nai B'rith, Dr. Zolov received many complaints of discrimination at Maine hotels and resorts, which were notorious for discrimination against Jews and blacks. Usually, the hotels and resorts did not have explicit discriminatory policies, but rather would tell Jews and blacks who inquired about rooms that they had no vacancies. In 1954, the problem came to a head when the Maine Medical Association, with approximately 1,000 members, planned to hold its annual meeting at the Colony Hotel in Kennebunkport, which refused to accommodate Jews. When Dr. Zolov learned of the medical association's plans, he contacted his friend Dr. Gene O'Donnell, who told Dr. Mahaney, president of the Association, that if he did not change the meeting location, a letter-writing campaign would ensue. Dr. Zolov then proceeded to write letters to twenty-six doctors in Portland explaining the problem, and received replies from all of them indicating that they would refuse to attend a meeting at the Colony Hotel. Dr. Zolov passed these responses on to Dr. Mahaney and threatened to write 1,000 more letters to all of the doctors in the state if the plans did not change. Dr. Mahaney told Dr. Zolov that if he would coordinate the meeting, then he could hold it wherever he wanted. Thus, Dr. Zolov immediately made arrangements to hold the association's convention at the Eastland Hotel in Portland, which did accommodate Jews. Although Dr. Zolov had obtained a minor victory, he realized that more permanent changes needed to occur in Maine's resort accommodation policies.

As a college student, Dr. Zolov had worked as a waiter at a summer resort in Maine called Birch Villa Inn. The inn, which accommodated one hundred guests, mainly served a Gentile clientele from the New York state area. In 1927 or 1928, Zolov waited on a rabbi who loved the inn and wanted to spend the weekend there with his wife and children.



Before they had the chance to make reservations, however, the owner of the inn approached Zolov and said, “Look Ben, I know you are Jewish and I have nothing against you. I have nothing against Jewish people, but I can’t have any Jewish people coming here. My own clientele might resent it and we haven’t had this in the past. I just don’t want to get started.”<sup>10</sup> Despite the fact that it was the off-season and there were no guests staying at the inn, the owner refused to change her policy. With this upsetting memory driving his desire to change these attitudes in the state, Zolov embarked upon a six-year lobbying campaign to pass a resort discrimination bill in the state of Maine in 1954.

Dr. Zolov worked with Justice Sidney Wernick, William Earles, a state representative, and Governor Clinton Clauson to push the bill through the Maine Legislature. Dr. Zolov and Justice Wernick both testified before the legislature and made appeals to democratic principles in their speeches. According to Justice Wernick, “The legislators did not want to be on record as voting against something which in principle at least complied with what the Constitution requires. And it was being put on a basis of law so that it really was in constitutional terms.” Nevertheless, it took six years for the final passage of the bill because every year the Legislature rejected it. This may have been due in part to a real estate lobby that tried to suppress the bill on the grounds that it would harm the hotel business. Hotel and resort owners argued that most of their clientele would not approve of sharing their vacations with Jewish guests. According to Justice Wernick, resort owners who testified before the State Legislature said, “You know, this isn’t how I feel, but I have a clientele who we’ve been having over twenty years or so and this is how they feel and I’m in business and I have to accommodate and I would not want to be forced to

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<sup>10</sup>Dr. Benjamin Zolov, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past,” p. 30.

change because I may lose my clientele.”<sup>11</sup> The real estate lobby could only counteract a bill promoting equality and justice for so long, and finally, in 1959, a public accommodation law passed that made it illegal for hotels and resorts to discriminate on the basis of race, creed or color. For his efforts, the Jewish Federation awarded Dr. Zolov with the chairmanship of the Community Relations Committee in 1960. Justice Wernick saw the law as a key step in changing discriminatory attitudes in the state because he believed that “you can legislate morals. . . In other words, if the law says something, that sets the pattern and it becomes more and more difficult for people to keep these attitudes inside themselves. Bit by bit when the law develops patterns of conduct, people begin to feel them. So I feel that legislation can resolve attitudes, can have impact on them, affect them.”<sup>12</sup> Zolov and Wernick’s legislative coup proved that the prejudicial attitudes of Maine Gentiles could be changed when directly challenged.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the Jewish community attempted to gain recognition in Portland through involvement in social welfare, as opposed to organizing to end discrimination. In the early 1950s, the Jewish Community Center became a Portland United Fund recipient, which helped bring the Jewish community into contact with other groups performing social services. In 1957, Barnett Shur became president of the local United Fund Campaign, and Harold Nelson followed suit in 1960. Many Portland Jews point to Shur’s ascendancy to the presidency of the United Fund as a significant achievement for the Jewish community. The presence of a leader of the JCC in this important citywide role meant that the Jewish community would have a strong voice and

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<sup>11</sup>Justice Sidney Wernick, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past” (30 September 1976), p. 30.

<sup>12</sup>Justice Sidney Wernick, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past,” p. 30.

could strive to make a larger impact in Portland.

During the 1960s, the Council of Jewish Women engaged in a variety of social service activities. In 1965 it helped establish the Portland section of WICS (Women in Community Service), a national organization comprised of the National Councils of Jewish, Catholic, and Negro Women, and the United Church Women. Through WICS, the council worked with the Women's Job Corps and started a summer program for disadvantaged pre-schoolers, which eventually became Portland's first Head Start program. In 1960, the Jewish Home for the Aged became an accredited nursing home and received a federal grant of \$110,000 to expand its facilities. Because the Home was open to people of all backgrounds, it served a crucial social need in Portland and enabled Portland Jews to improve their reputation in the city's institutional life.

In contrast to active Jewish groups in large cities combatting exclusion, Portland had not experienced a strong organizational push to end discrimination in the 1950s and 1960s. It was thus up to individual Jews with strong leadership skills to make their presence known in Portland. While the Bernstein and Bernstein law firm was well-respected and the city was populated with Jewish lawyers, many of the larger law firms in Portland, such as Pierce Atwood and Verrill & Dana, had no Jewish lawyers.<sup>13</sup> Although no one recalls that either office had a specific policy of excluding Jews, as was the case with many of the country clubs, Jews knew not to apply. Barnett Shur, however, had been the corporate counsel for the city of Portland since 1946. The presence of a Jew in such an important city function clearly signalled that non-Jewish Portland was aware of the Jewish community and the talent of many of its leaders. Sumner Bernstein, a member of the Bernstein and Bernstein firm, also played a prominent role in city politics when he became a member of the Portland City Council in 1955. He served in this capacity until 1961, and acted as chairman of both

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<sup>13</sup>Sumner Bernstein, interview by author (conducted by phone, 17 January 2002).

the Housing Authority and the School Committee. At the time of his election in 1955, he was the only Jewish member of the council. According to Bernstein, while his initial election created a minor stir, his Jewishness ultimately played no role in his experience on the City Council. Sumner and his wife, Rosalyn, seemed to be an unusual case among Portland Jews. Sumner, who was raised in Portland, was attending Harvard Law School when he met Rosalyn, a Bronx, New York native. The pair came back to Portland in 1950, and according to Rosalyn, moved easily in both the Jewish and non-Jewish communities. Rosalyn immediately joined the executive boards of a variety of institutions, including the city adoption agency, the League of Women Voters, the Maine Medical Center, and the Portland Museum of Art. Although she was often the only Jew in these positions, she claims that she never felt uncomfortable. The Bernsteins alternated between the Jewish and non-Jewish spheres because Sumner's parents, Israel and Rebecca, had already established themselves as well-respected figures in Portland. This, combined with Sumner's professional prestige as a member of Bernstein and Bernstein, allowed the couple social access to non-Jews that was denied to other Jews in the city. Rosalyn concedes that most of the boards she joined were closed to other Jews, and that the social lives of the vast bulk of their Jewish peers were restricted to the Jewish community.<sup>14</sup> The Bernsteins' position in the non-Jewish community, however, would ultimately enable them to play an active role in ending discrimination against Jews in Portland.

While most Jews did not move comfortably in non-Jewish circles like the Bernsteins did, other prominent Jews held public positions in Portland beginning in the decade after WWII. Mitchell Cope served on the Portland City Council alongside Bernstein between 1957 and 1960, Arnold W. Briggs was elected to the Maine State Legislature in 1958, Sidney W. Wernick became a Municipal Court Judge in 1956, and

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<sup>14</sup>Rosalyn Bernstein, interview by author (conducted by phone, 17 January 2002).

would eventually become a Justice of the Maine Supreme Court, and Morris Cox had served as Clerk of the U.S. District Court since 1948. Jewish leaders also occupied prominent financial positions in Portland. Israel Bernstein was a founding director of the Casco Bank and Trust Company and a director of the Home Savings and Loan Association. His son, Sumner, served as a director of the Cumberland Savings & Loan Association and as a incorporator of Portland Savings Bank along with Justice Wernick and Saul H. Sheriff. Maine Savings Bank also had three Jewish incorporators on its board: Barnett Shur, Judge Louis Bernstein, and Abraham E. Elowitch. Clearly, the same prominent Jews often served on multiple citywide boards and performed leadership duties within the Jewish community. They were able to combine some of their Jewish and non-Jewish activities to form partnerships between the two communities.

Aside from Rosalyn Bernstein's presence on the museum board, Jews had played almost no role in directing the city's cultural institutions. When Leonard Nelson came back to Portland in 1960 after attending law school, he noticed the lack of Jewish involvement in the city's cultural institutions. Determined to change this aspect of Jewish life in Portland, he succeeded in becoming president of the Portland Symphony Orchestra in 1963. Given that he was a Jew and much younger than all of his fellow board members, the Jewish community immediately lauded his achievement. Although he was the only Jew on the symphony board, Nelson says that he felt confident in the role of president. In fact, he was able to use his position to publicize some of the discrimination in Portland that had been kept quiet for so long. For example, because many Portland residents were unaware that the Portland Country Club excluded Jews, Nelson worked to increase awareness of this issue. In an interview he stated, "I was president from '63 through '66, and the first thing I did when I became president, I made it clear to the whole board that no board meetings would ever again be held in the Country Club during my presidency, nor would any symphony events be held in the Country Club, and I said because of their anti-Jewish policies, and a

couple of trustees looked at me and said, ““What do you mean anti-Jewish policies?””<sup>15</sup> Nelson challenged the trustees to investigate the matter, and they learned that Jews could not, in fact, join the Portland Country Club, nor could they join most of the other fraternal organizations in the area. No symphony events occurred at the Portland Country Club throughout Nelson’s tenure as symphony president. While this symbolic gesture certainly increased awareness of discrimination among the city’s elite, the policies of the clubs themselves had yet to be challenged.

Leonard Nelson had a positive experience working with the symphony board, while Clarice Shur, who served on the women’s board of the Symphony, felt conspicuous as the only Jew. She said, “I was their Jew, and I was terribly uncomfortable. This was a group of very elite women. I remember the first house I went to a meeting, and a butler opened the door, and I almost dropped dead because I was hardly the butler type. . . They weren’t very fond of me. That’s the whole answer, and I wasn’t very fond of them. . .”<sup>16</sup> While Portland’s non-Jewish elite felt that perhaps they *should* include Jews in their activities, many were unable to truly welcome Jews into their society. The practice of tokenism may have made Portland Jews feel uncomfortable, but it did enable them to play a more significant role in the non-Jewish community.

Because Portland Jewry founded and supported a number of successful institutions in its small community, many different people had the opportunity to perform leadership roles. Portland Jews built the Jewish Community Center, the Jewish Federation, Jewish Family Services, the Jewish Home for the Aged, and Temple Beth El from the ground up, thereby enabling them to develop strong organizational, collaborative, and leadership skills.

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<sup>15</sup>Leonard Nelson, interview by author (Portland, Maine, 11 January 2002).

<sup>16</sup>Clarice Shur, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past” (10 September 1976), p. 28.

As soon as these Jews saw the possibility of working in the non-Jewish community, they jumped at the opportunity. According to Rosalyn Bernstein, Portland's Jewish institutions trained Jews to be strong community leaders, and they were able to transfer these skills to the non-Jewish community.<sup>17</sup> Sumner Bernstein recalls that many of the Jewish leaders of his generation were energetic, bright, young professionals whom the Portland community viewed as good resources, particularly since they had gained leadership experience from a young age at the Jewish Community Center.<sup>18</sup> Leonard Nelson, for example, attributes his ability to lead the Portland Symphony Orchestra board to the training he received as president of the Center Youth. He said that he was "very confident" in his ability to lead a group of men twice his age, many of whom may have been wary of his youth and his Jewishness, because he received such good leadership practice at the Jewish Community Center.<sup>19</sup> The JCC trained many young Jews as leaders throughout the 1950s and 1960s. A 1963 article in the Bulletin about the Center's annual Youth Week reported that the exercise would prepare Portland's Jewish youth for "greater responsibilities in the future."<sup>20</sup> Many of these Center-trained youth later held positions of great responsibility in Portland, paving the way for the eventual dissolution of social barriers.

As prominent Portland Jews gained leadership roles on the city's various civic and cultural boards, they used their positions of power to publicize the discrimination still present in the city's clubs. Sumner and Rosalyn Bernstein had a form letter called the

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<sup>17</sup>Rosalyn Bernstein, interview by author.

<sup>18</sup>Sumner Bernstein, interview by author.

<sup>19</sup>Leonard Nelson, interview by author.

<sup>20</sup>Jewish Community Center Bulletin, 22 March 1963.

“Cumberland Club Letter” that they sent to the leaders of groups that met at restrictive clubs. Organizations occasionally moved their meetings as a result of the letter and the Bernsteins began to notice a growing consciousness of discrimination in Portland. When Barnett Shur became president of the United Fund Campaign, he insisted that no United Fund events be held at the Cumberland Club because the club excluded Jews. In Shur’s opinion, the initial inclusion of the Jewish Community Center in the United Fund Campaign had served as an “opening wedge” in the fight for increased social access for Portland’s Jews. Many Portland Jews suspected that the United Fund accepted the Jewish Community Center into its campaign because it needed money and the JCC had proven in the past that it could conduct successful campaigns. Regardless of the motivations leading to the Center’s inclusion, Shur was able to use his position to highlight the exclusion that occurred at clubs in Portland. Shur claims that although he personally did not care that the Cumberland Club excluded Jews, he boycotted the organization as a matter of principle. He said, “I felt strongly that since the United Fund was a community-wide agency, that it should not hold its meetings in a club which barred Jewish people from membership.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, during Shur’s tenure as president, the United Fund did not hold any of its meetings at the Cumberland Club.

When Merle Nelson, Leonard Nelson’s wife, joined the Junior League in the mid-1960s, she also demanded that the group stop holding its functions at the Cumberland Club. The Portland section of the Junior League broke away from its national body when a member who had been a friend of Nelson’s from elementary school asked her to participate in the organization. Nelson understood that she had been asked to join as a token Jew and felt uncomfortable agreeing to the offer. Nevertheless, her Jewish friends encouraged her to accept the invitation because they feared that if she declined, it would be many years before

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<sup>21</sup>Barnett Shur, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past” (8 September 1976), p. 31.



a Jew could break the ranks of the Junior League again. Nelson agreed with some trepidation, because, as she stated in an interview, "I knew why I was there and they [the members of the Junior League] knew why I was there... Just as I was excluded from the country club and other places because I was a Jew, I was included this time, not because of what I had done in my volunteer service to the community... but because I was a Jew."<sup>22</sup>

She managed to use the opportunity, however, to increase awareness of anti-Semitism in Portland by insisting that the group cease meeting at the Cumberland Club. But as soon as Nelson left the Junior League, the group resumed using the Cumberland Club for meetings.

Although certain individuals acted aggressively, Portland's Jewish institutions generally relied on education and outreach efforts to combat exclusion. In 1962, the Jewish Federation voted "to go on record in opposition to prayer, Bible reading and religious observances in the public schools of Maine." It also voted to allow the Federation's Community Relations Committee, under the direction of Dr. Zolov, to conduct a number of meetings with the Jewish and non-Jewish communities in Portland to educate people about the issues surrounding the practice of religion in public school. The vote came in response to a recommendation by the Community Relations Committee, and followed the precedent set by national Jewish organizations of condemning religious practice in the public schools as a violation of the principle of separation of church and state. In June of 1962, the United States Supreme Court found the use of the Regent's Prayer in New York public schools unconstitutional. While Jewish organizations almost unanimously supported the Supreme Court's decision, the Catholic Church widely condemned the Court's conclusion. The Catholic Diocese of Portland, however, broke ranks with its national body and supported the outcome of the case. Despite seeming support in Portland for the principle of separation of

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<sup>22</sup>Merle Nelson, interview by author (Falmouth, Maine, 14 January 2002).

unconstitutional. While Jewish organizations almost unanimously supported the Supreme Court's decision, the Catholic Church widely condemned the Court's conclusion. The Catholic Diocese of Portland, however, broke ranks with its national body and supported the outcome of the case. Despite seeming support in Portland for the principle of separation of church and state, Portland Jews felt the need to increase community awareness because of a 1954 Maine State law that required Bible reading or recitation of the Lord's Prayer in "all the public schools of the state, daily or at suitable intervals." In late 1962, as the constitutionality of the Maine Statute was pending in the United States Supreme Court, the leaders of the Federation hoped that "efforts to promote mutual understanding through the joint study and discussion will help create a climate of receptivity for the court's pending decisions, whatever they may be."<sup>26</sup>

In order to further the cause of mutual understanding, the Jewish Community Center also attempted to improve Christian-Jewish relations in Portland. A 1963 article in the Bulletin advertised an "enlightening" program to be held at the JCC called "Changes and Challenges in Christian-Jewish Relations." The program featured a film called *The Chosen People* about a Catholic family forced to confront the problem of anti-Semitism when their daughter informed them that a Jewish classmate would be unable to attend the senior prom because it was being held at an exclusive country club. According to the article, the film raised an important question: "What is the responsibility of Catholics, or Protestants, or Jews, when a religious group other than their own is discriminated against?" The program also included a panel discussion conducted by prominent Jewish and Catholic leaders about inter-group and inter-religious relations. The JCC hoped to explore "many

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<sup>26</sup>Jewish Community Center Bulletin, 28 December 1962.

Christian groups in Portland. According to Rosalyn Bernstein, institutional relations between Jews and Catholics remained weak, although some individuals in the two communities formed strong relationships with one another. Harold Nelson, for example, was chairman of the board of Mercy Hospital, a Catholic institution.<sup>25</sup> The improvement of Jewish-Christian relations thus rested not on Jewish institutions, but on motivated individuals within the Jewish community.

Rabbi Harry Sky, who came to Portland in 1961 to lead the congregation at Temple Beth El, was among the first Jewish leaders in Portland to make a concerted effort to establish interfaith relations in the city. Sky became president of the Interfaith Ministerial Association, which at the time did not include the Catholic clergy in Portland. Sky met with Bishop Feeney, the leader of the city's Catholic Church, to invite the Catholics to join the association. Although Bishop Feeney was initially reluctant to form relations with the Protestant community in Portland, he let the Catholic Church join when he saw that the Jewish community had attempted to work with the Protestants.<sup>26</sup> Despite Sky's efforts, however, Catholic and Jewish relations in Portland remained tense.

Sumner Bernstein experienced this tension first-hand when he attended a meeting of the Solidarity Brotherhood to hear a Catholic priest, Monsignor Noland, speak. Bernstein had been invited to attend the lecture by a personal friend, Harold Loring. Because he had never heard of Father Noland, Bernstein called the American Jewish Committee and learned that Noland had a reputation for espousing anti-Israel beliefs. Bernstein attended the meeting with a promise from Loring that he would be able to respond to the priest's remarks. According to Bernstein, approximately 900 Catholic men attended the gathering

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<sup>25</sup>Rosalyn Bernstein, interview by author.

<sup>26</sup>Rabbi Harry Sky, interview by author (Falmouth, Maine, 25 January 2002).

and heard Father Noland give “the worst kind of anti-Israel presentation. It was completely in poor taste.” True to his word, Loring gave Bernstein a chance to speak, who told the men at the meeting, ““There’s another side to this story. He has not told you the truth - the true facts about Israel and its relation to its divided neighbors, and I know that you belong to men’s clubs in every parish in this state. I just hope that you will invite me so that I can tell you a different story from what you have heard today.”” Despite his offer, none of the men, many of whom Bernstein had known his entire life, ever invited him to speak.<sup>27</sup> Even so, Bernstein credits Loring with giving him the opportunity to make his voice heard. As someone who had always moved easily between the Jewish and non-Jewish communities, Bernstein says that his relationship with Loring exemplified his sense of Portland. Although he was a guest at the Solidarity Brotherhood and had no right to rebut the priest’s remarks, Loring enabled him to do, signalling to Bernstein that some Gentiles in Portland were at least willing to listen to Jews trying to combat prejudice.<sup>28</sup> Although individuals like Bernstein had the opportunity to publicly fight discrimination, no strong Jewish organizational effort existed in Portland throughout the 1960s. One man with enough motivation and awareness had made himself responsible for sounding the Jewish voice. In order to truly create change in Portland, however, the Jewish community needed a greater number of outspoken voices.

Nationwide, Jews concentrated on the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, yet the movement gained little momentum in Portland. Although Rabbi Sky took up the cause of Civil Rights, he seemed to have had little institutional backing. Rather, his activities were

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<sup>27</sup>Sumner Bernstein, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past,” p. 34.

<sup>28</sup>Sumner Bernstein, interview by author.

those of an individual. In the early 1960s, Rabbi Sky participated in civil rights marches in Washington, D.C., and Selma, Alabama. A black minister in town convinced Sky to join the rally in Washington, and soon after, the rabbi started questioning all restrictions, not just those that applied to blacks. As far as he can recall, however, Rabbi Sky was the only Portland Jew who attended these marches. Although his congregants at Beth El were for the most part supportive of his activities, none actually joined him in the fight against discrimination.<sup>29</sup> A few Jews in Portland did help to organize the local chapter of the NAACP, but once again, little organizational support came from the Portland Jewish community.

Portland Jews point to a few factors that prevented the Civil Rights movement from becoming a major factor in the life of Portland Jewry. First, Portland had a relatively small black community. Rosalyn Bernstein describes the community as “minuscule,” and recalls little interaction between Jews and blacks who lived in Portland. The majority of blacks in Portland in the 1960s held menial jobs, and according to Bernstein, one could go weeks and weeks without seeing a black person.<sup>30</sup> Thus, Portland Jews may have been unaware of discrimination against blacks. Second, Portland Jews as a whole seemed willing to accept the status quo. According to Rabbi Sky, when he came to Portland, he encountered an attitude that one should not “stir things up.” Because Portland was a small city removed from the larger areas of political and social upheaval, residents tended to do things in their own way. In the case of Portland’s Jews, for a long time that meant accepting the status quo and focusing on activities internal to the Jewish community rather than trying to break into non-Jewish society. According to Sky, those Jews from Portland who had been

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<sup>29</sup>Rabbi Harry Sky, interview by author.

<sup>30</sup>Rosalyn Bernstein, interview by author.

exposed to larger cities and had more education were more likely to push the Jewish community to expand its horizons. Although Rabbi Sky had difficulty recruiting Portland Jews to help him in breaking down social barriers, some of the leaders of the Jewish community “jumped on the bandwagon.” In listing those in the community who worked with him towards the goal of social equality, Rabbi Sky named nearly all of those who had been the principal leaders of the Jewish community since the founding of the JCC in 1938, including Israel and Rebecca Bernstein, Louis Bernstein, Sumner and Rosalyn Bernstein, Harold and Mildred Nelson, Leonard and Merle Nelson, Dr. Benjamin Zolov, Barnett and Clarice Shur, and Sidney and Charlotte Wernick.<sup>31</sup> Most of these people had college and graduate degrees and many had spent time studying outside of the state. Although their task was difficult in a city that held firmly to its Yankee roots, these people ultimately succeeded in eliminating official exclusion in Portland.

In 1969, Kermit Lipez, then a young legal advisor to Governor Kenneth Curtis, walked into the Governor’s office and asked him if he wanted to “have some fun.” Lipez had been contacted by Herb Bennett, a Jewish attorney in Portland, who was complaining about exclusion from the country clubs. Lipez conducted some research, and discovered that all of the clubs had liquor licenses issued by the state. He conferred with Governor Curtis, and they decided to propose a bill that would deny a liquor license to any private club that discriminated.<sup>32</sup> In May of 1969, the Maine Legislature debated the passage of a bill called “An act relating to discrimination on account of race or religion.” The purpose of the bill, known as Legislative Document (LD) 1349, was “to state once and for all that

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<sup>31</sup>Rabbi Harry Sky, interview by author.

<sup>32</sup>Kenneth Curtis, interview by author (conducted by phone, 2 April 2002).

the policy of this State is that those who hold out their services generally, the social services generally, to the public-at-large without designating themselves as having a particular religion as the basis of their organization, shall not covertly and under cover quietly practice any type of discrimination against people because of their religion, their race, or their ethnic origin.”<sup>33</sup> Senator Mills of Franklin County introduced the bill, which proposed denying a state liquor license to any club with a restrictive covenant on the grounds that “if you are going to occupy a fine building on one of the main streets of one of our prominent cities, and you are going to tacitly bar people of the Jewish race, or a different color than yourself, then you can’t ask for the privileges of the State of Maine to do it.”<sup>34</sup> While Catholics had been admitted into the state’s social clubs after years of exclusion, Jews and blacks still faced significant discrimination. Senator Mills told his colleagues that licensing power had been used as a tool to fight discrimination in other states and that he had no motive for introducing the bill other than to combat prejudice. He assured the other senators that “this was not prompted by any outside organization or by any other influence, other than what I think is an honest attempt to do something that needs to be done. . . I say it because I know that very strong prejudice and discrimination does still exist in our State. . .”<sup>35</sup>

Although discrimination occurred statewide, Mills felt that local county attorneys should have the authority to apply the law because “this type of discrimination is a subject which is better known to the local people than it is Statewide. . .” Thus, each county would determine which clubs would receive a liquor license and which clubs would be denied the privilege of selling alcohol. After Mills’ testimony on May 6th, the Senate voted to pass the

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<sup>33</sup>Maine State Legislative Record -- Senate, 6 May 1969, p. 1799.

<sup>34</sup>Maine State Legislative Record -- Senate, 6 May 1969, p. 1801.

<sup>35</sup>Maine State Legislative Record -- Senate, 6 May 1969, p. 1802.

bill. On May 28, when the House debated the bill, Representative Joseph Brennan of Portland spoke in support of the legislation, particularly since Jews in Portland had thus far been unable to break down restrictive policies without the help of the law. According to Representative Brennan, many non-Jews in Portland also wanted to end the exclusive policies in the clubs, but were unable to do so. He said, "Presently in the Portland area, the Cumberland Club and Portland Country Club, apparently deny membership to certain minority groups. I know for a fact that many members of these clubs are personally opposed to the existing discrimination policies. However, it is very difficult for them to change that policy. Passage of this bill I think will facilitate some desired changes in that area."<sup>36</sup> With little opposition, the House passed the bill and Governor Kenneth Curtis signed it. The final wording of the law read: "No person, firm or corporation holding a license under the State of Maine or any of its subdivisions for the dispensing of food, liquor or for any service or for being a State of Maine corporation or a corporation authorized to do business in the State shall withhold membership, its facilities or services to any person on account of race, religion or national origin, except such organizations which are oriented to a particular religion or which are ethnic in character."<sup>37</sup>

Although the passage of the law signalled a major victory for Jews and blacks in the state, community leaders encountered obstacles in applying the law to Portland clubs. Because the statute required each locality to approve a liquor license before it could be issued by the state, Portland Jews had to petition the Portland City Council to deny liquor licenses to exclusive clubs. Charles Allen, a Portland lawyer and a member of the City Council, first raised the issue when the Cumberland Club and the Eagle Club applied to

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<sup>36</sup>Maine State Legislative Record -- House, 28 May 1969, p. 2703.

<sup>37</sup>Maine Statute 1301-A.



renew their liquor licenses. Allen, with supporting testimony from Rabbi Sky and Dr. Zolov, argued that the clubs could not qualify for a license under statute 1301-A because they discriminated on account of race and religion. The Council debated the matter for three or four weeks. At a second public meeting, Sumner Bernstein and local lawyer Alan Levenson testified on the importance of denying licenses to the clubs. In addition to their basic desire for social equality, Portland Jews felt that their inability to access the city's social clubs caused them professional harm. According to Dr. Zolov, the Cumberland Club "was a great political club, and there were a lot of business deals carried out there. Of course, it wouldn't be much of a business deal as far as a physician was concerned, but it would be with a businessman, or if you had somebody coming from out of town or if you wanted somebody to meet somebody or so forth. . . . You [as a Jew] were on your own. You couldn't do any entertaining in any of those places."<sup>38</sup> Portland Jews recognized that they could never achieve true equality until they had full social access.

Although Barnett Shur served as corporation counsel for the city of Portland at the time of the struggle, he recused himself from the case because he felt he had a conflict of interest. His assistant corporation counsel, Bob Donovan, ruled that the city should abstain from deciding the license issue because the state technically issued liquor licenses, although every license had to be approved by municipal officials. Despite Donovan's ruling, the City Council voted to deny the liquor license applications of the clubs due to their discriminatory practices. Governor Curtis received angry phone calls from both the Cumberland Club and the Portland Country Club the following day. He told the club directors that as "a private club you can do what you want, you just can't sell liquor."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Dr. Benjamin Zolov, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past," p. 32.

<sup>39</sup>Kenneth Curtis, interview by author.

According to Sky, the clubs operated without liquor licenses for approximately eleven months before finally agreeing to admit Jews. While the details are unclear, the Cumberland Club apparently struck a deal with the major Jewish law firms in Portland to admit six Jews in exchange for the renewal of its liquor license. As a condition of the agreement, the Cumberland Club insisted that Sumner Bernstein not be included among the six Jews.<sup>40</sup> Because of his infamous "Cumberland Club Letter," Bernstein was blackballed from many of the social and country clubs in the city even after they began to admit Jews. None of the clubs offered Rabbi Sky an invitation either, although he claims he never would have joined, even if given the opportunity.<sup>41</sup> While the Jewish community as a whole celebrated its victory, a small group criticized those Jews who accepted invitations to join the clubs. A young Jewish lawyer in Portland who asked not to be identified, observed what he called a "ghetto mentality." Although Portland Jews did not want to be discriminated against, they also did not want to join clubs in which they felt unwelcome. Furthermore, some in the Jewish community complained about the elitist attitude at the clubs and noted that only the most prominent Jews in Portland had been offered membership. According to the lawyer, however, this was a short-lived reaction on the part of a small number of Jews in the community.<sup>42</sup> Some Jews did resent the fact that Sumner Bernstein had been blackballed for his efforts to combat discrimination. When Harold Nelson heard about Bernstein's situation, he withdrew from the Cumberland Club although he had already paid his dues. He did retain membership in the Portland Country Club and encouraged his son to join as well. Although Leonard Nelson was initially reluctant to join

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<sup>40</sup>Sumner Bernstein, interview by author.

<sup>41</sup>Rabbi Harry Sky, interview by author.

<sup>42</sup>Interview by author, Portland, Maine, January 2002.

the Portland Country Club because he did not play golf and was not particularly interested in the social activities at the club, he eventually joined as a personal favor to his father, who felt that his son's presence in the Club as a Jewish arts and cultural leader would benefit the entire Jewish community.<sup>43</sup>

Soon after the first Jews joined the Cumberland Club and the Portland Country Club, leaders of the Portland Jewish community learned that their struggle had not yet ended. The Benevolent Protective order of the Elks (B.P.O.E.), known locally as the Elks Lodge, applied to the Portland City Council for a liquor license in 1970. The Council denied its license on the grounds that the Elks Lodge had discriminatory policies. The Lodge then appealed to the State Liquor Commission. In December of 1970, the Commission learned that the National Constitution of the Order of the Elks, which was binding on all subordinate lodges of the Order, restricted membership to "whites." The Commission denied the appeal of the Portland Lodge on the grounds that "the 'whites' only limitation of the National Constitution, controllingly binding on each subordinate lodge, established 'bad moral character' of the subordinate lodges."<sup>44</sup> The Portland Lodge and eleven other Elks Lodges in the state brought legal action against the State Liquor Commission and obtained an injunction against the Commission permitting them to retain their liquor licenses until the matter was decided in court.

When Barnett Shur learned that the Portland City Council had been named as a defendant in a suit brought by Elks Lodges statewide, he joined the case as the attorney for the city. The Elks Lodge challenged Statue 1301-A on the grounds that it violated its First Amendment rights to speech, religion, and assembly, and its rights under the equal

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<sup>43</sup>Leonard Nelson, interview by author.

<sup>44</sup>B.P.O.E. Lodge No. 2043 of Brunswick et al. v. Keith H. Ingraham et al., Supreme Judicial Court of Maine, 11 December 1972, p. 609.

protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. In an opinion dated 11 December 1972, the Maine Supreme Court held that the statute “was not unconstitutional as improper governmental abridgement of freedom of association or rights of privacy.” Justice Sidney Wernick wrote that the statute did not prevent the Elks from associating, but rather, it prevented them from selling alcohol, which was not a constitutional right. He wrote, “The Elks lodges may continue to exist and arbitrarily to discriminate; they will, however, be unable to sell intoxicating liquors for beverage use. . . . The activity of selling liquors lies essentially outside the sphere of privacy or private entitlements.”<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Wernick wrote that the State had a “legitimate interest in preserving its own dignity and nobility before its citizenry -- that the State, in a domain of activity in which it has the most plenary measure of police power available to the sovereign, should choose to formulate a public policy geared to avoidance of the image, or appearance, of acquiescence in, or condonation or encouragement of, practices which discriminate arbitrarily and invidiously on the basis of racial origin or color.”<sup>46</sup> As the Supreme Court’s decision forced the Elks Lodge to admit Jews and blacks in order to regain its liquor license, the Portland Jewish community had succeeded in officially abolishing all social barriers. As a small, isolated Jewish community in Maine, Portland Jewry was forced to become self-reliant rather than depending upon the aid of national Jewish organizations in the fight against discrimination. Portland Jews used their own internal institutions to their advantage, developing strong leadership skills and a sense of community unity that eventually enabled them to combat societal exclusion. As the barriers fell, Portland Jews began to occupy prominent

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<sup>45</sup>B.P.O.E. Lodge No. 2043 of Brunswick v. Ingraham, p. 611.

<sup>46</sup>B.P.O.E. Lodge No. 2043 of Brunswick v. Ingraham, p. 616.

Note: Although Justice Wernick was Jewish, there is no evidence to indicate that he should have recused himself from the case and no one has ever challenged his position as the presiding judge.

leadership roles in the city, which further facilitated the process of social integration. They had achieved their goal of becoming more American and were now accepted as full citizens of Portland. The secular Jewish institutions that had enabled Jews to integrate into mainstream society began to suffer, however, as the Portland Jewish community became less Jewish and more American.

## Chapter 4

### Institutional Decline in the 1960s and 1970s

Throughout the late 1950s and the 1960s, as Jews in Portland fought to eliminate social barriers, they experienced a simultaneous weakening of their communal institutions and a strengthening of their social standing in the city. This chapter will examine both the negative and positive consequences of social integration for Portland Jewry. At the same time as their internal institutions weakened, social access enabled Jews to play an active leadership role in Portland. What allowed Portland Jews to play a large role in the community from which they had long been excluded? How did they balance their new role as full citizens of Portland with their role as members of a distinctly Jewish community? The social access that they attained in the 1970s forced Jews to confront issues of assimilation and to find a balance between their seemingly divergent American and Jewish identities. Assimilation has posed a major challenge to American Jews since they first began achieving social and economic status equal to that of their non-Jewish neighbors in the post-war era. According to historian Jonathan Sarna, Jews must balance their desire to become American against their fear of losing a distinctive Jewish identity and eventually disappearing. While all minorities face such a challenge, Sarna asserts that the issue of assimilation is compounded for Jews because they comprise both an ethnic and a religious minority. Thus, assimilation has often been linked to apostasy within the Jewish community, as Jews give up both their religious and ethnic identities in order to join the mainstream.<sup>1</sup>

Historians debate the extent to which Jews lost their distinctive identity after World War II. According to Arthur Hertzberg, some Jews felt by the 1960s that “the Jewish community as a whole had not yet found the balance between its Jewish and American

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<sup>1</sup>Jonathan Sarna, The American Jewish Experience (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986), p. xvi.

identities.” Hertzberg quotes Nat Hentoff’s assertion that American Jews did not possess a substantive identity and that they had “no permanent psychological barrier to joining the other hollow men.” In other words, American Jews readily adapted to suburban American norms and values with little regard for preserving their own Jewish traditions. Hertzberg rebuts Hentoff’s view, however, writing that “the middle-class Jews of the mid-1960s might have seemed ‘hollow,’ or uncertain of their values, but within themselves they remembered why they were Jews.” Many American Jews had been taught by their immigrant parents that Jews were supposed to have *tsuris*, or troubles. Some Jews viewed their fight against discrimination as evidence of these *tsuris* and were thus reassured of their Jewishness.<sup>2</sup> As more and more social barriers fell throughout the 1960s, however, Jews were less able to base their sense of Jewishness on their efforts to gain acceptance in the larger community. Furthermore, American Jews seemed to confirm the “Three Generation Theory” developed by sociologists that any ethnic or religious minority will assimilate to majority culture over the span of three generations.<sup>3</sup> By the 1960s, American Jewry as a group had joined the mainstream.

American Jews experienced a brief revival of Jewish group feeling in 1967 during the Six Day War when they rallied around Israel, viewing a threat to the country as a threat to themselves. Historian Bernard Martin contends that the war in 1967 was a turning point for American Jews because it resulted in a renewed sense of awareness about the need to

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<sup>2</sup>Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), p. 362.

<sup>3</sup>Earl Raab, ed., *American Jews in the 21st Century: A Leadership Challenge*, part of the Program in Judaic Studies, Brown University, *Brown Studies on Jews and their Societies*, Ernest S. Frerichs, Calvin Goldscheider, and Alan Zuckerman, eds. (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1991), p. 7.

maintain and support a cohesive Jewish community.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the war did increase cohesion among America's Jews and led to an outpouring of philanthropic support.<sup>5</sup> Although the Six Day War briefly increased Jewish consciousness in America, American Jews found themselves without a unifying cause when the fervor surrounding the war subsided. In an effort to maintain group cohesion, American Jews looked towards the Holocaust as unifying memory. According to historian Stephen Whitfield, Holocaust memory became an "inextricable part of the Jewish mentality" in the United States in the 1970s.<sup>6</sup>

Despite searching for unity in recollections of the Holocaust, by the 1970s Jews feared that assimilation threatened the survival of their communities. According to Hertzberg, "After 1967 the Jews in America were freer, bolder, and more powerful than any community of Jews had ever been in the Diaspora. And yet, amid the bustle of success, the Jewish community was eroding. . . American Jews had solved their problem with the Gentiles, but they did not quite know what to do with themselves."<sup>7</sup> Intermarriage contributed to the erosion of the Jewish community. Although in 1957 only three and a half percent of Jews had married non-Jews, more Jews married Gentiles by the 1990s than married other Jews.<sup>8</sup> Jews also exhibited a lower birthrate than other ethnic groups in the

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<sup>4</sup>Bernard Martin, ed., Movements and Issues in American Judaism (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1978), p. 16.

<sup>5</sup>Stephen J. Whitfield, "American Jews: Their Story Continues," in Sarna, ed., The American Jewish Experience, p. 288.

<sup>6</sup>Whitfield in Sarna, ed., The American Jewish Experience, p. 288.

<sup>7</sup>Hertzberg, The Jews in America, p. 377.

<sup>8</sup>Karen Brodtkin, How Jews Became White Folks (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998), p. 159.



United States. While intermarriage and the low birth-rate concerned the American Jewish community, Jewish leaders most feared a loss of Jewish distinctiveness.

Historian Gary A. Tobin argues that the mass adoption by Jews of American norms and values after World War II helped break down the barriers between Jews and non-Jews. As these barriers broke, however, Jews became less distinct as a group. Many Jewish communities became decentralized and lost their cohesiveness, which resulted in a failure to replicate previous Jewish social and institutional patterns. Because they now had full access to American society, American Jews did not need to depend on their own internal institutions and social networks.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the United States, Jewish communities experienced an institutional decline, particularly in social institutions like the Jewish community centers. Given the erosion of the American Jewish community, how did Portland Jewry respond to the challenge of preserving a cohesive Jewish community while creating a place for themselves in non-Jewish Portland? The evidence reveals that Portland Jews, like their counterparts across the country, had to engage in a balancing act to maintain their communal institutions while simultaneously integrating into the wider community. In some cases, Portland Jews could not maintain the vibrancy and cohesiveness of the community they had worked so hard to build.

Although serious institutional decline did not occur until the late 1960s and early 1970s, Portland Jews began reexamining the role of their internal institutions as early as 1957, when Jewish Family Services started referring clients to the Portland Welfare Department. Since its inception, JFS had attempted to duplicate the services provided by the Portland Welfare Department because of the expectation in Portland that Jews “should take

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<sup>9</sup>Gary A. Tobin, “The Future of the American Jewish Community,” in Raab, ed., American Jews in the 21st Century: A Leadership Challenge, pp. 51-54.

care of their own.”<sup>10</sup> Although the organization had always made use of federal and state welfare services, including social security, veterans’ services, and aid to dependent children, Jewish leaders avoided referring clients to the city welfare department for financial help. Jules Krems, executive director of the Jewish Federation between 1948 and 1963, tried to combat the misconception that Jews should take care of their own. According to Krems, if JFS continued to duplicate all of the services available through the Portland Welfare Department, “We [Portland Jews] would tend to deny our role as Americans and as private citizens of Portland making full use of public services. . . . So I prevailed upon the Jewish Family Services to accept the philosophy that we are members of a city, we are local citizens, we are members of the city of Portland, and that we shall make use of all services available to all the citizens of Portland including the relief-giving services under the Portland Welfare Department.”<sup>11</sup>

Krems’ desire to use the services of the city highlighted conflicting desires of Portland Jews: they wanted full access to all of the city’s resources, but they did not want their internal institutions to weaken. Even though using the city welfare department did not necessarily imply that JFS would lose strength, it certainly implied that the nature of the organization would have to change. This prospect may have been threatening to Jewish leaders who had struggled to establish the institution in the first place. The Jewish community reluctantly agreed with Krems, however, persuaded by the argument that Jewish Family Services’ policy perpetuated ghettoization in the city by isolating Jews and resulted in double taxation for Jews who had to pay for both city services they did not use and the

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<sup>10</sup>Benjamin Band, Portland Jewry: Supplement One (Portland, Maine: The Portland Jewish Historical Society, 1961), p. 7.

<sup>11</sup>Jules Krems, interview by Dr. Konnilyn G. Feig, archival collection titled “Portraits of the Past: The Jews of Portland” (Portland, Maine: The Portland Jewish Historical Society, 14 October 1976), p. 27.

services of JFS. Because it seemed inconsistent to use some public welfare services and not others, in 1957 JFS voted to fully use all tax-supported public assistance programs, including the Portland Welfare Department.<sup>12</sup> Although Krems won his first battle, he also had to convince the non-Jewish community that “this concept of Jews taking care of their own was being overdone, and had no rational basis to begin with.” After initial reluctance, the Portland Welfare Department fully welcomed referrals from JFS. Krems later stated that the two organizations “enjoyed a marvelous relationship.”<sup>13</sup>

Because Jewish Family Services no longer needed to provide basic financial assistance, the nature of the organization changed. Under Krems’s guidance, JFS tried to provide services that Portland Jews could not find elsewhere. The organization’s main function became refugee resettlement, because, according to Krems, “no one else was prepared to bring over the immigrants, the survivors of the war. These were all gaps in services. They were services which could not be rendered by any other public agencies, so that our philosophy was very clear , you see, about what we could do and could not do.”<sup>14</sup> As Jews began to take full advantage of city services, they no longer relied on their internal institutions to duplicate the activities of the non-Jewish community.

While JFS attempted to provide important services to Portland Jewry, its role in the community shrunk. Refugee resettlement became the core of an agency that otherwise served little function in the 1960s and 1970s. By 1976, JFS became a “no-staffed agency,” overseen by the director of the Jewish Federation and two volunteers, Rita Willis

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<sup>12</sup>Band, Portland Jewry: Supplement One, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup>Jules Krems, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past,” p. 28.

<sup>14</sup>Jules Krems, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past,” p. 30.

and Peggy Bernstein, who occasionally offered direction in counseling or referrals.<sup>15</sup>

According to Clarice Shur, who commented on JFS' role in Portland in 1976, "I don't find that there is anything to do. I don't see the need of it particularly, except that there are still certain problems in the older Jewish community that need special attention. At least it is felt that if they were to go to a secular social service agency, they might not be quite understood the way a Jewish person would understand another Jewish person."<sup>16</sup> With the existence of the Jewish Home for the Aged, however, and an ever-decreasing immigrant population in Portland, the need for JFS continued to diminish until the agency eventually stopped operating in the late 1970s.

While Portland Jews considered the demise of Jewish Family Services worrisome, the decline of the JCC created outright anxiety within the community. Already by the early 1960s, a series of articles in the Bulletin indicated that Portland Jews were questioning the role of the JCC. In 1964, the newspaper reprinted an editorial by Rabbi Max A. Shapiro of Temple Israel in Minnesota entitled "Why My Community Needs a Jewish Community Center." In his article, Shapiro addressed the concerns of Jews who felt that a Jewish Community Center segregated Jews instead of helping them integrate. The rabbi argued that a JCC "could be the one force that would cut across the denominational lines that now fragmentize the community and separate so many of our people. . . And I see no conflict in a Jewish Community Center within the total community, just as I see no conflict for a Y[MCA] or a Catholic Youth Center within the general community." Besides enabling Jews to solidify their place in the total community, Shapiro asserted that a Jewish Community Center can counteract the effects of assimilation. He wrote, "It could make us

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<sup>15</sup>Jules Krems, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past," p. 33.

<sup>16</sup>Clarice Shur, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past" (10 September 1976), p. 26.

a more cohesive community. . . A stronger community. And more - it could help bring the marginal Jew back to his Jewishness; it could help rouse the apathetic Jew from his lethargy.” Shapiro also feared that a general community center with no religious affiliation could “heighten the trend” of intermarriage, whereas a JCC “can be a means of arresting it and could do it positively.”<sup>17</sup> Although Shapiro wrote about the need for a Jewish community center in Minneapolis, the presence of his article in the Bulletin suggested that Portland Jews needed to convince themselves of the JCC’s importance to their community. During the 1940s and 1950s, Portland Jews never questioned the existence of the JCC. By 1964, however, enough social barriers had fallen so that the JCC did not play the obvious role in the Portland Jewish community that it once had.

In 1965, the Bulletin printed another article that addressed the need for a JCC in Portland. Although this editorial questioned the presence of a Jewish community center in New Brunswick, Canada, it raised issues entirely applicable to Portland Jewry. Victor Taylor, the JCC director at the time, wrote that the editorial “is as appropriate here as it is in New Brunswick (where it was written) or any community where this might be asked.” Clearly, Taylor felt that the JCC in Portland experienced the same problem of waning enthusiasm as other Jewish community centers. According to the article, “Every year there are some who unthinkingly fail to renew their membership [in the JCC] by stating that they are not interested this particular year, but will rejoin later, or that their children do not have time to attend Center activities this year.” The editorial continued, “It is important that people think before taking this action. Being a member of the Center is not the same as hailing a taxicab. . . It is a Jewish institution in which every member of the community has

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<sup>17</sup> Rabbi Max A. Shapiro, “Why My Community Needs a Jewish Community Center,” Jewish Community Center Bulletin, 4 December 1964.

a stake. Even if one is not able to use it today he will be using it some time in the future.”<sup>18</sup>

The inclusion of this editorial in the Bulletin demonstrated the fears of Jewish leaders that the JCC had lost its centrality in the Jewish community.

By the mid-1960s, many Portland Jews no longer saw the JCC as the key communal institution in their lives. The Center experienced decline for three main reasons: first, Portland Jews no longer needed an exclusively Jewish institution to provide them with social and communal activities; second, the same people who had been leaders within the Jewish community began to fill leadership roles in the general community, thereby directing some of their time and energy away from Jewish institutions and toward city-wide organizations; and third, the JCC’s location in the center of Portland was inconvenient for most Jews, who now lived on the outskirts of the city in Woodfords.

As Portland society became more open, Jews no longer needed to rely on the programming provided by the Jewish Community Center. According to historians Earl Raab and Seymour Martin Lipset, “When a group no longer serves an important and unique need, it begins to lose its cohesive, if not yet its nostalgic, force.”<sup>19</sup> In the 1960s in Portland, Jews could join most cultural and civic institutions, with the exception of the country clubs, making many of the social and cultural activities provided by the Center obsolete. Merle Nelson recalls that the JCC was not nearly as important to her children, who grew up during the 1960s, as it was to her as a child during the 1940s. The Center no longer provided the plethora of activities that characterized its early years. Rather, its

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<sup>18</sup>Jewish Community Center Bulletin, 26 March 1965.

<sup>19</sup>Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, Jews and the New American Scene (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 51.

function became that of a meeting place for Jewish organizations.<sup>20</sup> According to Jules Krems, “after a while, the Center became almost a meeting place for the Jewish community which doesn’t provide a very meaningful rationale. If all the Center is supposed to be is a place where Jews can meet, you can just rent a room or a storefront somewhere and get by much cheaper than with a big organization.”<sup>21</sup>

Even those groups that continued to use the JCC as a meeting space grew weaker during the 1960s. The Center Women’s Club, for example, which had been one of the most active groups at the JCC, experienced rapid decline during the late 1960s and into the 1970s. In 1976, Cynthia Mack, a longtime member of the club said, “I find the membership [of the Center Women’s Club] dwindling because the membership of the Center is dwindling. . . . It has gone down so rapidly it’s hard to believe that it’s happened; because, at one time, it was the organization to belong to.”<sup>22</sup> Despite its rapid decline, the Center Women’s Club did manage to survive, mostly because it played a key role in the maintenance of Center Day Camp, the one facet of the JCC that continued to grow and thrive throughout the 1960s. According to Roberta Gordon, who came to Portland in 1971, many remained involved in the JCC simply because they wanted to send their children to Center Day Camp.<sup>23</sup> Jules Krems pointed to Center Day Camp as the glue that held the JCC together throughout the 1960s and 1970s. As he once stated, “one of the things that saved the Center and permitted it to exist was the development of the Center Day Camp. It

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<sup>20</sup>Merle Nelson, interview by author (Falmouth, Maine, 14 January 2002).

<sup>21</sup>Jules Krems, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past,” p. 23.

<sup>22</sup>Cynthia Mack, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past” (23 September 1976), p. 43.

<sup>23</sup>Roberta Gordon, interview by author (South Portland, Maine, 16 January 2002).

was an inspirational move because as the society becomes more affluent, and as family ties and the relations between parents and children become more loose, parents develop leisure interests. . . The Center Day Camp gave parents an opportunity to be free eight hours a day to play golf, five days a week. . . So, the Center Day Camp became the focus of the Center.”<sup>24</sup> According to Krems, the Center Day Camp responded to the changing values of American society in the 1970s and enabled Portland Jews to emulate the child-rearing customs of their non-Jewish counterparts.

As soon as the country clubs and fraternal organizations opened up and Jews obtained social access in Portland, the programming previously provided by the JCC became obsolete. In 1976, Dr. Konnilyn G. Feig, a history professor at the University of Southern Maine, conducted a series of interviews with Portland Jews, all of whom questioned the continuing need for a Jewish Community Center in Portland. Most agreed that the Center’s programming would have to change in order to retain any sort of membership. According to Cynthia Mack, “I think membership has decreased so much that the programming does not meet the needs of the day of the Jewish community. The Jewish community has become a part of the Portland social scene: symphony, country clubs, theatre. Tennis has taken a lot of people away from the Center, I think. It’s become a very popular Jewish sport now, which it never has been because most of the clubs excluded Jewish people. . .”<sup>25</sup> Jews participated in many of the activities that had been previously reserved for Portland’s Gentiles in an effort to integrate as fully as possible. Merle Nelson also recalls that in the 1970s, as skiing became more popular, Jews began participating in the sport in larger numbers. This meant that many of them left the city on the weekends to

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<sup>24</sup>Jules Krems, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past,” p. 24.

<sup>25</sup>Cynthia Mack, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past,” p. 44.



travel to the mountains, leaving fewer people to enjoy the Center during their days off from work.<sup>26</sup>

Although the original programming at the Center no longer served a significant purpose for Portland Jewry, most Jews wanted to maintain the JCC. In 1976, Barnett Shur argued that “there is a need for it [the Center], providing that it is properly located and . . . programming purposes are modified to the existing needs. For example, we used to have our own symphony orchestra and dramatic groups, arts and crafts. All those things today are passé. But there is a need for any organization, and I think the organization could be successful if it met the needs.”<sup>27</sup> Shur, however, like other prominent Jews in Portland, could not articulate these needs. The Portland Jewish community appeared to be torn between its desire to hold on to its internal institutions and its desire to fully integrate into Portland society.

Most community leaders agreed that the location of the Center should be changed in order to ensure its survival. As Shur stated, if the Center “met the needs of the community in a proper location, I think it would survive.” When the JCC first opened its doors in 1938 on Cumberland Avenue, a majority of the Jewish community lived within walking distance, making participation in Center activities easy. According to Shur, “We used to live down there. The entire community used to live down there. My God, every night there would be hundreds of people in that building to put on shows.”<sup>28</sup> By the 1970s, however, most Jews no longer lived in the Munjoy Hill area. The first migration, which occurred after World War II, resulted in a concentration of Jews in the Woodfords neighborhood on

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<sup>26</sup>Merle Nelson, interview by author.

<sup>27</sup>Barnett Shur, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past” (8 September 1976), p. 19.

<sup>28</sup>Barnett Shur, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past,” p. 19.

the outskirts of the city. Subsequent migrations to outlying suburbs occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, so that Jewish residential concentration in Portland was soon a thing of the past. In order for the Jewish Community Center to survive, it needed both a new location more conducive to the widely dispersed Jewish population and new programming that satisfied Jews who lived an upper middle-class lifestyle.

Jules Krems, who as Federation director had knowledge of other Jewish communities across the country, argued that the Jewish Community Center should be designed more like a country club if it was to continue to thrive. He stated that the Center's initial "location was adequate to meet its needs, but now I get the impression, from what I know nationally, that the more successful Centers are those that are built outside the community -- several miles out -- on large plots of ground which have tennis courts and outside swimming pools, and which serve the country club needs of a middle class society."<sup>29</sup> Krems and others felt that the Jewish Community Center simply could not provide the type of services sought by integrated and affluent Portland Jews. The recreational needs of the Jewish community had changed and adapted to the more open society that existed in Portland. According to Krems, "If every Jew in Portland, for example, could be admitted to membership in the Portland Country Club, and if the Portland Country Club were to establish a Center Day Camp, they'd give up the Jewish Community Center. That's a crude way of putting it."<sup>30</sup> Although Krems was speaking hypothetically and perhaps exaggerated the situation, fewer and fewer Jews identified with the Center.

Increasingly weak leadership within the Jewish community's internal institutions only served to exacerbate the problem. Due to the small size of the Portland Jewish

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<sup>29</sup>Jules Krems, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past," p. 25.

<sup>30</sup>Jules Krems, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past," p. 25.

community (approximately 3,400 in 1968), the institutions had a relatively small pool of people from which to cultivate leaders.<sup>31</sup> The same people tended to be involved in the leadership of all of the Jewish organizations throughout the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1960s and 1970s, as Jews found themselves more welcome in Portland, they transferred the leadership skills they had gained in Jewish institutions to city-wide organizations. According to Sumner Bernstein, “the resources of Jewish communal institutions have been diluted by the general community.”<sup>32</sup> Prominent Portland Jews jumped at the opportunity to serve on the boards of such institutions as the symphony, the museum, and the library. An individual person only has so much time and energy, however, and as prominent Portland Jews made greater contributions to the wider community, there was a concurrent weakening in the leadership of the Jewish Community Center and the Jewish Federation. According to Cynthia Mack, “I think the leadership [of the JCC] has changed. I don’t think they have a following anymore. The founders are no longer active in the Center, although they continue to financially support it. I think it is a sentimental \$110,000 toy which has got to be rid of.”<sup>33</sup> Although community leaders tried their best to sustain the JCC, Portland Jews realized that they had lost their best and brightest leaders to the community at large.

In addition to the impact of obsolete programming, a poor location, and weak leadership, the JCC was affected by the increasing influence of the synagogue in the community. In the 1960s and 1970s, the conservative synagogue developed a new suburban social power in American Jewish life as Jews achieved almost complete

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<sup>31</sup>Population statistics from the Jewish Community Center Bulletin, 14 January 1972.

<sup>32</sup>Sumner Bernstein, interview by author (conducted by phone, 17 January 2002).

<sup>33</sup>Cynthia Mack, interview by Feig, “Portraits of the Past,” p. 45.

identification with the American middle class.<sup>34</sup> Because American Jews no longer needed to rely on one another for a sense of community, many turned towards religion as a means of preserving Jewish identity. Synagogue membership began to increase in 1971, particularly in the conservative institutions, whose more intimate and flexible services appealed to the majority of American Jews.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, most conservative synagogues had become so-called “synagogue-centers,” meaning that they provided social as well as religious programming, and served to maintain and intensify feelings of Jewish identity in an increasingly assimilated population.<sup>36</sup> Temple Beth El, Portland’s conservative synagogue, had its own social programs, such as the United Synagogue Youth (USY) and the Temple Sisterhood, which drew Jews away from the JCC. According to Rosalyn Bernstein, Beth El provided an “enormous outlet” for Portland’s Jews, and enabled them to find religious and social identification in one place.<sup>37</sup> When Roberta Gordon came to Portland in 1971, she noticed that many Jews used the synagogue, not the Center, to find a Jewish connection.<sup>38</sup> Leonard Nelson observed that the temple began to supplant the JCC as the mode of Jewish identification in Portland. As he noted, “Beth El had its own social

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<sup>34</sup>Gerald Sorin, Tradition Transformed: The Jewish Experience in America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 220.

<sup>35</sup>Gary A. Tobin, “The Future of the American Jewish Community,” in Hertzberg, ed., The Jews in America, p. 57.

<sup>36</sup>Bernard Martin, “Conservative Judaism and Reconstructionism,” in Jacob Neusner, Alan J. Avery-Peck, William Scott Green, eds., Encyclopedia of Judaism, Volume 1: A - I (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1999), p. 123.

<sup>37</sup>Rosalyn Bernstein, interview by author (conducted by telephone, 17 January 2002).

<sup>38</sup>Roberta Gordon, interview by author.

arm, and I began noticing, for example, USY, which was a children's social arm of Temple Beth El, that was beginning to be powerful, and I noticed that in other cities in America too, in New England. . . So I think the weakening of the Jewish Community Centers as a movement, I began noticing in the larger cities first, and then it also happened in Portland. . . part of it was that as the synagogues developed their own suburban power, they had their own social organizations."<sup>39</sup>

Although most Jews in Portland agreed that the Center no longer played a central role in their lives, many lamented the decline of an institution that they had worked so hard to build. They were not ready to abandon the organization. According to Cynthia Mack, the same woman who called the Cumberland Avenue building a "sentimental \$110,000 toy," "Sentimentally, I feel very badly about the decline of the Center. My mother had many happy years there and, as a youth, I enjoyed going down there for social activities."<sup>40</sup> Merle Nelson also described the decline of the Center as sad, particularly since it had been such a welcoming place where everyone knew one another and felt comfortable.<sup>41</sup>

Because many Portland Jews harbored emotional attachments to the Center, they attempted to find a solution to ensure its existence. In 1972, the Jewish Federation, which had remained strong throughout the 1960s, and the Jewish Community Center merged in an attempt to save money. Unlike the services provided by the Jewish Community Center, which could be duplicated in the general community, the Jewish Federation functioned as a fundraising organization for purely Jewish causes. Although Portland Jews wanted to integrate into the non-Jewish community, many still wished to financially support the

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<sup>39</sup>Leonard Nelson, interview by author (Portland, Maine, 11 January 2002).

<sup>40</sup>Cynthia Mack, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past," p. 47.

<sup>41</sup>Merle Nelson, interview by author.

Jewish community. Protection for the state of Israel remained a particularly important issue for Jews across the country, as did the emergence of Holocaust memory. The Federation allowed Portland Jews to contribute to these causes without feeling that they were limiting their activities to the Jewish community.

Julius Elowitch, who became Center president in 1972, orchestrated the merger between the Center and the Federation. He then reorganized the Center's executive board and delegated more responsibility to other members of the board of the directors. He wanted Jewish leaders to feel a greater sense of personal responsibility for the survival of the JCC. Although Elowitch's ideas and the merger between the JCC and the Federation temporarily halted the Center's decline, it was not enough. According to Mack, "when you get into problems such as double digit inflation and dwindling membership, you certainly have a problem."<sup>42</sup> Given its financial situation, the Jewish community could no longer support the Cumberland Avenue building.

In 1979, the Jewish community sold the Cumberland Avenue building and embarked on a program called "Center Without Walls." Under this program, the JCC as an organization would continue to exist and the community would use previously existing facilities in Portland instead of its own building for its activities. For example, a Jewish basketball league could be held at the YMCA and Jewish organizations could meet in other public spaces in the city. In 1982, the community bought a small building on Ashmont Street in the Woodfords section of Portland to serve as an administrative center for the JCC. The board of directors of the JCC initially planned on remaining in the small building for only three years, at which time they hoped the community would be revitalized enough to purchase a larger building in Woodfords. Membership continued to decline, however, and by 1984, the JCC membership stood at 339 households, down from 654 households in

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<sup>42</sup>Cynthia Mack, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past," p. 47.

1959.<sup>43</sup> A combination of declining membership and financial hardship has forced the JCC to remain in the Ashmont Street Building until the present day.

While there was no doubt that increased integration played a substantial role in the decline of the Jewish Community Center, Portland Jews disagreed about the extent of societal openness in the city. There seemed to be a generational split in Portland, with older Jews convinced that discrimination still existed and younger Jews believing that they lived in a completely open society. Many older Jews who experienced exclusion for much of their lives felt that beneath the surface of new laws and inclusionary policies, nothing in Portland had really changed. They argued that longstanding prejudice could not change in the span of a few years. In 1976, Cynthia Mack stated, "I don't think anything has changed for the Cumberland Club, but I think they have to guard their conversation as much as I would guard mine. I am very uncomfortable around that situation. . . No, nothing will change. I don't think anything will change these people. For whatever reasons, their dislike of the Jewish people will never change."<sup>44</sup>

As president of the Anti-Defamation League, Dr. Benjamin Zolov continued to encounter evidence of discrimination in Portland. In 1976 he said, "anybody who thinks that discrimination has gone by the boards, is wearing blinders, or else he's got his ears stuffed. He doesn't hear well. There are problems."<sup>45</sup> Although Portland Jews middle-aged and older who had experienced exclusion tended to be more aware of these problems, some young Jews still felt the aftereffects of a closed society. When Roberta Gordon came

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<sup>43</sup>Edgar Allen Beem, "The Jewish Identity," Maine Times, 24 February 1984.

<sup>44</sup>Cynthia Mack, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past," p. 77.

<sup>45</sup>Dr. Benjamin Zolov, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past" (7 September 1976), p. 36.

to Portland, she quickly noticed “signs of not being welcome in certain parts of life.” While she and her husband, George, a periodontist, experienced a warm professional welcome, socially they felt most comfortable in the Jewish community. According to Gordon, social separation still existed in Portland. Although some prominent Jews did join the country clubs and fraternal organizations, most Jews still felt conspicuous in these former bastions of discrimination.<sup>46</sup> Still, other Portland Jews recall that they never experienced any discrimination and always felt welcome in the city. As a young Jewish lawyer who came to Portland in 1968, Judge David Cohen said he did not experience any discrimination. He stated in an interview that most of his colleagues were warm and welcoming and that it never occurred to him that he would be singled out for being Jewish. Initially, his social life revolved around the non-Jewish community and he did not actively participate in Jewish life in Portland until he became well-established in the city. Nevertheless, Cohen never tried to join a country club because the atmosphere did not interest him.<sup>47</sup>

As society became more open, however, some Portland Jews expressed concern about assimilation. Like other communities in the United States, Portland Jewry began experiencing higher rates of intermarriage and a loss of cohesiveness. The community thus attempted to balance the positive and negative aspects of societal integration. From a positive perspective, an open society allowed Jews to make an enormous impact in Portland. According to Merle Nelson, given the relative size of their community, Portland Jews made a “disproportionately strong” contribution to the city. Along with multiple Jewish presences on city civic and cultural boards, Portland Jews began to take a stronger political

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<sup>46</sup>Roberta Gordon, interview by author (South Portland, Maine, 16 January 2002).

<sup>47</sup>Judge David Cohen, interview by author (Portland, Maine, 14 January 2002).



role in the city and the state. Merle Nelson served as a state legislator, as did Joel Abromson. Abromson's wife, Linda, served as mayor of Portland and as a city councilor. These are just a few examples of the major influence of Jews in Portland. Along with strong leadership skills cultivated within the Jewish community, Portland Jews often made good leaders because they had "reasonable voices." According to Rabbi Harry Sky, citizens of Portland began to respect Portland Jews for the solidity of their social arguments and their belief that social boundaries were meaningless.<sup>48</sup> Because they had worked hard to establish their own internal institutions and then to combat discrimination, Jewish leaders in Portland tended to have a strong sense of social justice and community that translated well to civic leadership.

Nevertheless, some Portland Jews feared losing their Jewish identities. According to a 1984 article in the Maine Times, "Now that Jews are part of the mainstream and the establishment in America and Maine, the problem they face is not that of being handicapped by Jewishness, but of retaining what remains of that Jewishness already eroded by assimilation and intermarriage."<sup>49</sup> The evidence indicates that the Portland Jewish community did experience a loss of social cohesiveness. Some Jewish leaders like Jules Krems hoped that the Jewish Community Center would help combat assimilation. According to Krems, "The Center does have an appeal, and if it could be built under the conditions or circumstances or setting that I've described, I think it could still be supported primarily because of the fear of assimilation, the fear of intermarriage."<sup>50</sup> Despite Krems's hopes, however, the Center did not retain enough support to effectively combat assimilation.

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<sup>48</sup>Rabbi Harry Sky, interview by author (Falmouth, Maine, 25 January 2002).

<sup>49</sup>Beem, "The Jewish Identity," Maine Times.

<sup>50</sup>Jules Krems, interview by Feig, "Portraits of the Past," p. 25.

Once society opened up, Portland Jews wanted to take full advantage of the social access which they had been long denied. According to Robert Willis, the 1984 Jewish Federation president in Portland, "It's too easy *not* to be Jewish these days."<sup>51</sup>

The rapid decline of the Jewish Community Center after 1972 signalled the end of an era in the history of Portland Jewry. Gone were the days when hundreds of Jews gathered at the Cumberland Avenue building every day to take part in dramatic plays, basketball leagues, and community service projects. Instead, Portland Jews had gained full access to the wider community, and in so doing, lost a sense of Jewish cohesiveness. Nevertheless, community leaders maintained hope that Portland Jewry could continue to survive and perhaps flourish. In 1984, when asked whether or not the Portland Jewish community would eventually disappear, Rabbi Sky responded, "Don't count on it. We Jews have always beaten the odds. People have written our obituary many times."<sup>52</sup> As they looked towards the future of their community, Portland Jews would rely on the knowledge they had gained from their institutional past and the faith that they could once again create a vibrant Jewish life in the city of Portland.

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<sup>51</sup>Beem, "The Jewish Identity," Maine Times.

<sup>52</sup>Beem, "The Jewish Identity," Maine Times.

## Conclusion

The insularity of Portland Jewry in combination with the close-mindedness of the Gentile world created an ideal atmosphere for the development of strong Jewish communal institutions. Because everyone in the Jewish community knew one another, there was little room for dissent. In the case of the Jewish Federation, for example, community leaders pressured uncooperative groups to join by threatening to ostracize them from the community. While such a threat might hold little weight in a larger city with multiple resources, exclusion from the main group in a small community like Portland often meant institutional suicide. In his book American Judaism, historian Nathan Glazer asserts that Jewish institutions tend to thrive in smaller communities because Jews form a captive audience for one another. Jews in these communities feel pressure both to participate in Jewish institutional life and to experience a strong sense of Jewish group feeling.<sup>1</sup> The story of the Portland Jews clearly supports Glazer's assertion.

Although the general historiography on American Jewry has been based on larger cities, the trends hold true for small-town Jewish communities like Portland as well. Ewa Morawska has outlined four major developments in American Jewish life that led American Jewry towards integration and assimilation: upward mobility, increased participation in American public life, secularization of Jewishness, and diversification of social relationships among Jews.<sup>2</sup> Portland Jews experienced each of these developments in turn as they moved from separation toward a more integrated society. Despite the presence of these trends, however, the small size of Portland and its remoteness from major metropolitan centers meant that Portland Jews had to create change on their own rather than relying on the

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<sup>1</sup>Nathan Glazer, American Judaism, second edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 123.

<sup>2</sup>Ewa Morawska, Insecure Prosperity: Small-Town Jews in Industrial America, 1890-1940 (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. xiv.

support of national organizations. In contrast to the active social reform movements experienced by Jews in urban centers, Portland Jews faced a closed and at times static environment in the small, homogeneous city. The traditional Yankee Protestant society in Portland forced Jews to combat discrimination on an individual basis rather than through large organized movements. While this sometimes slowed the process of social integration, Portland Jews eventually gained acceptance and succeeded in becoming full citizens of both Maine and America.

As members of an ethnic and religious minority in a predominantly white Protestant community, Portland Jews developed a strong network of secular Jewish institutions that they in turn used to facilitate Jewish integration into Portland society. Gone were the days of segregation and exclusion. While some Jews would continue to feel socially uncomfortable well into the 1990s, Portland now accepted its Jewish citizens as equal members. In achieving this equality, Portland Jews did not always follow national trends in fighting discrimination, choosing instead to concentrate on strengthening their own community. The way in which Portland Jews combatted exclusion stems from both the cohesive nature of the community and a strong sense of Maine individualism. The state of Maine is geographically and, to some extent, culturally isolated from mainstream America, which creates a need for self-reliance. Maine residents pride themselves on their self-sufficiency and their ability to produce strong leaders. The Jewish community in Portland took advantage of these qualities of self-reliance and leadership in their quest to make a place for themselves in the city.

The unified and insular nature of the Portland Jewish community can be traced back to the immigrant roots of Portland Jews. The East European heritage of most Portland Jews created a homogeneous Orthodox community known as the "Jerusalem of the North." This Orthodox community resisted religious modernization for a long time, resulting in a

cohesive community with a lack of diversity in religious belief, economic standing, and social class. In contrast to other Jewish communities that experienced a split between German and East European Jews, the homogeneous nature of Portland Jews enabled them to produce strong, centralized community institutions.

Like their counterparts elsewhere, Portland Jews experienced both blatant and subtle forms of anti-Semitism in the first half of the twentieth century. Societal exclusion caused Portland Jews to turn inward and develop communal institutions that would protect them from discrimination and provide key recreational and cultural services. The 1938 establishment of the Jewish Community Center on Cumberland Avenue marked a turning point in the lives of Portland Jews. Whereas Portland Jewry had been forced in the past to rely solely on religious institutions to create unity, it now had a secular community institution. It used the JCC to create a balanced program of recreational, cultural, and educational activities for all ages, and to improve its reputation in the Gentile community. The JCC created a safe place in which Portland Jews could participate in traditional American activities, such as basketball, bowling, and summer camp. Although the establishment of the JCC signalled the desire of Portland Jews to become more American, it did not mean that Jews were becoming more integrated.

Throughout the 1940s, Portland Jews focused almost exclusively on internal institution building. With the end of World War II and the ensuing economic prosperity of the 1950s, however, Jews began to look towards integration and away from exclusively Jewish affiliations. As was the case with Jewish communities across the country, Portland Jews mimicked non-Jewish living patterns and societal values. Portland Jewry joined the mass American exodus to the suburbs, moving in large numbers from the Munjoy Hill section of Portland to the Woodfords neighborhood. At the same time, economic prosperity and increased levels of higher education enabled Portland Jews to thrive professionally. They also participated in the mass religious revival sweeping the county

after World War II. Despite their economic and professional success, however, the social separation of Portland Jews from their non-Jewish neighbors only served to highlight the fact that they were still not fully included in the city life. Portland Jewry's internal institutions continued to thrive throughout the 1950s because Jews had no other alternative. They were still unwelcome in the city's civic, cultural, and fraternal organizations.

As the 1960s progressed and American Jews developed a strong social consciousness, they worked actively for the cause of civil rights and helped advance equality for African Americans. They directed this push for equal rights towards their own community as well, breaking down the remaining legal barriers to their inclusion in mainstream society. Organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, and the American Jewish Congress used both educational and legal means to combat residual anti-Semitism in the United States. While these organizations played a key role in ending discrimination against American Jews, they had a minimal presence in Portland. A number of factors, including a sense of Maine individualism, a lack of community resources, and geographic and cultural isolation, all meant that Portland Jewish institutions did not participate in the nation-wide organizational effort to end discrimination. Rather, individual and small groups of Jews in Portland used various educational and legal means to abolish discrimination in civic institutions and fraternal organizations, thereby ending de jure exclusion. Although their legal victories enabled Portland Jews to participate fully in non-Jewish society by the 1970s, it would be another couple of decades until all Jews felt comfortable in the Gentile world.

Many Jews did take advantage of increased social access throughout the 1960s and 1970s, allowing the Portland Jewish community to become increasingly assimilated to the mainstream, so much so that by the mid-1970s, the Jewish Community Center, once a bastion of Jewish activity in Portland, no longer played a central role for Jews in Portland. Indeed, by the mid-1970s, Portland Jews had achieved full access to all social and

recreational activities, thereby rendering the JCC's programming obsolete. Thus, in 1979, the community believed it had no choice but to sell the building in the face of dwindling membership and financial hardship. By the 1970s, the Portland Jewish community looked like most other Jewish communities in America, threatened by the consequences of assimilation and intermarriage, yet excited by the possibility of a new life in the wider society.

It would be misleading to end this account with a description of the decline of the Jewish Community Center. That is not, in fact, the whole story. In 1996, after twenty years of relative inactivity, the Jewish Community Center and the Jewish Federation hired David Unger to act as a joint executive director for both organizations. Unger, professionally trained to manage a not-for-profit organization, immediately embarked on a program to revitalize Portland's communal Jewish institutions. After a few years working in Portland, Unger and his board members agreed to merge the Jewish Community Center and the Jewish Federation into a single organization, to be known as the Jewish Community Alliance (JCA) of Southern Maine. They made the decision to merge in the late spring of 1999, and had completed the merger by January of 2000, a relatively quick accomplishment. While the professional staff at the two organizations combined easily, convincing the lay leadership of each organization to work with one another proved to be more difficult as each board harbored emotional attachments to its respective institution. Nevertheless, Unger notes in an interview that there was little resistance to the merger in Portland because the Jewish community was "beat down" due to poor programming and financial trouble.<sup>3</sup>

The newly-combined board of the JCC and the Federation then developed a five-year strategic plan with a mission "to enhance and promote Jewish life and continuity

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<sup>3</sup>David Unger, interview by author (Portland, Maine, 9 January 2002).

locally, in Israel and throughout the world, and to generate the financial resources to develop, provide and support diverse programs, education and services in order to accomplish these goals.” The strategic plan of the JCA indicates the desire to improve the Portland Jewish community in five key areas: facilities, Jewish education, fundraising, quality and excellence in programming, and volunteer leadership. Unger and the lay leadership of the JCA had to rebuild the program from the ground up, focusing first on increasing the quality of volunteer leadership and strengthening fundraising. According to Unger, the nature of volunteerism had changed by the 1990s, so that it was initially difficult to convince assimilated Jews to give their time and energy to an exclusively Jewish institution. He credits the gradual resurgence of the Jewish community to a generational shift, with energetic younger Portland Jews taking over from their older counterparts.

The improvements in the Jewish Community Alliance have been so remarkable that other small communities across the country are now looking to Portland as a model for community rejuvenation. In 1996, the nursery school at the JCC had an enrollment of eighteen children, the Center Day Camp served 160 children each week, and a small seniors program supported approximately twenty members. By 2001, the programming at the JCA had grown dramatically: the nursery school had an enrollment of eighty children, 200 children attended Center Day Camp each week, early childhood and Family Life education programs had been developed, a group for young adults called the Maccabee Programs served approximately twenty-five teenagers by organizing athletic activities and exchanges with Jewish teenagers in Russia and Israel, and a new seniors program had been established. Furthermore, Jewish Family Services, which had been completely shut down, was reorganized as a subordinate program of the JCA. Currently, JFS provides programming for the elderly such as meals on wheels, and has two social workers on staff who provide counseling and referrals to members of the Jewish community.

Despite this seeming success, Unger contends that a Jewish community with over



six thousand Jews like Portland should have better facilities. Omaha, Nebraska, for example, with a community of six thousand, has a new 150,000 square foot Jewish community center, whereas the Portland community is still using the 5,500 square foot facility on Ashmont Street that it bought after selling the Cumberland Avenue building. While some smaller Jewish communities around the country have already undergone revitalization, Portland is just beginning the process. Unger attributes Portland Jewry's tardiness to its decision to sell the Cumberland Avenue JCC in 1976 and to weak lay leadership. According to Unger, for a religious and ethnically-based not-for-profit organization like the Jewish Community Center to really thrive in this era of assimilation, professional leadership must be employed. There is no doubt that Unger's presence in Portland has certainly helped the community institute new programming. Unger and the executive board hold great hope for the future of the Portland Jewish community. Although Portland Jews have often followed their own path and bucked national trends, they have always managed to find success while maintaining group cohesion. Thus, the "vision for the Jewish Community Alliance means respecting current challenges and linking the past to the future. In other words, our vision is an expression of the choices we have made, based on our experience and present condition, and selected for the path toward our future. Our vision must, therefore, ultimately have an effect at the community level, where life is lived, where we as Jews live separately, but together as Jews."<sup>4</sup> The strong institutional past of Portland Jewry continues to serve the community today, as it looks towards increased success in the future.

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<sup>4</sup>*The Jewish Community Alliance of Southern Maine: Strategic Plan 2001-2005*, ratified 27 February 2001 by the Strategic Planning Committee of the Board of Directors of the Jewish Community Alliance of Southern Maine.

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