
Maine Jewish History Project: Annual Report

September 7, 2010

As we begin a new academic year at Colby, and a new Jewish year besides, I write to update you on the activities of the Maine Jewish History Project during its inaugural year and on plans for the coming year.

The Maine Jewish History Project at Colby College fosters research on Jewish life in the Pine Tree State, sharing the results of this research with current and former Mainers and also with students and scholars of American Jewish history. Through oral history interviews and the examination of documentary sources, members of the project's research team collect information about Maine's Jewish communities, a subject that has received insufficient attention. Team members analyze this data and then give their findings back to community members, completing the circle of storytelling and enriching everyone's knowledge. While the mission of the project encompasses all of Maine, the primary focus of the research team is on the Jewish communities of Kennebec County, especially that of Waterville.

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The involvement of Colby students is central to the mission of the Maine Jewish History Project and to its successes in the past year. Student members of the research team process and analyze historical data, actively engaging with members of local Jewish communities both in the collection of information and in the presentation of the knowledge they generate through their own research activities. Other students at Colby also benefit from the work of research team members: students in this past spring's survey course "Jews and Judaism in the Modern World," for example, read essays written by student researchers in order to better understand American Jewish history. It has been a true pleasure to work with the students—Jewish and non-Jewish, from Maine and from away—who have chosen to participate in this project.

At this time last year, the Maine Jewish History Project at Colby College did not exist. What began with a trickle—work by three student researchers during the Fall '09 semester—has turned into a steady stream of data collection, analysis, and presentation. Those initial student researchers, **Dell Perez '10**, **Jen Shriber '10**, and **Margie Weiner '12**, laid the foundations for future work by analyzing census data about Jews in Waterville and Winslow, transcribing oral history interviews conducted by members of the Levine family (whose history in Waterville dates to the 1880s), and archiving Levine family correspondence from the World War I era. **Margo Derecktor '10** began the process of unraveling a fascinating mystery: In the 1920s, when many American and Maine colleges erected barriers to Jewish enrollment, why did Colby's administration welcome Jewish students with open arms and even with financial aid?

The centerpiece of student involvement in the Maine Jewish History Project is the course which I teach in the January term, "Topics in Maine's Jewish History." The course's focus in 2010 was on Jews born in Kennebec County before 1946 and, secondarily, Jews from away who attended Colby before 1946. Most of the studies prepared by participants in this course are available to the general public on the Maine Jewish History Project's website, <http://web.colby.edu/jewsinmaine/>:

- **Spencer Kasko '12**, “‘Waterville, Maine, of all places’: Population patterns in Waterville’s fledgling Jewish community”
- **Sam Levine '11**, “Occupational trends of Jews in Kennebec County”
- **Jena Hershkowitz '12**, “‘We did the short kiddush’: Patterns and practices of Jewish religious life”
- **Nicole Mitchell '10**, “Religious education in Kennebec County”
- **Becky Muller '10**, “Dating and marriage trends in Kennebec County’s Jewish communities”
- **Kimi Kossler '12**, “Jewish mothers in Kennebec County”
- **Hasan Bhatti '10**, “Jewish participation in civic organizations in Waterville”
- **Katie Peterson '10**, “Jewish fraternities at Colby”
- **Desiree Shayer '12**, “Jewish students from away at Colby College: Anti-Semitism and acceptance in the interwar years”

In addition to their online presentations, Spencer, Kimi, Becky, Nicole, and Desiree prepared oral presentations for a standing-room-only event, “Jewish Experiences in Kennebec County.” About 60 people attended this April program, including Colby students, current and former members of Kennebec County’s Jewish communities, and others from as far away as Portland and Bangor. I offered a related presentation on “Colby and the Jewish community of Waterville in the early 20th century” to alumni participating in this past June’s reunion weekend.

Among the especially gratifying aspects of my work with participants in the January course has been the interest of many of those students in continuing to research Maine’s Jewish history after that course’s conclusion. **Hasan Bhatti** and **Becky Muller** each chose to devote part of their final semester at Colby to an independent study of Waterville’s Jewish community. Becky presented her research, “A community apart: Women’s experiences in Waterville, Maine, 1945–1970,” within the framework of Colby’s Undergraduate Research Symposium, while Hasan presented his work, “100 years of Beth Israel,” in a special event at Beth Israel itself; both papers are available at <http://web.colby.edu/jewsinmaine/>.

This spring and summer, I’ve also had the pleasure to work with **Kimi Kossler** and **Desiree Shayer**. Kimi has archived a sizeable collection of correspondence by members of the Levine family from World War II and is currently archiving records of Waterville’s Beth Israel synagogue and sisterhood along with those of Waterville’s chapters of Hadassah and B’nai B’rith. In addition, Kimi is in the process of creating interactive maps that depict the growth and shifting residential/occupational patterns of Jews in Waterville and Winslow during the first half of the twentieth century. Desiree, a Goldfarb Center Student Research Fellow, is working with me to better understand Colby’s admissions policies during the interwar years and their impact on Waterville’s Jewish community. Our research, which compares the dynamics at Colby with those at Bates College in Lewiston, will shed valuable light on the dynamics that shaped Jewish–Christian relations in New England during this period. Desiree and I will be presenting our findings at the annual conference of the Association of Jewish Studies in December. Kimi and Desiree presented their preliminary findings at the Colby Undergraduate Student Research Retreat.

In the course of our work, members of the project research team have collected a significant amount of raw data about Jewish Mainers from census records, vital statistics, naturalization documents, city directories, and other public sources. We are in the process of making this data easily accessible through the website of Documenting Maine Jewry (<http://www.mainejews.org>), a community-based non-profit organization with which we are partnering.

The numerous interviews of Jews who have lived in Kennebec County which members of the research team conducted provide information that is even more valuable. Transcripts of all of these interviews will be available to future Colby researchers and others who come to Colby to conduct research; some narrators have consented to share their interview transcripts more broadly through the website of

Documenting Maine Jewry. The work of the Maine Jewish History Project would be impossible without the willingness of so many community members to give generously of their time and their stories, and I cannot thank the following individuals enough for their gracious participation:

Sara Miller Arnon
Marcia Shiro Beckerman
Peter Beckerman
Judith Levine Brody '58
Sumner Fanger
Irene Lait Friedman
Sid Geller
Gerald Gilson '42
Marion Hains
Robert Hains
Doris Hopengarten '40
Philip Isaacson (Bates '47)
Kenneth Jacobson '50
Lester Jolovitz '39
Glenyce Miller Kaplan '46

Rabbi Raymond Krinsky
Ida Joyce Levine
Sumner Lipman
Sandy Maisel
Bob Rosenthal '50
Arlyne Rosenthal Sacks '54
Judith Quint Schreider '39
Sam Shapiro
Burt Shiro '44
Phyllis Shiro
Ken Slosberg
Stephen Sternberg '41
Gordon Wolman '41
Myrt Wolman

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The community members who have been interviewed as part of the Maine Jewish History Project are certainly not the only individuals whose support has been vital to the successes of the past year. The project itself would have been stillborn without the steadfast support and encouragement of Dean **Ed Yeterian** and Associate Dean **Michael Donihue**; Prof. **Elisa Narin van Court**, director of Colby's Jewish Studies Program, and the members of that program's steering committee; and my colleagues within the Religious Studies Department. The Goldfarb Center for Public Affairs and Civic Engagement provided both a course development grant for "Topics in Maine's Jewish History" and a faculty-student collaborative research grant for study of the exceptional number of college-educated Jews from Waterville during the interwar years. I am grateful to the director of the Goldfarb Center, Prof. **Sandy Maisel**, to the members of the Goldfarb Center steering committee, and especially to the center's staff, **Alice Elliott** and **Susanna Thompson**.

The Bronstein Fund, which supports curricular enhancement of the Jewish Studies Program, provided support for the guest speakers who enriched the "Topics" course. It is my pleasure to thank **Barry and Judith Bronstein P'96** for endowing this fund and to acknowledge the speakers. Prof. **Eric Hooglund** (Bates College) and Prof. **Tom Longstaff** (Colby, emeritus) placed Waterville's Jewish community within the broader context of the city's diverse ethnic matrix. **Jo Radner**, a professional folklorist, trained students in the art of conducting oral history interviews.

Pat Burdick, Special Collections Librarian, has provided exceptional support for the considerable archival activity associated with the Maine Jewish History Project. **Clem Guthro**, Director of the Colby Libraries, and **Peggy Menchen**, Assistant Director for Public Services, have also supported members of the research team in a variety of ways. **Manny Gimond** of Academic ITS trained Kimi Kessler in the use of GIS technology and has helped her to design the maps of Waterville's Jewish community. Also in ITS, **Mel Regnell** and **Ellen Freeman** were instrumental in setting up both the public website of the Maine Jewish History Project and the internal website through which team members share their work in progress. **Debbie Dutton** and her colleagues in College Relations have greatly facilitated efforts to reach out to Jewish Colby alumni; **David Pulver '63, P'93** has played a similar role with respect to Colby trustees.

I have been fortunate to work with numerous partners beyond the Colby community over the past year. **Sara Miller Arnon**, **Wendy Miller**, and **Julie Miller Soros** have been extraordinarily generous in sharing the documents and information they have collected regarding members of Waterville's Levine family and Levine's clothing store. **Peter Beckerman** and **Tiffany Lopes** of Beth Israel Congregation identified historic documents associated with the synagogue and Jewish communal organizations and made those documents available for archiving. Peter also provided invaluable assistance in formulating the initial list of prospective interview subjects from Waterville. Rabbi **Susan Carvutto** of Congregation Beth El in Augusta played a similar role in identifying oral history narrators from the Jewish communities of Augusta and Gardiner.

Sarah Sudgen, director of the Waterville Public Library, went out of her way in the midst of construction to make the library's collection of Waterville city directories available to our research team. **Tom Longstaff** and **Abe Peck** each provided access to outstanding collections of historic photographs, which students used in their presentations. **Elaine Ardia** and **Pat Webber** at the Muskie Archives and Special Collections Library of Bates College have provided invaluable assistance in our research into Jewish enrollment at Bates during the interwar years. It is also a pleasure to acknowledge the assistance of my parents, **Philip Freidenreich** and Prof. **Harriet Freidenreich** (Temple University), whose thorough examination of census and other governmental records have yielded a considerable amount of data for future members of the research team to analyze.

It has been a special privilege to forge personal and institutional partnerships with individuals who have long been at work researching local history. I am grateful to **Harris Gleckman** of Documenting Maine Jewry and to **Richard D'Abate**, **Steve Bromage**, and **Susan Cummings-Lawrence** of Maine Historical Society for their constant encouragement of a newcomer to the field, for their advice, and especially for their interest in collaboration. The fruits of this collaboration will become especially apparent in the year to come.

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Colby's Jewish Studies Program has received a grant from the Legacy Heritage Jewish Studies Project, directed by the Association for Jewish Studies (AJS), to support public programming on the subject of Maine's Jewish history. The Legacy Heritage Jewish Studies Project promotes sustained Jewish Studies programming in small to mid-sized communities and seeks to foster relationships between scholars and the wider communities in which they work, values embodied by the Maine Jewish History Project. "Telling the stories of Maine's Jewish history" events will take place both at Colby and around the state during the coming academic year.

This fall in communities throughout Maine, I will offer an interactive program of stories depicting Jewish experiences in Maine from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. Nearly every active synagogue in the state is either hosting or co-sponsoring one of these events, which will take place in Auburn, Augusta, Bangor, Bath, Biddeford, Portland, and Waterville. The first of these events, which took place at Rockland's Congregation Adas Yoshuron on August 1, brought together 50 people to share their personal and family stories and to learn about how these stories fit within a broader historical framework of Jewish life in Maine; a dozen participants stayed afterward to discuss ways to further the process of collecting and preserving the stories that capture Jewish history in the Midcoast region. I am grateful to **Richard Aroneau** of Adas Yoshuron for facilitating the August 1 event and to the many community partners who are laying the groundwork for future programs in this series. My own contributions to these programs draw heavily on the work of the Maine Jewish History Project research team.

Fall events in the “Telling the stories of Maine’s Jewish history” program will bring the work of Colby researchers to communities around the state; spring events, in turn, will bring members of those communities to Colby, both to learn and to share their own research. The Jewish Studies Program, in collaboration with Documenting Maine Jewry and Maine Historical Society, will host “Discovering Maine’s Jewish history: A conference for community, professional, and student historians” on Sunday, April 3, 2011. This event, which builds on a conference held at Bates in 2009, will enable local researchers to share information and place Maine’s Jewish history within the broader context of the American Jewish experience. Two leading scholars of American Jewish history, Prof. **Hasia Diner** (NYU; author of *The Jews of the United States, 1654–2000*) and Prof. **Lee Shai Weissbach** (University of Louisville; author of *Jewish life in small-town America*), will deliver keynote addresses. The conference will also feature several thematic sessions moderated by the keynote speakers, Prof. **Michael Hoberman** (Fitchburg State College; author of *How strange it seems: The cultural life of Jews in small-town New England*), and Colby’s Prof. **Rob Weisbrot**, among others. Presentations at these sessions, which will also appear in electronic format at <http://web.colby.edu/jewsinmaine/>, will be offered by community-based historians and Colby students.

Colby students will also play crucial roles in creating exhibits about Maine’s Jewish history. “The stories they could tell: Artifacts of the Maine Jewish experience” will be on display in the Whitney Room of Roberts Union in April and May of the coming year. This exhibit will explore three storylines: immigration and occupation patterns of Jews who settled in Maine, the impact within Maine’s Jewish communities of major developments in national and world history, and the experiences of Jewish Mainers as a lens through which to see broader trends in American Jewish history. Students will curate this exhibit and offer guided tours to public school students, among other visiting groups. **Susan Cummings-Lawrence** is laying the groundwork for this exhibit by preparing a list of artifacts, photographs, and documents available for inclusion. **Lauren Lessing** of the Colby Museum of Art is providing guidance for this exhibit and will train student docents. In addition to the physical exhibit, students will create virtual counterparts for inclusion in Maine History Online, a set of chronological and thematic essays and exhibits about the state’s history within Maine Memory Network (<http://www.mainememory.net>), a project of the Maine Historical Society.

While “Telling the stories of Maine’s Jewish history” events provide opportunities to share the findings of the Maine Jewish History Project research team and other historians, the underlying research process itself will continue unabated. I will offer “Topics in Maine’s Jewish History” again this January and look forward to welcoming a new cohort of students into the research team. Students in the 2011 cohort will draw upon and supplement the work of the 2010 cohort regarding Jews born before 1946 who have lived in Kennebec County; I am especially excited to see what they are able to learn from the newly archived Levine letters and Waterville Jewish community documents. In addition, members of the research team will interview Jewish baby boomers born in Kennebec County and extend the chronological scope of our research ever closer to the present day. Work on post-war Jewish life at Colby will likely be put on hold for the third cohort of student researchers, which will form, fittingly enough, in 2012–13, the academic year in which Colby will celebrate its bicentennial.

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The work conducted thus far by members of the Maine Jewish History Project research team demonstrates that Colby has long been exceptional in its openness to Jewish students and Jewish campus organizations. From an historical perspective, the fact that Colby is home to Maine’s only Jewish Studies Program and the state’s only endowed chair in Jewish Studies comes as no surprise. It is only fitting, then, that Colby should be at the cutting edge of research into Jewish life in Maine. I consider it a great privilege to pursue this research in collaboration with so many talented and dedicated students, colleagues, and community members. May the years to come be as fruitful as the year that has just drawn to a close.