

¹⁰Charter members of the post included Abraham I. Weisman, David Sivovlos, William E. Perlin, Leo Golodetz, Lewis Abramson, Harry Weinman, Sam T. Shrensker, Benjamin Troen, Louis Grinker, Manuel Berenson, Maurice Davis, Abraham L. Venner, Samuel Ross, Philip Gold, Philip Solomon, Abraham Bernstein, Louis Bernstein and Max Rice.

Succeeding David Sivovlos as commander were Abraham I. Weisman, William E. Perlin, Maurice Davis, Manuel Berenson, Harry Venner, Melvin Jacobson, Sifas Jacobson, Harold Ross, Myer Marcus, Hyman Jacobson and Arthur M. Waterman.

¹¹Among Jews of Portland who lost their lives during active service in World War II were Samuel M. Citrin, Benjamin A. Cox, Edward R. Goldstein, Louis S. Lane, Herbert F. Meyers, Sidney R. Miller and Max Weinstein.

¹²Succeeding Mrs. Davis as president of the Auxiliary were Mesdames Morris Benjamin, William E. Perlin, Manuel Berenson, Benjamin Goldberg, David Cutler, Sam Lubovitz and Max Milstein.

¹³*To Dwell in Safety*, by Mark Wischnitzer, page 290.

¹⁴Succeeding Robert Clenott as president of the Portland Zionist District were Saul G. Chason, Harold P. Nelson, Harold J. Potter, Morris Greenberg, Franklyn Golding, Abraham H. Simonds, Harry Garon, Dr. David Davidson and Benjamin Lazarus.

¹⁵Succeeding presidents of the organization included Mesdames Max Cooper, David Seigal, Nathan Cope, Morris Sclar, Jack Levine, Abraham Stolkner, Miss Leah Geron and Mrs. Seymour Nathanson.

CHAPTER XI

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER

The founding of the Jewish Community Center marked a turning point in the development of communal life, for it provided for the first time a focal point for all the varied activities of the diverse groups among Portland Jewry. The real history of the Jewish Community Center began in 1937 with the formal organization of a directorate and the election of officers. Although a center building on Wilmot Street had been used for thirteen years previous to this date, it served principally as a meeting hall of constituent organizations, and lacked a philosophy, program and organization of its own.

On November 1, 1937 a meeting was held at the home of Louis Bernstein for the purpose of creating a new Jewish community center and acquiring ample quarters. The officers elected were Louis Bernstein, president; Mrs. Edward J. Berman, vice-president; Edward J. Berman, treasurer; Mrs. Theodore Wasserman, secretary; and Maurice Davis, clerk.¹

At a mass meeting in the Community Center on Wilmot Street on November 15, 1937, the public was exhorted to support the proposal for a new center. Louis Bernstein presided and major speeches in favor of the project were delivered by Miss Edith Palmer, Edward J. Berman and Rabbi Mendell Lewittes. The result was a strong vote of approval and plans were made to secure a suitable building.

The former Pythian Temple on Cumberland Avenue, erected in 1910, was surveyed by a special committee consisting of Morris Sacknoff, Louis Bernstein and Mrs. Edward J. Berman. They reported that this five-storied building, although badly in need of repairs, could be purchased for \$17,500. A campaign for funds was launched in February 1938 with a goal of \$29,600. An immediate lift to the campaign was given by directors of the Jewish Community Center, who pledged \$15,000 among themselves.

In the meantime a curious incident took place. At a special meeting of the board of directors held on March 21, 1938, President Louis Bernstein informed the directors that, due to a technical error, the original incorporation of the Jewish Community

Center was legally invalid and that all the actions undertaken by the board were illegal. Thus, on March 17, 1938 seven of the directors became incorporators of a new Jewish Community Center and a new Certificate of Incorporation was properly prepared. It was now necessary for the board of directors to confirm anew all actions in regard to fund raising, building purchase, etc. These plans were quickly ratified and the Jewish Community Center became a legally constituted organization.

During 1938 a transformation of communal life took place. A large sum of money was spent on remodeling and repairing the new Center building under the direction of a building committee consisting of Abraham S. Levey, chairman, Abraham Seigal and Jacob Citrin. New equipment was purchased for the gymnasium, bowling alley, lounges and meeting rooms. Under the guidance of the National Jewish Welfare Board, the Center was projected not merely as a meeting place for clubs but as a creative force, dedicated through its programs to the satisfaction of recreational, cultural and communal needs.

In June 1938 Norman I. Godfrey of Stamford, Connecticut was appointed first executive director of the Center, and in August, the Policy Committee, headed by Joseph Wigon drew up a statement of aims and policies.

On Sunday, November 13, 1938, the new Jewish Community Center was blessed by Rabbi Mendell Lewittes at a ceremony in the Etz Chaim Synagogue. That afternoon the Center opened its doors to the public and inaugurated its Dedication Week under the general chairmanship of Abraham S. Levey with special programs each day.² With the dedication over, the Center began to implement its program.

Shortly after the opening of the Center, the Y.W.H.A. announced its dissolution as a separate entity. Its role was then taken over by the new Center Women's Club. In January 1939 the Y.M.H.A. adopted as its project the building of a Center library. It equipped the reading rooms with furniture, magazines and Yiddish and English newspapers. In February 1939 David Lavin, president of the Y.M.H.A., presented a plaque to the Center Library, thereby announcing its official opening.

In the first flush of its youth, the Center witnessed a mushrooming of many affiliated clubs. For the young children there were the Judeans for boys of ages nine to eleven directed by Saul Sheriff; the Junior Maccabees for boys from eleven to thirteen years, led by Edward D. Sacknoff and Abraham Gordon; and the Tel Hai group for boys from thirteen to fifteen directed by Daniel

Kornetsky. The Deborah Girls served the interests of the junior distaff element.

For the adults, in addition to the activities of their own groups held in the Center, special programming began to emerge. At the outset, the Education Committee chaired by Israel Bernstein scheduled several lecture series, the first dealing with the broad topic, "Can Democracy Survive?" Noted guest lecturers were invited.

As part of the Center's educational activity, a Sunday School was organized under the direction of Mrs. Barnett I. Shur. She was assisted by Mrs. Aaron Blumenthal, who conducted a class of pre-school children. And to serve the ends of both education and recreation, the Center Workshop came into being under the guidance of Gerald Waxman. It has been distinguished since its inception by the high calibre of its artistic achievements.

With the rise of the Center, Portland's first Jewish community weekly paper came into existence. Although the *Center Bulletin* was to serve principally as a house organ, its editors sought to add to its pages literary contributions from readers, and thus to enable it to assume the additional role of a literary journal. In the first issue (December 9, 1939), the new policy was announced editorially, as follows:

The *Bulletin* will 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 ambition can be realized will depend entirely on the cooperation of the members.

After several months the response was so negligible that the editors had to repeat and underscore their appeal. They called upon readers to submit any essay, brief biography, book review or story and confessed that if the *Bulletin* were to remain a house organ, it must be regarded as a failure. The paper, they said, would gladly increase the number of its pages to accommodate all contributions and concluded with this challenge:

The editors, therefore are turning their offer into a challenge. If the members have the ability we believe they possess, they will accept this challenge and send in their contributions regularly from week to week. If the challenge is not accepted, then we will be forced to hang our head in shame and confess that we were in grievous error and that there is no literary talent in our midst. Have we, or have

we not, cognoscenti and literati? Who will be the first to make robust answer?

The response was deafening in its silence and the editors no longer pursued this course of action. The *Community Center Bulletin* remained principally a medium for meeting announcements and a herald for special community events.

During the war years, the Center cooperated with the U.S.O. in making its facilities available to service personnel. Several organizations, principally the Business Girls Club, sponsored special parties, dances and general social activities as part of the general U.S.O. program, thereby enhancing the Center's role in this activity. As a counteracting element, we must note that the military services withdrew an extremely high percentage of young Jewish men from community life, leaving the Center and the Portland Jewish community in general in a state of suspended animation. Early in 1942, Louis Bernstein joined the Army Air Force and was succeeded by Edward J. Berman as Center president.

In November 1946, Victor H. Taylor, who came to Maine in 1944 to supervise U.S.O. work for the National Jewish Welfare Board, was elected acting executive director of the Center. Shortly thereafter, on January 24, 1947, Norman I. Godfrey, who had guided development of the Center from its start, died and Mr. Taylor was named executive director.

The Center's role in initiating adult education programs after the war is briefly mentioned in a later chapter ("Education and Social Welfare"). From the outset, however, a great part of the Center's activities was geared to the recreational needs of children. As early as 1940, the Center sponsored a day camp known as Camp Jaysee but in 1949, financed by a fund set up in memory of Norman I. Godfrey, the Center purchased a large camp site on Sebago Lake about seventeen miles from Portland. This new camp has provided children with an ideal environment for their summer hours. The well integrated educational and recreational programs of the Day Camp comprise perhaps the most significant achievement of the Center's program for children.

In May 1949 two Center leaders, Louis Bernstein and Barnett I. Shur, were elected to the board of directors of the National Jewish Welfare Board. This personal honor accorded them was reflected on the Jewish Community Center of Portland as well.³ The Center was fortunate since its inception in attracting to its leadership men who distinguished themselves in business and civic life and who worked continually for the development of

community institutions. This holds true, in no small measure, for its recent leadership, including presidents Harold J. Potter, Harold P. Nelson, Irving Small and Morris Cox.

Between January 26 and February 3, 1952, the Center observed the completion of thirteen fruitful years of activity. Once again the doors of the Center were opened wide to a gala Bar Mitzvah Week celebration under the direction of David Astor.⁴ Out of the celebration emerged a call to rededication in behalf of the Jewish community's leisure interests.

The Center's contribution extended far beyond the confines of the Jewish community and its services received broad public recognition. From 1942 to 1947 it was a member of the United Community War Chest and since then it has been a beneficiary of the Portland Community Chest. Its leaders, both lay and professional, have assumed prominent roles in committees of the Community Chest and Council of Social Agencies.

Backbone of the Center has been a devoted corps of women organized on December 20, 1938 as the Center Women's Club. Mrs. Harold P. Nelson was the group's first president. Serving with her were Mrs. Maurice Rosen, first vice-president; Mrs. Leo Golodetz, second vice-president; Mrs. Carl Zolov, secretary; and Mrs. Sol Branz, treasurer.⁵

The Center is now an integral part of the Jewish community. Its growth has conditioned both the direction and intensity of the social development of Portland Jewry, for it has become a focal point of most community endeavors. With the Jewish Federation, to be considered in the following chapters, it must be regarded as the veritable center of gravity of the community.

REFERENCES IN CHAPTER XI

¹The first Board of Directors included Mrs. Edward J. Berman, Israel Bernstein, Mrs. Israel Bernstein, Louis Bernstein, Jacob Citrin, Mrs. Maurice Davis, Mrs. Sadie Davis, Miss Ida Goffin, William Goodman, Silas Jacobson, Mrs. Gertrude D. Kramer, Abraham S. Levey, Mrs. Anne L. Matson, Morris Sacknoff and Rabbi Mendel Lewittes (honorary member).

²Daily dedication chairmen and their programs included Louis Bernstein, Sunday, Dedication; Abraham Seigal, Monday, Jewish Cultural Day and Hadassah Reception; Aaron Davidson Monday, Dedication of Recreation Floor; Morris Sacknoff, Tuesday, Y.M.H.A. Old Timers Reunion; Joseph Wigon, Wednesday, Organization Day -- B'nai B'rith; Israel Bernstein, Thursday, Community Dance -- Council of Jewish Women; Jacob Citrin, Friday, Community Religious Program; Edward J. Berman, Saturday, Youth Program -- Fraternity and Sorority Dance; Leo Golo-

detz, Sunday morning, Sunday School Reception; Jacob Rubinsky, Sunday afternoon, Junior Rally; and Mrs. Israel Bernstein, Sunday Evening, Mother and Daughter Banquet.

³In March 1949, Louis Bernstein, then recently appointed by Governor Horace Hildreth of Maine to the post of Recorder of the Municipal Court, was named honorary president of the Jewish Community Center. He is now Judge of the Municipal Court.

Barnett I. Shur has served as Corporation Counsel for the City of Portland since 1946. He is a past president of the Jewish Community Center, served for three years as president of the New England Section, National Jewish Welfare Board, and also as national vice-president of the Jewish Center Division of the National Jewish Welfare Board.

⁴Daily chairmen and events included Mrs. Philip Schilling, Saturday, Center Youth; Rabbi Morris Bekritsky, Sunday, Hear O Israel Radio Program; Dave Astor, Sunday and Monday, Bar Mitzvah Freilach; Harold Karl Halpert, Tuesday, Center Orchestra Concert; Harold J. Potter, Wednesday, Board of Directors Meeting; Leo Golodetz and Abraham Seigal, Thursday, Golden Age Program; Rabbi Ephraim Bennett, Friday, Temple Beth El Service; Saturday, Rabbi Morris Bekritsky, Shaarey Tphiloh Synagogue Service; Mr. and Mrs. Irving Rothstein, Saturday, Oneg Shabbat; Miriam Kaatz, Saturday, Young Adult Musical; Harold P. Nelson and Barnett I. Shur, Sunday, Founder's Banquet.

⁵Succeeding presidents of the Center Women's Club were Mesdames Barnett I. Shur, Myer Sacknoff, Harold J. Potter, Julius Elowitch, Henry Pollard, Frank Laben, Arnold Goodman, Edward Rodman, Philip Schilling and Jack Clayman.

CHAPTER XII

THE RISE OF THE JEWISH FEDERATION

From its earliest years the Jewish community in Portland expanded in all directions without plan or order. Like Topsy, it "jest growed." Religious, social and cultural organizations continued to produce offspring which existed side by side with their parent bodies, sharing the same interests and often the same programs. This multiplicity was a source of great inconvenience because it resulted in innumerable separate campaigns for funds and enlistment of community support.

An early attempt to coordinate activities of divergent groups was made by the Vaad Hoir in 1929. The primary purpose of the Vaad, as has been noted, was to assure the healthy growth of the orthodox community through avoidance of duplication and to provide financial support for necessary religious functions. Thus a community rabbi was engaged and a single community slaughter house established.

During the earliest years of its operation, when income from the supervision and slaughter of kosher meat and fowl warranted, the Vaad extended its support to such institutions as the Portland Hebrew School, the United Hebrew Charities and the Jewish Home for Aged. Thus it not only provided necessary funds to these worthy institutions but also reduced the demands upon the time, energy and monetary resources of the community.

With the onset of the economic depression in the early thirties, these agencies found themselves in dire distress. Income from all sources diminished and the Vaad could no longer be depended upon to provide substantial support. Some members of the community, led by Abraham S. Levey and motivated by a concern for maintaining community services at a reasonable level, sought a new solution. As they surveyed the chaos and confusion of organizational competition all around them, they concluded that the only answer was a united fund raising campaign which could mobilize the resources of an entire community in behalf of worthwhile community services.

Their initial efforts were directed toward establishment of a central fund raising agency to serve the Jewish Home for Aged,