

CHAPTER IV

BRANCHING OUT (1880-1904)

In the early 1880's, Jewish immigration into the United States entered upon a period of ever-increasing growth. This was due principally to the rapidly worsening conditions of living for Jews in the Russian Empire and Austria-Hungary.

In Russia, in 1881, a new wave of antisemitic violence was unleashed by government officials who encouraged peasants to fall upon the Jews without fear of punishment. Violence flared anew in 1882 and this pattern of wanton destruction became characteristic of Russian Jewish life in the ensuing decades in spite of world-wide protest meetings and diplomatic intervention. As a result, the Russian word "pogrom" (meaning pillage and devastation), the official designation for these mass attacks, became an international word.

In 1881 a total of 8,193 Jews were admitted at the ports of New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore. The number increased to 111,284 in 1891 and to 136,742 in 1892. The number admitted in Boston is unknown because statistics available for the years 1881 to 1890 refer only to admissions in those ports.¹ Many of the Jews who settled in Portland during this period came through Boston.

During the 1880's the Jewish population of Portland increased to sixty families or more.² Most of the newcomers were attracted by the presence of relatives or former townsmen. Thus there was little variation in geographical background, most of the population being made up of settlers from Russian Poland.

Many of the newcomers engaged in peddling, traveling from town to town on long excursions. Some settled temporarily in towns along their route. Some of the peddlers, after they accumulated a little capital, opened retail stores, dealing principally in dry goods and men's clothing. A few learned trades and became craftsmen. During this period, Barnard Aaronson, Joseph H. Wolf and Isaac Abrams acquired reputations for wealth in the young community. All were clothing merchants.

For the most part, Portland's entire Jewish population resided in an area of a few city streets centering around Hampshire Street.

To the contemporary Portlander, this was the "Jews' quarter." Nevertheless, many Jewish shopkeepers soon branched out and maintained their business establishments on more fashionable Middle Street and Congress Street. Others, maintaining clothing and general stores, became established on Fore Street.

Among other prominent Jewish merchants of the period were Wolf Bergman, a clothier on Middle Street; Joseph Levy, merchant tailor on Federal Street since 1860; David Shalit, a dry goods dealer on Middle Street; and the Shine brothers (Solomon and William) proprietors of a large general store in Monument Square. In addition a few Jewish establishments received brief notices in a contemporary business directory⁸ from which we quote:

Bernstein Bros. Clothing and Furnishings . . . No. 366 Fore St. also one at 399 Fore St. Portland, Me. . . The firm of Bernstein Bros. have carried on clothing business since 1888 . . . The individual members of the firm are J (oseph) S. and A (braham) J. Bernstein both of whom are natives of Russia, and well known throughout Portland and vicinity. (P. 119)

Rosenberg Bros., Continental Clothing and Gents' Furnishings Goods House . . . 373 Fore Street. Founded 1889 . . . The premises comprise two floors. The firm consists of Mr. Simon Rosenberg who is a native of Germany, and Mr. Samuel Rosenberg, a native of Portland, Me. (P. 141)

New York Clothing Store, Lewis Wassermann, No. 128 Middle Street and 459 Fore Street, Portland, Me. . . . founded by Mr. Lewis Wasserman in 1888. He is a native of Russia. . . . (P. 115)

Samuel Davis, Clothing, Furnishings and Jewelry, No. 330 Fore Street, Portland, Me. . . . He is a native of Russia and has been identified with his present establishment since 1890. (P. 87)

Reference to Jews in contemporary guide books, such as Hull's, and a conservative business directory indicate that the Portland Jewish colony, because of its growing population and gradual integration into the city's economic life, was being noticed by the general community. It was also during this period that the first native Jewish generation was growing up and exhibiting an interest in civic and political life. Among the young political aspirants was Samuel Rosenberg, who was born in Portland in 1873. He won a seat on the Common Council in 1898, and was thus the

first Jew to hold political office in Portland. The Common Council, the lower chamber, and the Board of Aldermen, the upper chamber, comprised the legislature of Portland. In later years, several Jews served in both the Common Council and the Board of Aldermen, as well as the State Legislature.

Although a few Jews managed to succeed financially by the turn of the century, the Jews as a group were not a significant element in Portland business life. Only gradually, thereafter, did they become established in important areas of economic life and exert an influence on the city's development.

Internally, the Jewish community was a network of religious, fraternal and charitable organizations which embraced the entire Jewish population. Three Orthodox congregations were in existence, each one striving for leadership. How they came into being will be treated in the following chapter.

REFERENCES IN CHAPTER IV

¹**To Dwell in Safety**, Mark Wischnitzer, 1949, p. 289.

²In his **Handbook of Portland**, 1888, John Hull writes: "The Jews in this city number more than 60 families."

³**Representative Businessmen of Portland**, George Bacon, 1891.

CHAPTER V

RELIGIOUS AND EDUCATIONAL LIFE

The Jewish community of Portland was founded as a religious settlement. The primary interest of the pioneers was to establish a community that would satisfy their need for worship, religious study and ritual observance. Even the so-called secular organizations had to satisfy certain religious wants. Thus we have seen that the principal aim and accomplishment of Portland Lodge I.O.B.B. was the purchase and supervision of a burial ground for Jews. When this need was fully satisfied, there was little left for Portland Lodge to do.

The earliest settlers and those who followed brought to Portland the tradition of East European Orthodox Judaism which took root here and flourished. With the exception of a brief period during the first World War, Orthodoxy prevailed as the only form of Jewish religious life until 1947. In that year Congregation Beth El was formed and affiliated with the conservative movement thus marking the end of the long period of Orthodox uniformity.

Until the advent of Congregation Beth El, Portland Jewry was probably unique in America for having withstood, for so long a time, the tendency toward differentiation that prevailed in nearly every community. Thus, from the earliest days, the Orthodox Jewish community of Portland was referred to as "the Jerusalem of America" by other Jewish communities. And just as Jerusalem, even in romantic retrospect, was not free from intra-community differences, there was hardly a time when Portland was completely unified, even in its religious life.

Until the early 1880's, there was no synagogue. For purposes of prayer and religious study the worshipers met in the homes of several learned Jews. In time two distinct groups emerged, depending on their place of worship. One centered around Barnard Aaronson and the other around Jacob and Isaac Judelsohn. Although at the start the difference was only residential, it later became somewhat ideological. The congregation of Barnard Aaronson was aligned somewhat with "modernism," so the latter congregation regarded itself as truly "traditional." Then when