

THE GROWTH OF PORTLAND'S JEWISH COMMUNITY LIFE

A Complete History from the Very Beginning of the
City's Jewish Life to Its Present- Day Prominence

By Dr. Elias Caplan

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In the year 1881 an unusual pogrom even for Czaristic Russia overwhelmed our brethren who had the misfortune to live in that land. Thousands perished; untold numbers were made homeless; life for the vast majority of our people became increasingly more difficult. Thus, another exodus took place. The majority came to New York; some settled in Boston; few settled in Portland, Maine. The West claimed some; naturally the fathers of the families came first.

Portland at that time, as it is today, was predominantly a typical New England city, steeped in the traditions of Americanism, proud of its contribution to the commercial and literary life of the nation. To it came our pioneers. Ignorant of the language, ill-adapted to the American mode of living, the ill-fitting clothes of Eastern Europe still on their physically weak bodies, they must have presented a strange exotic appearance. With a background of intellectual achievement, these descendants of petty merchants, but also of profound Talmudic scholars, were apparently doomed to failure. Two things saved them: the indomitable perseverance of a people accustomed to privation, inured to misery but finding both strength and solace in that inner life which like a "nayr hatomid" brightened their existence amidst trouble and pain, jeers, and good-natured contempt, and secondly the overwhelming devotion to their families, whose sole hope lay in their success.

They became pedlars, itinerant merchants selling their wares throughout the sparsely settled communities, astonishing the natives with their peculiar English. Some became tailors, some shoemakers; here and there a small insignificant store was opened, a pawnshop, a variety store---thus a nucleus of a community was formed sixty years ago.

The High Holidays drew them together. They met at first in a private home. A small unpretentious low-ceilinged white-washed room off a kitchen on the second floor of an impoverished home was the beginning of an ultra-orthodox synagogue. It was there they met to pray, to discuss their affairs, to plan their future. And it was fortunate for Portland that among the early settlers were some men of learning and ability to whom Judaism was a living symbol.

It is difficult to do justice to all of the pioneers---all were worthy, all in a way unconscious builders of that better fuller life which characterizes Portland of today. A few outstanding personalities, however, have left lasting impressions upon our city. Perhaps, the best known and the most respected was Abraham J. Bernstein, whose life was and still is dedicated to the preservation of the fundamental principles of orthodox Judaism. A scholar in his own right and a descendant from a long line of rabbinical leaders, he is today revered by all for his profound erudition and devotion to his people. His two sons, both prominent attorneys, are worthy followers: Israel Bernstein has been for the past few years the outstanding leader of the highly successful campaign for the United Jewish Appeal, of which he is the state chairman, while his brother, Louis Bernstein, has proven his dynamic leadership in being the guiding spirit of the beautiful Community Center House, which has become the focus of all Jewish and civic activities of the city.

The first pretentious synagogue was built about thirty-five years ago by a few of our public-spirited Jews. The late Bernard L. Shalit was its president. It was in that synagogue that the Secretary of Commerce and of Labor under Theodore Roosevelt's administration, Honorable Oscar Straus, together with Rear Admiral Marix, addressed a distinguished audience of Jews and Gentiles one memorable August evening; it was that synagogue that the renowned scholar and author Prof. Solomon Shechter graced by his presence. Mary Antin, the gifted Jewess, spoke from the pulpit, as did Dr. Stephen Wise, Miss Henrietta Szold, and others. The spiritual leaders were all men of ability---the saintly Rabbi Shoet Sr., the energetic Rabbi Esrig, the modest Rabbi Marcus, the almost progressive Rabbi Miller.

The second synagogue built by the more modern members of our community invited as its spiritual leader Rabbi Phineas Israeli, who served devotedly for four years. Its first president was Jacob Rubinsky. The third is the Chassidic house of worship. The structure is modest, the worshippers few, but they make up in characteristic devotional intensity the lack in numbers. Its first president was Abraham Iseman.

As time went on, the community prospered. Today Portland may boast of the fact that the spiritual leadership of the entire community is in the hands of Rabbi Mendell Lewittes. His orthodoxy is unquestioned, and he enjoys the rare distinction of being able to please the heterogeneous elements of our community.

And as the city grew, the early settlers, strangers no longer, adapted themselves with characteristic facility to their new environment. The pedlar became the business man; the tenant, the owner of his house; the scholar became the teacher, the mohel, the shochet, the cantor, the rabbi. With greater leisure and more frequent contacts both among themselves and through the medium of the press and books with the great outside world, the Jews of Portland began to identify themselves with the various movements of the day. And when our national renaissance was crystallized in the Zionist movement of Herzl and Nordau, our city became one of the most important centers in New England.

The first Zionist Organization was formed forty years ago. The writer can well remember the meetings of those never-to-be-forgotten days: the quarters were dingy, often cold and smoky, but the enthusiasm of youth was there, the devotion to the cause, the yearnings of suppressed dignity at last finding expression in the clarion call of their Herzl, their Nordau, their Pinsker, those meetings which broke up in the wee hours of the mornings with the words "Aid layovdo teekvosenu" ringing in the ears of the tired perspiring Zionists. "Aid layovdo teekvosenu", do they not epitomize the entire history of our people? Strangers in a strange land, ill at ease among their tolerant neighbors, hampered by differences in customs, language, traditions, yet thankful for the marvelous opportunity for self-expression in this grand land of liberty---yet, yet it was good to be among and with their own, who shared their aspirations, who spoke their language and dreamed their dreams. It was good to be a Zionist in those days as it is today, to live again the lives of their prophets, of their ancestors in Zion, to build anew the bridge of restoration. And swift as that, they gave and gave unstintingly to the Jewish National Fund, to the Keren Hayesod, to all the institutions of the new Zion.

It was not astonishing therefore that Portland was graced by the presence of nearly all the leaders of Zionism. Portland boasts of a very active Zionist

* "We have not yet lost our hope."

District Chapter of nearly one hundred and fifty members. Its first president was Robert Clenett. Under the present leadership of the very devoted worker, Samuel Chason, it is destined to make itself felt throughout the entire State. The Poale Zionists are among the leading groups. Its present president is David Rubinoff. The Mizrachi carry on the principles of their belief with the Zionists' circles. Its first president was Rabbi Esrig. The Order of the Sons of Zion has a local branch in our city. Joseph Wiggon has been its active head for several years.

The writer remembers with feelings of joy and lasting gratification the inimitable address by that great interpreter of the spirit of Judaism, Shmaryahu Levine, the wonderful messages delivered by the incomparable orator, the late Nahum Sokolow, who twice visited our city; the magnetic influence of Louis D. Brandeis will be felt to the end of our days. Of lesser lights but of equal importance, we recall Jacob de Haas, N. Syrkin, R. Gotheil, and many others.

Portland has one of the best B'nai Brith lodges in the District. It has become integrated with the life and aspirations of the community; no movement of any consequence is foreign to it. Its members are to be found actively participating in every institutional development of our city. Portland has the enviable distinction of being the parent organization of all other lodges in the State of Maine. The United Hebrew Charities under the efficient leadership of William Goodman is a credit to the community.

What the synagogues meant to the older generations, the Community Centers mean to the youth of today. An outgrowth of the first World War was they have caught the imagination of our people to an unbelievable degree. Community Centers are springing up daily everywhere. Portland has one of the finest in the country. Its commodious attractive building is what its name implies---a center for all Jewish activities. It is the meeting place of nearly all our organizations. Its educational programs command the attention of the entire community; its esthetic yearnings find expression in the frequent dramatic presentations given by the talented members of our various dramatic groups. It is also fortunate that in its executive director, Norman Godfrey, it has one of the ablest social workers in the country.

Our city has the enviable distinction of having had a Hadassah Chapter for more than twenty-five years. ^{Mrs. Etias} Caplan as its first president served in that capacity for twelve years. It is today one of the best-organized chapters in the country. To it came the founders of the movement, Miss Henrietta Szold, Miss Nellie Straus, Mrs. Richard Gotheil, Mrs. de Sola Pool, Mrs. Jacobs, with many others from New England to still further the enthusiasm of the brave and loyal daughters of our people. In recent years a Junior Hadassah Group has been formed with all the enthusiasm and eclat of youth. Its first president was Miss Mae Epstein.

One of the most important organizations of our city is the Council of Jewish Women. Mrs. Maurice Markson was its first president. The local Council is fortunate in having for its mentor and guiding spirit Mrs. Israel Bernstein, who ably represents the local chapter on the National Board. The Home for the Aged of Portland is unique in that it is in reality the lasting place of rest for the aged of the entire State of Maine. What strikes the observer even on superficial examination is its homelike atmosphere; there is no institutional air about it; from its modern kitchen to the spotlessly clean dining room, attractive reception hall, and neat sleeping rooms---the place is what its

builders intended it to be---a Home, not an institution merely. About thirty-odd folks of both sexes spend their declining days in comfort and peace. Its present superintendent, Mr. Sheresefsky, is ably supervising the difficult task of pleasing and satisfying the somewhat capricious demands of the inmates; the Home owes much to the able managements and devotional care of its president, Mr. Morris Sacknoff, and the untiring zeal of the president of the Auxiliary, Mrs. Samuel Seegar. Miss Jane Kedis has been secretary of the home from its very inception.

So Portland lives. It is a far cry from the humble beginning of the few immigrants from Russia who came penniless to Portland, to the city of today with its eight hundred families, many flourishing institutions, its successful business and professional men completely Americanized yet not forgetting their Judaism, identifying themselves with the many various civic and political activities of their non-Jewish citizenry. A typical Jewish community, a valuable factor in the evolution of the entire city.

The road was difficult; success did not come easily; but hardship toughened their fibres, so that now after sixty years of toil our community has taken its place among the best of its size in our country---Jews all---Americans all.