

MDI historical exhibit on display at COA

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BAR HARBOR -- A pictorial look at a defining period in the history of Mount Desert Island and two other communities in the state went on display at College of the Atlantic Wednesday.

Called "Crossing Lines: Histories of Jews and Gentiles in Bangor, Mount Desert Island and Calais, Maine," the pictorial exhibit provides a visual story of the experiences of two cultures, the native-born Protestants and immigrant Jews, beginning with the Gilded Age through the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.



Judith Goldstein

The exhibit, funded in part by the Jewish Community Endowment Associates and the Maine Humanities Council, coincides with the recent publication of "Crossing Lines" by Somesville resident, Judith S. Goldstein.

Goldstein's book examines the three communities in the context of those two cultures over the past 100 years, with examples of how the patterns of accommodation and acceptance differed. That theme is also echoed within the exhibit.

At the opening of the exhibit Wednesday evening, Goldstein referred to the pictorial display as "a mixture of old and new -- the Protestant establishment and Jewish immigration."

Goldstein, who was one of the curators of the exhibit, referred to the works of E. Digby Baltzell, professor emeritus of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, as having inspired much of her continuing interest and research into Protestant culture and leadership in the United States.

Baltzell, author of "The Protestant Establishment: Aristocracy and Caste in America," was present at the opening of the exhibit Wednesday evening to deliver an overview of the strength of the Anglo-American "good sportsmanship" ethic, a value that Baltzell says is in apparent decline.

As is shown in both the exhibit and Goldstein's book, Mt. Desert Island was the least tolerant of the three Maine communities that saw an influx of Jewish immigrants during the 1800s.

An elite resort colony, Mount Desert Island "attracted the best of the intercity aristocracy and excluded immigrants who were considered to be the most undesirable," according to notes available at the exhibit.

Jewish immigrants to the three towns in Maine "differed in their numbers, cohesiveness and inclination to build Jewish institutions."

All, however, "scrimped and saved to pull their families away from Russia to create new lives in Maine. They poured their hopes into their Americanized children who rose through the public educational system into the middle class."

As their lives changed, leaving some old traditions behind, their own cultural and religious traditions changed radically.

In the exhibit on Mt. Desert Island are old photographs of Bar Harbor and Acadia National Park, of men and women who helped shape its cultural and economic future.

Described as an elite cottage culture, Mount Desert Island in that day was "part of a structured pattern of prejudice which extended from boarding schools to clubs, residential areas, professions and businesses.

"Summer resorts became conspicuous social battlefields where hotels managed to exclude Jewish and other non-Protestant guests."

The histories of the two cultures over the decades are a journey through "challenge and aspirations, fear and segregation. And they conclude as Protestant exclusivity gave way to equality of opportunity for Jews in all but a few pockets of Maine's life."

The exhibit will be on display at COA through July, when it will then travel to Calais Free Library for September and October.

Goldstein will present a program that is derived from her research for "Crossing Lines" at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, July 9, at Port In A Storm Bookstore on Route 102 in Somesville.