

CHAPTER X

NEW SOCIAL AND FRATERNAL GROUPS

In this chapter we shall sketch briefly the rise of organizations that came into existence in the period between the two world wars.

The Portland Council of Jewish Women was organized on October 20, 1920, with twenty-one members, and its first regular meeting was held on November 17, 1920, at the home of Mrs. Maurice Markson. During that brief interval the membership increased to fifty-eight, and six months later it reached one hundred and fifty.

At the first meeting Mrs. Markson was elected president; Mrs. Jacob Scheibe, first vice-president; Mrs. Jacob Rosenberg, second vice-president; Mrs. Benjamin Press, recording secretary; and Mrs. Jacob Sapiro, treasurer.¹

From the outset, the Portland Council of Jewish Women became active in education and social service. It assisted the Portland Hebrew School by providing funds for maintenance and cooperated with the Y.W.H.A. in directing the Sunday School. The Council sponsored social affairs for the benefit of the United Hebrew Charities and carried on its own social service.

When immigrant ships landed in Portland in 1923 and 1924, and the passengers were maintained on House Island, the Council of Jewish Women set up kosher kitchens there under the supervision of Mrs. Lena Perry. It also assisted immigrants in entering this country by communicating with their relatives and then speeding them to their destinations. In several instances it prevented deportation of individuals by appealing directly to authorities on their behalf.

During the 1920's especially, the Council of Jewish Women was active in getting Jews to register and vote in political elections. It sponsored lectures on all vital questions of the day, encouraged aliens to join Americanization classes and furnished books to the Portland Public Library.

After the rise of Hitler in Germany the problem of Jewish refugeeism became acute. The Council set up a German-Jewish Refugee Committee which organized fund raising for relief of refugees from Nazism. As a reaction to Nazism, the Zionist groups

in Portland also became more active, and the Jewish community was required to mobilize itself for ever increasing fund campaigns. But before these new developments are discussed, it is necessary to consider two new Jewish organizations which were formed in the late 1920's, the Portland Veritans Club and the Jewish Home for Aged.

The Veritans Club was founded on March 8, 1925 by Dr. Elias Caplan, Harold A. Meyers, Dr. Cyrus Briggs, Maurice Rudman, and Henry N. Taylor. It probably was New England's first Jewish service club. It was active in welfare work and projected several plans for non-sectarian service work, although its membership was entirely Jewish.

Dr. Elias Caplan was elected first president of the Veritans Club, with Dr. George Goldberg as vice-president, Henry N. Taylor as secretary and Harry Turitz as treasurer.

Starting as a local group, the club soon aroused interest in other communities, and several branches were organized elsewhere in New England. In 1928 plans were made to expand even beyond New England and to become a truly national service organization. Under the leadership of Dr. Elias Caplan, the founders constituted themselves a temporary national committee and summoned a convention of all the branches during the summer of 1928. As a result of this convention, definite plans were prepared for creation of a national Veritans Club. But within a year or two the organization ceased to function.

It is not too clear from available sources why the Veritans Club disappeared so suddenly. One possible reason was the great depression starting in 1929 which affected adversely even well established service clubs. The many dislocations and maladjustments in social life arising from the depression may very well have contributed the *coup de grace* to the bold and optimistic dreams of the Portland Veritans Club.

On May 2, 1927, members of the Y.W.H.A. organized the auxiliary of the Jewish Home for Aged. Since 1911 a home for Jewish aged had been one of the principal objectives of the Y.W.H.A., but the project was deferred in favor of a campaign for a home for destitute children. When this failed, interest in a home for aged was revived and small sums of money were collected over the years and set aside for the project. With the formal organization of the auxiliary, the goal was brought nearer realization.

The first officers of the Auxiliary were Mrs. Samuel Seiger, president; Mrs. Harry Potter, first vice-president; Dr. Cecelia Fieldman, second vice-president; Mrs. Benjamin Goldberg, recording

secretary; Mrs. Israel Bernstein, corresponding secretary; Mrs. Herman Sivovlos, financial secretary; and Mrs. Samuel Davis as treasurer.²

A committee appointed to find a site for the home recommended purchase of the land and buildings between 142 and 164 North Street. In May 1927, five hundred dollars was deposited to bind the deal, and on June 21, 1927, the land and buildings were purchased by the Auxiliary.

The Jewish Home for Aged was incorporated under Maine law as a charitable institution on December 13, 1927.³ Its first officers were Dr. John L. Davis, president; Samuel Bernstein, vice-president; Mrs. Benjamin Goldberg, secretary; and Samuel L. Bramson, treasurer.⁴ Shortly afterward Dr. John L. Davis died and Morris Sacknoff was elected president, holding that position, except for one year, until his death in 1943.⁵

Ground breaking ceremonies for the Home were held on November 16, 1928 and the cornerstone was laid on January 13, 1929. The Home was officially opened on September 15, 1929 in the presence of Governor William Tudor Gardiner of Maine and other dignitaries. At its inception the Jewish Home for Aged had only one resident, Philip P. Silverman. In January 1930, the number was increased to seven, and by August of the same year to fifteen. The peak was reached in 1945 with thirty-five residents.

The course of the Home's development paralleled that of many similar institutions. In its earliest years it was administered by members of its board, but as it grew the need for full-time direction became evident. Thus, in 1933, Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Pravatiner were engaged as superintendent and matron and served for several years. They were succeeded by Mr. and Mrs. Max Sherevsky who served from June 1937 until April 1945.

When it appeared that facilities of the Home would not suffice for future needs, plans for an additional wing were formulated in 1946 by a building committee headed by William Goodman.⁶ On September 17, 1950, ground was finally broken for the new structure, and on November 25, 1951, the wing was dedicated.

The Jewish Home provides not only comfort to its aged residents but medical and nursing care as well. With the creation of a new infirmary wing it has expanded its services to include short and long-term convalescent care. Since August 1, 1954, Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Glickstein have served as executive director and house mother respectively.

The rise of Nazism in the 1930's led to a heightening of Jewish

consciousness in the Portland Jewish community as elsewhere in the world. This reaction was expressed in the growth of new defense organizations, an awakened interest in Zionism and the expansion of fund raising efforts for refugee relief.

In the field of Jewish defense, B'nai B'rith played a leading role on the national scene. Despite the demise of two B'nai B'rith lodges in Portland, interest in the organization was not completely dulled, and a new lodge was incorporated on December 5, 1936, as Cumberland Lodge, No. 1137, B'nai B'rith, with Maurice E. Rosen as its first president.⁷

The purpose of the lodge, as stated in its articles of incorporation, was

. . . to have as its basic platform the unity of all Jews, regardless of congregational affiliation or place of origin, contributing to the greater solidarity and prestige of Jewry through its capacity to bring together the many elements in a common purpose, the promotion of their highest interests and those of humanity, and the consummation of a better understanding among Jews and between Jews and non-Jews.⁸

Among its other activities, Cumberland Lodge lent its support to formation of the Maine Hillel Foundation, serving Jewish students at Bates College, Colby College and the University of Maine.

Under the leadership of Dr. Benjamin Zolov, who was elected president of the State of Maine B'nai B'rith Council, the lodge assumed an active role in combatting resort discrimination in Maine. In 1952 the Council introduced a corrective bill in the Maine legislature, and Dr. Zolov and Sidney W. Wernick testified in its behalf. The legislature, however, rejected the bill, although it was approved by the Senate Judiciary Committee and had the support of many labor, civic and church groups, including the Catholic Diocese.

In addition to its corrective program, Cumberland Lodge provided audio-visual materials to public schools and sponsored radio and television programs on democratic themes. Its sister organization, Cumberland Chapter, No. 236, B'nai B'rith, was organized in 1939, with Mrs. Abraham Kramer as its first president.⁹ During the war years the chapter was active in recreational programs for service men, and received citations from the U.S.O. and the United States Treasury Department. Although primarily a lodge auxiliary, Cumberland Chapter has sponsored independent programs of service work in hospitals, libraries and schools.

Another new Jewish defense organization was Jacob Cousins Post, No. 99, Jewish War Veterans, which came into being on January 3, 1935, with David Sivovlos as commander.¹⁰ In cooperation with its national organization, founded in 1896, the local chapter has devoted itself to securing legislation in the interest of veterans, to a program of service in behalf of its members and to defending the honor of the Jewish people against detractors.

Following the second World War, membership of the Jacob Cousins Post was augmented by a new generation of veterans and its program moved forward rapidly.¹¹ One of its members, Silas Jacobson, achieved national recognition as vice-commander of the First Region and as a member of the national executive committee.

In May 1936 an auxiliary of the Jacob Cousins Post was formed, with Mrs. Maurice Davis as president.¹² Among other activities, the auxiliary developed an extensive program of hospital service for veterans at the Portsmouth Naval Hospital in Kittery, Maine, and the Marine Hospital in Portland. The entrance of the United States into the Korean War in 1950 led to a further expansion of its hospital service program.

The growth of Jewish refugeism as a consequence of Nazism also stimulated the Zionist movement throughout the world. Since the end of World War I Jews from many lands, mainly from Eastern Europe, began to settle in Palestine and to contribute toward the development of the new Jewish national home. But after 1933 great numbers of German Jews were compelled to seek new homes and many turned eastward to the Holy Land. Whereas in 1932, only 9,553 immigrants came to Palestine, in 1933 the number of immigrants reached 30,327, and swelled to 42,359 in 1934 and to 61,854 in 1935.¹³

The crisis of European Jewry and the growing importance of Palestine as a haven of refuge aroused American Jewry. In Portland several new Zionist organizations came into being, exerting a powerful influence. The first was the Jewish National Fund Council which coordinated the land-purchase programs of several Zionist groups, including Hadassah, Poale Zion, Degel Zion Camp and Mizrahi. Among its leaders were Philip Abrahamson, Max W. Simonds, Irving Rothstein and Samuel Nelson.

The Portland Zionist District, a branch of the Zionist Organization of America, was founded in 1934. Robert Clenott, organizer and first president,¹⁴ served until 1941. From a mere handful of members, the organization reached an enrollment of three hundred in 1944. In that year the District also contributed to the war effort by promoting the sale of fifty thousand dollars in war bonds.

In 1938 a branch of Pioneer Women, the Women's Labor Zionist Organization of America, was formed in Portland. Its first officers were Mrs. Myer Levitan, president; Mrs. Max Cooper, first vice-president; Mrs. Sonia Astor, second vice-president; Mrs. Saul Shulman, treasurer; and Mrs. Celia Lerman, secretary.¹⁵

The growth in the number of Zionist organizations encouraged formation of the Portland Zionist Council in 1940, to coordinate their activities. In addition, the Council sponsored educational programs and holiday celebrations, in conjunction with the Jewish Community Center. Saul G. Chason, first president of the Portland Zionist Council, served until June 1944, when he was elected president of the Maine Zionist Council. Irving Rothstein succeeded him in the leadership of the local organization.

We will now turn our attention to the development of two new institutions that have played a central role in the life of Portland Jewry: the Jewish Community Center and the Jewish Federation.

REFERENCES IN CHAPTER X

¹Succeeding Council presidents included Mesdames Jacob Sapiro, Israel Bernstein, Samuel Sacknoff, Benjamin Press, Louis Matson, Jesse Rosenberg, Richard Wilkes, Benjamin Zolov, Lewis Bernstein and Aaron Blumenthal.

²Succeeding presidents were Mrs. Max Kaplan, Mrs. Samuel M. Schatz and Mrs. Benjamin Lerman.

³The Jewish Home for Aged has also been incorporated in New Hampshire and Vermont. Residents of these states are eligible for admission to the Home which solicits funds in these areas.

⁴The original directors of the Jewish Home for Aged were Dr. John L. Davis, Morris Sacknoff, Samuel Bernstein, Samuel L. Bramson, Max Oransky, Joseph Brenner, Mrs. Eli Perry and Mrs. Benjamin Goldberg.

⁵Other presidents of the Jewish Home for Aged were Harry Potter, James Stein, Joseph W. Larkin and William Goodman.

⁶Other committee members were Charles Rosenbloom, Abraham Seigal and Philip Reuben of Portland, Samuel S. Goodman of Bangor, and Joseph R. Wilner of Auburn.

⁷Succeeding presidents were Dr. George Goldberg, David I. Rubinoff, Ralph Lamport, Udell Bramson, Dr. Robert Weinstein, Abraham L. Kramer, Dr. David Brownstone, Samuel King, Dr. Benjamin Zolov, Benjamin Bernstein, Maurice Ross, Arthur Fink, David Royte, Saul Brenerman, Samuel J. Shatz, Samuel Brynes, Cyrus K. Briggs and Louis Drogin.

⁸Incorporators of the Lodge were Udell Bramson, Abraham Kramer, Richard B. Wilkes, Samuel Goldfarb, Thomas Livingston, Lester E. Sapiro, Jacob Sapiro, Dr. Elias Caplan and Ralph Lamport.

⁹Succeeding presidents were Mesdames Ralph Lamport, Benjamin Zolov, Benjamin Bernstein, Myer Goldberg, Joseph LaRees, Samuel Brynes, Louis Drogin, William Sidman, George Robinson and Henry Levine.

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, Silas 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