

REFERENCES IN CHAPTER XVI

¹In this chapter we will continue the story of Jews in public life begun in Chapter VIII. Here we will call attention not only to individuals who held political office but to men who were prominent in economic life and the professions. In the latter category we will refer only to those who were pioneers in their field or who served professionally in a public office.

²Morris and Oscar Cox are the sons of Sarah and the late Jacob Cox.

³Members of the "Trojans" included Hyman Berenson, William Goodman, David Blumenthal, Harry Sacknoff, David Rosen, Abraham Goffin, Harry Cohen, Benjamin Levi, Herman Goffin, David Kriger and Harry Blumenthal. Herman Sivovlos was manager.

⁴In later years, Cyrus K. Briggs was active in soft ball. He organized the Soft Ball Association of Portland in 1933, and the State Soft Ball Association in 1935. Since 1945 he has served as State Commissioner of Soft Ball.

⁵Among the others were Bernard Abrams, H. Beckelman, Mitchell Bernstein, Saul Brenerman, Mitchell Cope, Benjamin Cox, Abraham Elowitz, Philip Erlick, Harry Finkelman, Henry Finks, Jack Finn, Harry Garon, Maurice Gerber, Morris Glovsky, Morris Greenberg, Sidney Greenberg, Carl Kopel, Sidney Levine, Sidney Miller, Eber Resnick, Robert Rosenberg, Jacob Rubinoff, David Schwartz, Hyman Shepard, David Shulman, Sam Shible, Bertram Silverman, William Silverman and Henry Troubh.

CHAPTER XVII

IN RETROSPECT

Having concluded our cursory survey of the rise of the Jewish community in Portland, Maine, we are now in a position to evaluate the course of its development, and to highlight those factors that have figured prominently. We will also indicate the most glaring lacunae and those problems which should engage the attention of future investigators.

From our present perspective, it may be unlikely that significant quantities of additional source material will be forthcoming in the near future, dealing with the prehistory and the early decades of the Jewish community. It appears that little attention was given to the preparation or preservation of records of early Jewish experiences. The only significant additions which may be expected are kernels of fact and details that can be culled from official public records, newspapers and other non-Jewish literary material. Unfortunately, limitations of time did not permit an exhaustive study of these sources.

It has been the author's conviction that for the period covering the last fifty years, the historians who follow him can expect to accumulate more significant quantities of source materials than he has had at his disposal. Several came to his attention after the preceding chapters had been written. They have not affected the general structure of fact that has been outlined in this study, but these and future finds may enable us to throw more light on obscure issues and personalities. At any rate, the preparation of this preliminary study will have proved worthwhile if it can spur not only individual students, but the community as a whole, to renewed efforts to uncover its old sources and preserve them for posterity.

Little information is at present available on Jewish life in Portland prior to the 1860's, and it may be safely assumed that although individual Jews may have lived here previously, no organized Jewish community had been founded. The Jewish community of Portland, to the best of our knowledge, was formed after the Civil War.

From all indications, the growth of the Jewish population pro-

ceeded at an accelerated rate until the end of the first decade of the present century. At the time the population increase slackened somewhat in pace, and continued to fall off gradually until the late 1930's. During the last ten years, the Jewish population increased more rapidly due in great measure to the influx of Jews from other parts of New England and New York.

Almost from the start, Portland Jewry exhibited a homogeneity in social and geographical origins. With rare exceptions, all the earlier immigrants came from the Russian Empire. The few exceptions were German Jews, but Jews from the Austrian Empire, principally the territory of Galicia, who figured prominently in the waves of immigration from 1890 to 1910, hardly appeared in Portland. Thus, until the present day, the Portland Jewish community is essentially composed of descendants of Polish and Lithuanian Jews.

We have already noted that the first permanent Jewish settlements in Maine were in Bangor and Lewiston, the latter almost contemporary with the founding of the Portland community. Yet the rapid growth of Portland's community soon outstripped the other settlements and by the turn of the century Portland was securely in the lead.

Relations between Portland and its sister communities were strengthened by marital ties between families in the several towns. During the last three decades of the 19th century, the Jewish population of Maine was not too stable. With a high percentage of peddlers, a noticeable "floating" element existed. Jews from Portland would often travel throughout the state, settling for varying periods in Bangor, Lewiston, Waterville, Biddeford and Rockland. And there arose corresponding movements of Jews from these towns to others. In some cases, the temporary residence led to permanent settlement, accounting for the high degree of family relationship between the populations of several Jewish communities. Although during the last half century the transfer of population has been less fluid, this phenomenon still occurs, albeit in lesser degree. The unusual homogeneity in origins and tradition may account for the fact that the emergence of non-orthodox religious congregations in Maine has, to date, been a rare phenomenon. In Portland, the new pattern appeared for the first time during World War I, but was short-lived. This interest in a departure from Orthodoxy was exhibited by men who were reared in the Orthodox tradition of Portland, but found it unsatisfactory.

It is significant that the collapse of this movement coincided

with the founding of a new synagogue, Etz Chaim. Many of the adherents of innovation became active in Congregation Etz Chaim and, perhaps through their influence, a concession was made to modernism in the person of an English-speaking preacher, Rabbi Israeli. But the effort of Rabbi Israeli to bring Etz Chaim into the United Synagogue of America was not successful, and this congregation remained Orthodox in spirit, practice and affiliation.

With the advantage of hindsight, we can perceive that the rise of Temple Beth El was not fortuitous. It had a tradition of at least thirty years in the defunct Modern Synagogue Society, whose demise did not extinguish the desire for a change. Throughout this period, in Congregation Etz Chaim a small but vocal group continued to insist on the abolition of the separation of sexes during worship, but with little success. This was one of the motives for the eventual founding of the Conservative congregation. However, we must not overlook the fact that, during the 1940's, a large number of Jews from other parts of New England and New York settled in Portland. They brought with them their own traditions. They had lived in towns where non-Orthodox religious groups had flourished, and with which many of them had been affiliated. It was this new element in the population which produced a qualitative difference in the religious situation, and made the movement for innovation more effective than it had been in the days of the Modern Synagogue Society.

But the formation of Congregation Beth El did not remove the problem of innovation from the ranks of Orthodoxy. In one sense, it aggravated the situation, for pressure is now being exerted on the Orthodox synagogues to modify their practices in respect to mixed seating, prayers in English and the length of the prayer service. The rapid growth of Temple Beth El has influenced some of the younger Orthodox leaders to attribute its success to the appeal of family pews as opposed to separation of the sexes. In one Orthodox congregation, at least, the lines have been drawn almost evenly between advocates of one or the other position. In the meantime, Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh has been host to a Bas Mitzvah ceremony, a confirmation for girls, hitherto unknown in Portland's Orthodox tradition. And English responses are becoming an established part of the High Holiday services in Orthodox synagogues.

Viewed from a wider perspective, the Conservative and Orthodox movements appear to be principally the products of "geographical" influence. The oldest Jewish residential district was in the area of Middle Street, from Pearl to Hampshire Streets. From

this center, Jewish families moved gradually to the Munjoy Hill section and to the other side of Congress Street, then edging closer and closer to Woodfords. Until twenty years ago, not many Jews lived in Woodfords or Deering. This pattern has now been transformed. During the past generation, principally the last decade, Woodfords and Deering have witnessed a wholesale Jewish immigration. The point was reached where at least half the Jewish population was far removed from the old center of life, with its institutions. There was plainly a need for new institutions, synagogues and Hebrew schools in Woodfords to serve the religious needs of the sub-community. When Congregation Beth El established itself in the sector, its success was guaranteed. And conversely, the decline of Orthodoxy in Portland can be attributed, in no small measure, to the isolation of its institutions from the "Main Street" of Jewish life.

It appears that the Orthodox forces have become aware of the "geographical" influence, and plans have been made to establish Orthodox institutions in Woodfords. The new Portland Hebrew School, which will also accommodate Portland Hebrew Day School, is expected to be ready for use in 1955. It will be built with an adjoining synagogue.

In the meantime, the number of Jews moving to Woodfords from older sections is increasing. It is now apparent that a new chapter in Jewish life in Portland is under way.

Although our study has been confined to the internal development of the Portland Jewish community, we must not overlook the fact that Portland Jewry did not evolve in a vacuum. However, it would have greatly complicated our study had we attempted to treat in detail of the relations of Portland with Maine Jewry, as a whole, or with other Jewish communities in New England. Yet we feel that a brief reference to the Maine Jewish Council and its predecessor, the Maine Jewish Committee, is in order. For this institution, although inactive at present, was the first great effort to unite the Jewish communities of Maine, and may well be revived.

The Maine Jewish Committee was formed in 1938 by Israel Bernstein and Joseph W. Larkin in response to the pressure of overseas Jewish needs. At the outset, it served principally as a fund raising agency, in cooperation with the United Jewish Appeal. Its great merit lay in the manner in which it brought small, unorganized Jewish communities into an overall plan of efficient campaigning. But, functioning as a voluntary, loosely knit association, it was unable to exert a strong influence on local community

organization. It appeared to be more of an association of local leaders than an official representative of communities. Despite these weaknesses, it was able to effect certain basic changes in the outlook of the separate communities, to offer them a broader perspective. Thus, at present, there is a strong and favorable sentiment, in Portland at least, for its revival.

Philip W. Lown of Lewiston was for many years a guiding hand of the Maine Jewish Committee¹. In 1945, with the assumption of additional duties, it was reorganized as the Maine Jewish Council. Among the Council's new tasks were the advancement of Jewish education and the creation of a Jewish summer camp for children.

Nobart Schapiro was engaged as executive director of the Maine Jewish Committee. He was succeeded by Dr. Alexander Kohanski, a noted Jewish educator. A survey was made of the educational needs of Maine and of particular communities, including Portland. Among achievements of the Council in the educational field, was the organization of Sunday schools in smaller communities. In addition, uniform standards and curricula for all schools in Maine were established and provision was made for training Sunday school personnel. The Council also provided instruction, by mail, of Jewish children who lived in remote sections.

Despite the many hurdles in the educational field, efforts of the Maine Jewish Council laid the foundation for future endeavors to bring back into the mainstream of Jewish life the young and older Jews who were cut off from all contacts with it.

The creation of Camp Lown was another solid contribution of the Council. Organized in 1946 under Council sponsorship, Camp Lown continues today under separate management. It offers boys and girls summer camp life in a Jewish environment, emphasizing religious and cultural values.

Surveying briefly the span of nearly ninety years, from the founding of the Portland Jewish community until the present, we note several turning points in that course of development, denoting the end of one period and the birth of another.

The first significant marker was the founding of Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh. Until 1904, Portland could boast of a robust religious life, but could not point to one impressive synagogue. The erection of the Shaarey Tphiloh Synagogue was more than an architectural achievement. It brought unity and cohesion to the life of the community. It united diverse groups and became the central institution.

The next significant achievement was the organization of Port-

land Hebrew School in 1908, which eliminated the chaos in educational life and provided a central source of Jewish instruction for the young. This opened a period of unusual vitality in religious life, which was not seriously affected even by the split in Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh shortly after World War I.

In 1929, the Vaad Hoir played the role that Shaarey Tphiloh had played in its early days. The community had grown much larger now. There were several synagogues. The Vaad created a unity amid diversity and under its aegis Portland Jewry was once more united and strong.

Two new institutions, the Jewish Community Center and the Jewish Federation also stand out as markers. The emergence of the Center as an independent recreational and cultural force, introduced a new element in a community where the synagogue was always central. Jewish life in Portland became more secularized, and the status of the synagogue was immeasurably transformed. Creation of the Federation in 1942 made possible maximum financial mobilization but it evolved into a supra-community organization similar to the directorate of a Kehillah. To achieve this end, every organization surrendered its freedom to solicit funds and its freedom to act independently in certain situations without the approval of the Federation. In return for this partial surrender, the organizations received benefits of professional guidance, a degree of financial security and the elimination of the chaos that is a by-product of an unorganized community.

Because of its role in the community, the Federation is able to achieve a comprehensive approach to community problems that would ordinarily be impossible. The organic approach to social service work and education that the Federation has made possible through its Jewish Family Services and its Bureau of Jewish Education, indicate the systematic manner in which it may yet reorganize other aspects of community life in the future.

Finally, we point to Temple Beth El as another marker along the course. Although we are still too close to events, and the Temple is still too young for us to evaluate accurately its impact upon the community, we already have seen how it has transformed the religious climate. The Conservative movement is firmly entrenched in Portland and its impact on Orthodoxy has been twofold. On the one hand, it has brought pressure to bear on the Orthodox congregations by its very existence as a contrast. On the other, it has stirred a strong reaction from the Orthodox community to transfer its facilities to newer sections of the city. The end result may well be a balance of power, with the barest in-

sinuation of innovations in the Orthodox synagogues.

We conclude our survey of the development of the Jewish community of Portland with the words delivered by Barnard Aaronson at the Portland Centennial Celebration of 1886, which we cited in an early chapter.

May the next centennial celebration show as much marked progress as the present has over the past, and may our children be proud of the efforts of their fathers.

For every conclusion is in reality only a new beginning.

REFERENCE IN CHAPTER XVII

¹Among the leading representatives of Portland, were Abraham S. Levey, Saul G. Chason, Joseph Wigon, Sidney W. Wernick, Barnett I. Shur, Harold P. Nelson, Harold J. Potter, Joseph W. Larkin and Israel Bernstein.