

CHAPTER II

THE PIONEERS

"A quarter of a century ago, there was no representative of the Jewish Church in your city." Barnard Aaronson so prefaced his statement on Jewish life in Portland as the Jewish representative for the Portland Centennial in 1886. He pointed out that only twenty years earlier, in 1866, did Jews begin to settle in Portland in noticeable numbers.

Barnard Aaronson was one of those pioneers. He came in 1866 from Boston where he had lived many years, and where he had been a member of the Jegar Sehadutah Lodge, B'nai B'rith, since 1857. With him arrived several other families and individuals including his father, the Rev. Aaron Aaronson. Later he was joined by his brother-in-law, Joseph H. Wolf.

Others had preceded these founders of a new Jewish community. Among them was Joseph Levy, formerly of Germany, a "merchant tailor" since 1860. A clothier, Edward Laveen (or Levene) and a few peddlers, apparently Jewish, also were at hand. The tendency of many Jewish immigrants to enter the junk peddling business is an Ariadne's thread in our efforts to locate the earliest Jewish settlers.

During the late 1860's, Simon and William Shine moved to Portland after a brief residence in nearby Standish, Maine. Simon, born in Breslau, Germany, in 1848, settled in Standish in 1864. His brother, William, joined him in 1866.

Other arrivals in the 1860's who can be identified were Abram Margofsky, Isaac and Simon Santosky. Most of the settlers from this period onward came from Poland and Lithuania, then part of the Russian Empire.

Among the settlers during the early 1870's were Judah Rosenberg, Shiah Berman and the brothers Jacob and Isaac Judelsohn. Rosenberg came with his family from Markoff, Poland. On September 15, 1873 his wife, Rebecca, bore a son, Samuel, the earliest recorded birth in the new Jewish community. Shiah Berman and his son-in-law, Jacob Judelsohn, brought with them the scholarly tradition of the Russian-Polish *yeshivot* and they served as standard bearers of the Talmudic tradition. Jacob Judelsohn

died in Portland in 1942, at the age of ninety-two.

The young community established ties with the other small Jewish communities in Maine very rapidly. In 1874 it suddenly emerged as the seat of a B'nai B'rith Lodge, drawing its membership also from Bangor, Lewiston and Waterville. By that time there were between twenty and thirty Jewish families in Portland.

Among the persons not previously mentioned who were already established in Portland by 1874 were Israel Aaronson, Samuel Abrahams, Isaac Abrams, Wolf Bergman, Samuel De Groot, Moses Fonsaca, M. Herzberg, Zorach Hirshon, Samuel Kahn, Samuel Levi, Harry Levin (or Henry Levin), Samuel Mathias, Solomon Schryver, William Schryver, Morris Stearns, William Sulky (or Solkay), Morris Wolf, Nathan Wolf, Philip Wolf and Reuben Wolf.

These early settlers soon acquired an excellent grasp of the English language, for it was a matter of great necessity for them in an overwhelmingly non-Jewish city. It is also significant that they learned to read and write English well. The minutes of the Portland Lodge, Independent Order B'nai B'rith, from 1874 to 1880, were written in English with many persons serving as recording secretary. Throughout this well preserved record, there is an even correctness in style and English usage and evidence of the mastery by these men of the period's ornate handwriting style. In contrast, we note that from the 1890's onward, with the greater influx of Jewish immigrants from Europe, Yiddish tended to supplant English as the written language of Jewish organizational records. As late as the 1920's, the minutes of the synagogues and Talmud Torah were written in Yiddish.

We are now prepared to look into the activities of the small, yet vigorous Jewish Community of Portland in the 1870's and see how the foundations were laid.

REFERENCE IN CHAPTER II

¹Centennial Celebration, Portland City Council, 1886, p. 144.