

and as an Alderman in 1918 and 1919.

Samuel Davis, who served on the Board of Aldermen in 1920 and 1921, enjoyed an unusual experience as chairman in 1920. For it was during that time that Mayor Charles B. Clarke was not available for business one day. Samuel Davis was then designated as "Mayor for the day." This distinction was never forgotten by his friends.

The last Jews to serve on the Common Council were David Sivovlos in 1922, and Louis Bernstein in 1923, the final year of the old form of government.

In order to keep within certain chronological limits, we will record in a later chapter Jewish achievements in public life from the late 1920's until the present. There we will include not only references to public office but also activity in the professions, civic organizations, organized sports and economic life. At this point, however, mention should be made of Jacob H. Berman who served as the County Attorney for Cumberland County in 1916, and Israel Bernstein who served as an Overseer of the Poor in 1919 and 1920, and as a member of the School Committee from 1921 to 1923. The former is a grandson of Shiah Berman, one of the early Jewish settlers in Portland. The latter is the son of the late Abraham J. and Sarah Bernstein, who were mentioned in previous chapters on religious and philanthropic activity.

## CHAPTER IX

### RELIGIOUS LIFE (1920-1942)

In 1919 the dissident group which had departed from Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh obtained the old premises of Congregation Sharith Israel on Middle Street and called itself Congregation Adas Israel. When Rabbi Chaim Shohet became spiritual leader of this new congregation, Rabbi David Essrig was engaged by Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh.

Congregation Adas Israel met on Middle Street while preparations were being made for a new synagogue building. Jacob E. Rubinsky was its first president and Harry Fireman served briefly as treasurer until that post was taken over by Joseph Shur who held it for more than twenty years.<sup>1</sup>

In 1921 the new congregation purchased a building on Congress Street and proceeded to renovate it. Before the new synagogue was ready Rabbi Chaim Shohet died and was succeeded by his son, Rabbi Moses Shohet, who had been serving in Bangor. The decision on succession was, in fact, made on the cemetery grounds shortly after interment of the elder Rabbi Shohet. As a memorial to its first rabbi, the new congregation changed its name to "Etz Chaim" (Tree of Life).

From its inception, Congregation Etz Chaim was known in Portland as the "modern *shul*", for many leaders of the defunct Modern Synagogue Society joined it and encouraged innovations. As a concession to the younger element, an English-speaking rabbi, Dr. Phineas Israeli, was engaged to serve concurrently with Rabbi Moses Shohet. Rabbi Israeli delivered English sermons and directed activities for the younger members. He introduced late Friday evening services and congregational singing.

On October 18, 1921, the Sisterhood of Etz Chaim Synagogue was organized in the home of Mrs. Elder Markson who was elected its first president. The other officers were Mrs. Samuel Davis, vice-president, Mrs. Jacob E. Rubinsky, treasurer, Mrs. Mark Levine, financial secretary, and Mrs. Harold A. Meyers, recording secretary. The sisterhood purchased the ark and the Torah scroll which was presented to the congregation by Mrs. Meyers on June 4, 1922, at ceremonies dedicating the new synagogue. It also sponsored the

first bazaar undertaken by a Jewish religious organization in Portland, in December 1922.<sup>2</sup>

It was during this period that an effort was made by Rabbi Israeli to bring Congregation Etz Chaim into the Conservative movement. On several occasions he appealed to the directors to affiliate with United Synagogue of America. The closest step in that direction was taken at a meeting of the synagogue's board of directors in May 1926. The minutes read as follows:

Rabbi Israeli addressed the directors appealing to them to join the United Synagogue of America and extolling the work of that organization, and it was voted that every member be asked to pay 25 cents before the High Holidays and the sum collected be sent to the organization as dues.

The decision, however, had no practical results and Congregation Etz Chaim remained in the Orthodox camp.

Another new organization which came into being during this period was the Mount Sinai Cemetery Association. It was incorporated on November 26, 1920, with Morris Sacknoff as president, Joseph Mack as vice-president, David Schwartz as treasurer, and Julius Comeras as secretary. The signatures of Samuel Seiger and Max Oransky also appear on the certificate of incorporation.

The land for the cemetery, consisting of one and a half acres off Warren Avenue in Portland, was first purchased as a cemetery in 1894 by the Portland Hebrew Benevolent Association.<sup>3</sup>

Later, a Hebrew Synagogue Society came into being and held title to the same land jointly with the older burial association. When the new Mount Sinai Cemetery Association was formed, through merger of the two organizations, it received title to the land in separate deeds from each of the older groups.<sup>4</sup> William Goodman has served as president of the Mt. Sinai Cemetery Association since the death of Morris Sacknoff in 1943.

Despite the division of community strength, Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh was able to make significant progress in the early 1920's and in 1926 it discharged its mortgage. This was accomplished to a great extent through the assistance of its sisterhood which was organized in 1925. The officers of the sisterhood during this period were Mrs. Harry Miller, president; Mrs. Louis Helfont, vice-president; Mrs. Hyman Bernstein, treasurer; and Mrs. B. Diamon, secretary.

On May 3, 1926 an elaborate celebration was held in the Shaarey Tphiloh Synagogue on the occasion of the burning of the mort-

gage and the first anniversary of the sisterhood. The gala affair also served as a farewell party for Rabbi David Essrig who left for California after serving for nearly eight years.

The synagogue was gaily decorated with banners and the Zionist flag stood alongside the American flag. Community differences were laid aside for the day and all congregations participated in the celebration. The synagogue, recently remodeled at a cost of \$17,000 provided a festive setting. No less than five major speeches were delivered, according to the local press. Mentioned as speakers were Jacob H. Berman, Max L. Pinansky, Israel Bernstein, Morris Sacknoff and Hyman Bernstein.<sup>5</sup>

Harmony between the two principal congregations, however, was at best superficial, for the competition between them created a condition bordering on chaos in the community's religious life. The die was cast when Congregation Etz Chaim established its own Vaad Ha-Kashruth in 1921, in competition with the old Vaad sponsored by the Shaarey Tphiloh Synagogue. As a result intense rivalry ensued.

Observers during this period recalled that elders of the community would not partake of food served at weddings and similar joyous occasions if its preparation was supervised by the rabbi of the other synagogue. Nor would they attend the circumcision of their grandchildren if it was performed by a *mohel* other than their own. If a family celebrated a joyous occasion in one synagogue, it usually forfeited similar privileges in the other. Or if a *meshulach*, or itinerant fund raiser, made an appeal in one synagogue, he was not welcome in the other.

The economic effects of this competition were felt sharply. The minutes of the Vaad Ha-Shechita of Shaarey Tphiloh Synagogue, for November 22, 1925 confirm this, for we read therein:

Moved that every director must buy his meat from our butcher and kill *chaies* (animals) at our *rav*. Committee of five to see how to raise (money to cover) the deficiency in the treasury for next year.

In the final analysis, it was the pressing economic burden resulting from parallel and competing kashruth programs that compelled a serious examination of merger plans. The community could not afford to maintain two rabbis, two *shochtim* and two slaughterhouses.

For two years, committees representing both synagogues met under the chairmanship of Abraham S. Levey to devise ways and

means of rationalizing the operations of their respective synagogues. Several plans were considered. One would allow Congregation Etz Chaim to retain Rabbi Israeli as its spiritual leader and permit Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh to engage a rabbi who would then be recognized as "Rabbi of Portland." He also would be required to deliver occasional sermons in Etz Chaim Synagogue. Another plan called for hiring one rabbi by both congregations and the establishment of one Vaad Ha-Shechita. Neither plan was easily negotiated and the upshot of the lengthy deliberations was quite different from the original intention. The Vaad Hoir, or Jewish Community Council, came into being to supervise the religious affairs of Portland Jewry.

The Vaad Hoir was organized in 1929 with Abraham S. Levey as its first president and Saul Shulman as secretary. Prior to the assumption by the Vaad of its comprehensive functions, the individual synagogues put their affairs in order. By mutual agreement, Congregation Etz Chaim and Rabbi Moses Shohet terminated their long association and Rev. Myer J. Levinson, the congregation's *shochet* found a position elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh also parted company with Rabbi Joshua Mereminsky. Its *shochet*, Rev. Harry Simansky, was retained as community *shochet* by the Vaad Hoir, and has functioned in that capacity until the present.

The actual organization of the Vaad Hoir was more comprehensive than had been originally planned, for it was made up of representatives from the three Orthodox synagogues. Congregation Anshe Sfaard soon joined the two original constituents. The supply of kosher meat was now under the supervision of the Vaad. The income derived from this enterprise, in addition to the contributions from its constituent synagogues, enabled it to subsidize the Portland Hebrew School and pay the salary of a community rabbi. The first community rabbi was Abraham Miller who came in 1930 and served for six years. He was succeeded by Rabbi Mendel Lewittes who served in Portland from 1936 until 1942.

Under the leadership of Abraham S. Levey, the Vaad Hoir functioned as the central religious organization for many years. It was Mr. Levey's aim to have the Vaad assume greater powers in time and to develop into the governing body of a Portland *kehillah*. This goal was never attained, however, due in part to the rise of the Jewish Federation of Portland in 1941. Since the Federation became a secular Vaad, controlling the collection and disbursement of all community funds, the role of the Vaad Hoir was inevitably eclipsed.<sup>7</sup>

In October 1934, Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh marked its thirtieth anniversary with a three-day celebration. It began on Friday, October 19, with an Oneg Shabbat service and on Saturday the Talmudic study group held a great *siyyum*. The celebration was climaxed on Sunday with a dinner attended by three hundred persons. Philip Abrahamson, president of the congregation, was toastmaster, and Mrs. Israel Bernstein the principal speaker. The following notice appeared in the local press:

"The Synagogue stands as a monument to the eternal spirit of the Jew," Mrs. Bernstein said, outlining the history of the local institution.

The handful of Jews who were the founders were inspired by real Judaic spirit, she said.

Mrs. Bernstein said that the Jewish religion does not embrace mere ritual for holiday and special occasions but that tenets formed a vital force for everyday life.

She pointed out that most social service activities found their beginnings in the synagogue, including such services as visiting the sick, consoling the bereft, sheltering the aged, caring for orphans and providing temporary shelter for transients.<sup>8</sup>

During this period Congregation Etz Chaim also made forward strides. Its synagogue building, although well situated on Congress Street, was blocked from view by an old building which occupied the street front. This difficulty was overcome by razing the eyesore and improving the grounds. On December 7, 1937, Etz Chaim Synagogue dedicated a new ark donated by Harry Sivovlos in memory of his parents, Simon and Fanny Sivovlos. On the eve of Rosh Ha-Shanah, 1941, the new entrance and the landscaped approaches to the synagogue were dedicated. The work was made possible through bequests in the wills of Nathan Markson and Samuel Davis, the latter a past president of the congregation and a former city official.

Until the end of 1942, the position of Orthodoxy in Portland seemed secure. A contributing factor to this state of affairs was the successful activity of the Young Israel Club. Founded in 1931 by I. Edward Cohen, Young Israel attracted to its ranks a large segment of the Jewish youth and guided them through a variety of religious and social activities. With the cooperation of Rabbi Mendel Lewittes, Philip Abrahamson and Jacob Rubinsky, Young Israel remained a potent force in Portland's religious life until

the early 1940's when it quietly went out of existence, a veritable war casualty.

Under the aegis of Young Israel, daily and Sabbath services were held in the two large synagogues. On Sunday mornings, the "minyan breakfast" was introduced, with religious services followed by a meal and then a study period. As an added activity, Young Israel sponsored athletic teams for younger boys, who were then encouraged to participate in the religious life of the parent organization.

The impact of Young Israel soon made itself felt on synagogue life. Its religious services had acquired a reputation for decorum, dignity and spirited congregational participation. In addition to being a medium for training youth in synagogue participation, it was regarded as a model for adult congregations to emulate. Its passing marked the end of a period, not only chronologically but culturally as well. With its demise, the religious climate of Portland was soon transformed.

Another creative institution was the Portland Torah Foundation, organized by Michael Rubinsky to assist rabbinical schools in this country and abroad through the medium of a perpetual fund. To create this fund, the Portland Torah Foundation enrolled members who paid regular annual dues, distributed collection boxes and conducted special campaigns. The money raised was invested in government bonds or deposited in a bank account, with only the interest being used for the organization's educational purposes. In this manner, the principal was never diminished, but rather increased, and the Portland Torah Foundation has been able to send regular contributions to seats of Torah study.

Although Portland was still officially Orthodox until the end of this period, many Jews were dissatisfied with Orthodoxy. Since they were unable as yet to introduce the innovations they desired, they continued to comply with the established usages. In a later period, as we shall see, the opposition to Orthodoxy was channelized into a new movement and a new congregation.

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#### REFERENCES IN CHAPTER IX

<sup>1</sup>Other presidents of the congregation were Samuel Davis, Joseph Mack, Louis Weinman, Udell Bramson and Herman Sivovlos.

<sup>2</sup>Other presidents of the sisterhood included: Mesdames Samuel Davis, Elias Caplan, S. Mitnick, Edward Chapman, Fannie Hoffman, Louis Matson, Solomon Turetsky, Benjamin Troen, Sol Branz, Sam Kaatz, William Punsky and Jacob Levinsky.

<sup>3</sup>Cumberland County, Registry of Deeds, Book 610, page 424.

<sup>4</sup>The Portland Hebrew Benevolent Association deeded the land to the Mount Sinai Cemetery Association on November 30, 1920, and the Hebrew Synagogue Society did the same on December 29, 1920. (Cumberland County, Registry of Deeds, Book 1071, pages 182-183). At the time of transfer, David Schwartz was president of the Portland Hebrew Benevolent Burial Association and Samuel Press was its authorized agent. Morris Sacknoff was president of the Hebrew Synagogue Society.

<sup>5</sup>Among the directors of Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh at that time were Morris Sacknoff, Abraham S. Levey, Louis Rice, Samuel Comeras, Harry Miller, Abraham A. Greenberg, Max Oransky, Samuel Sacknoff, Zissel Boxstein and Hyman Boxstein.

<sup>6</sup>Rabbi Israeli had left Portland previously because of illness.

<sup>7</sup>Succeeding Mr. Levey as president of the Vaad Hoir were Morris Sacknoff, William Goodman and Louis Weinman.

<sup>8</sup>Portland Press-Herald, October 22, 1934.