



Israel Bernstein

Israel Bernstein was born November 22, 1890, in Portland. His father, Abraham, a scholar and teacher of religion, brought his sweetheart Sprinze and her two brothers as well as four brothers of his own to America from Russia after he established himself as a fine, trustworthy businessman. Israel's mother, a devoted friend to all who needed help, became an inspiration to social service workers. The Bernsteins began to earn a living as pawnbrokers and jewelers. Later they dealt in real estate. He said his father left "an eye for the stars" and a love for what lay inside books not a lot of money.

Israel was described as a small man with big ideas. He was the first Portland Jew to graduate from Harvard College and Harvard Law School. Yet it was hard for a Jew to be a lawyer in 1915. At first he only collected bad debts. Israel needed the help of a senator to be inducted in the U.S. Army, but he could not be sent to Europe because he had poor vision. People relied on him

for everything. He was not only a legal advisor, but also a family confidant and educator. When the sons of his clients went to law school, they were brought into his firm. Lenny Nelson and Barney Shur joined Israel and his brother, Judge Louis Bernstein, after they passed the bars. He gave much of his time to his community.

Israel Bernstein's parents, Abraham and Sarah (Sprintze, of the charity legend), came to Portland from Russia after the Napoleonic laws were repealed. When Abraham opened a secondhand store (after a short period of peddling), he became very active in religious matters for the community. He brought in Hebrew teachers for his own sons and then helped organize the first synagogue, Shaary TPhiloh, in 1904. He served on the first board of directors. Recognized by non-Jews as a trustworthy leader, Abraham had to recommend a Jewish applicant for a loan before it was granted by a bank.

Israel, his first son, was the first Jew in Portland to go to Harvard. He was already in practice when he enlisted in the Army in WWI and returned to his office after the war ended. Before he died in 1957, he and his wife Peggy were founders, workers and advisors in almost every community organization, Jewish and non-Jewish, in Portland.

His service in the army during WWI typified the wispy-haired wearer of big horn-rimmed glasses. With puckish humor he said, "I stuck with my boss, a major, because I liked him and he said he needed me to do the work, so I didn't go for a commission. I stayed with that major." He became a regimental sergeant major in the Twelfth Division.

He was thirty-two years old when he married Rebecca Thurman, a lawyer in Boston. They had two children, Sumner, now a lawyer, and Helen Barbara, now married to Dr. Edward Wasserman and an active community volunteer in Bridgeport, Connecticut.

Although Israel was not an outdoor enthusiast, he worked hard to give boys a camping experience as well as inculcation of Boy Scout values. He was awarded the Silver Beaver for Distinguished Service to Boyhood in 1944 and the Silver Antelope Award in 1945. He served fifteen years on the Selective Service Board and many years in the American Legion.

As a member of the American, Maine, and Cumberland Bar Associations, he was a prime mover in the development of new civil rules adopted by Maine's judiciary system.

During the Depression he raised 16 percent of the original capital to start a bank. His associate in his law firm, Barney Shur, involved his parents who contributed six hundred dollars (a large sum) from their grocery store. Israel became a director and founder of Casco Bank & Trust Co.; director of Home Federal Savings and Loan Associations; director and vice-president of the Greater Portland Chamber of Commerce; vice-president of the Portland Better Business Bureau; a founder, director, and president of the Portland Jewish Federation; chairman of the United Jewish Appeal Campaign for six years; chairman of the Portland Jewish Federation Campaign; a founder and first president of the Jewish Historical Society of the Maine Jewish Council; director of the Jewish Community Center; vice-chairman of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds (New England region); trustee of the Portland Public Library; trustee of Goodwill Industries; trustee of Maine Library Association; and board member of the New England region of the American Jewish Committee. In addition, he was a founder of the YMHA and YWHA, for which he received a citation in 1953.

Meanwhile he served as overseer of the poor in Portland from 1919 to 1920, became a member of the School Committee during 1921-1923, served veterans as a commissioner of Relief for Needy Veterans of WWI, and was a government appeal agent for the Selective Service.

Elected President of the Cumberland Bar Association, he also was chosen as president of the Torch Club of Western Maine and joined the Rotary Club of Portland. He was appointed the chairman of the Liaison Committee of the Cumberland Bar to the University of Maine School of Law.

Despite his declaration, "I like to see a good new idea bust up old rules. I like to see stuffy old conservatives sit up and frown. I like change," his obituaries reflect a well-liked, agreeable person. From Bill Caldwell in the *Portland Sunday Telegram* (July 2, 1967), we learn that he "won many battles, lost some, but seemed to carry no battle scars... Like the man, his office was small, plain, unpretentious. He treasured books more than money just as his father, Abraham, did. When his father died, he was buried in a coffin made from the pine wood of the desk where he had so long and so lovingly pored over the Talmud." Although he was active in the bar associations, Boy Scouts, banking, and Jewish organizations, "he never seemed to belong to the

entrenched establishment. He remained a rebel and supporter of the underdog until he died.”

He started the law firm, Bernstein, Shur, Sawyer, and Nelson in his middle years. It is still a thriving firm headed by his son, Sumner, who still takes as associates the children of clients who pass the bar examinations.

Israel died June 27, 1967, at the age of seventy-six. From a eulogy given January 16, 1968, the picture emerges of a cultured gentleman, an avid reader with a keen intellect and a strong concern for humanity, a leader: “Israel Bernstein was not content to maintain the status quo or to rely on hidebound tradition but rather chose to look forward to originating those changes which inevitably led to progress and advancement. His constant search for new and progressive ideas left his indelible mark as a founder and president of many organizations.”