

Louis Bernstein

Louis Bernstein, ten years younger than his brother, Israel, and the son of Abraham, retired from the law firm Israel founded and said, "I feel just as much at home in Portland as the descendants of a family who came over on the Mayflower because I can substantiate my loyalty to my community, my country, and my contributions to life."

Abraham was one of four brothers and two sisters lured to America from Kovna, Russia, between 1870 and 1882 by his brother Max. Life in Russia, punctuated by pogroms and cruel army service, was so miserable that people would place their sons in families devoid of sons to avoid a twenty-year stint in the army. Each brother lost his original Oppenheimer name by using the foster family name. In Portland they became Bernsteins. When Abraham established a good business after six years, he sent for his sweetheart, Sarah Sprinze, and her two brothers. Abraham had been a Talmudic scholar in Europe. Sarah was not so limited; she was educated in a Gymnasia. They married in 1889.

Learning was like breathing in Abraham's household. Louis learned Hebrew and Judaism from his father, who taught Gemora for forty-one years every Friday evening to anyone who was interested, free. From his mother he learned to serve his coreligionists as well as others in the community. He graduated from Bowdoin College and Peabody Law School. As an alumnus he was elected president of the Board of Legislators of Bowdoin and

was appointed to the Board of Overseers in 1958. Bowdoin College bestowed an honorary Doctor of Law Degree on him in 1973.

Soon after he graduated from Bowdoin, he served as secretary of United Hebrew Charities of Maine which supervised the Hebrew Free Loan Society that loaned interest-free funds to the poor to open a store, get medical help and food, and meet various other needs. Almost as soon as he came home from law school, he helped organize the Jewish Community Center where he was elected president. He served on the board many years.

In 1922 he was elected to the City Council. In 1934 he was elected to the Portland Civil Service Commission in charge of the police and fire departments. At age forty-one he left his post as judge of the municipal court to enter the U.S. Air Force as a lieutenant. By the time World War II had ended, he was a major, vindicated for his dismissal as a volunteer underage soldier in WWI. He became a charter member of Post 99, Jacob's Cousins, Jewish War Veterans.

Before WWII Louis helped to create the Jewish Federation for Displaced Persons in Europe and was one of the first to lead a bond drive for Israel.

When he passed the bar examination, Louis joined the law firm established by his brother, Israel—Bernstein, Shur, Sawyer and Nelson—which now has many partners and associates in Portland and Augusta.

In 1890 the Canal National Bank in Portland voted to grant loans to people of Jewish origin only if they were cleared by Louis's father. Abraham became a close friend of the president, Mr. Thomas, the great-grandfather of the present president of the bank. Louis served as incorporator of the Portland Savings Bank.

Louis married a girl he met in New York whose parents also came from Kovna. They had no children. They traveled to Europe and Israel. He served on the Executive Committee of Social Agencies and was the first Jew named general chairman of the Portland Community Chest in 1952. He was a founder and trustee of the Portland Junior College, state president of the Higher Education Assistance Foundation, and he helped merge the Children's Hospital with the Maine Medical Center. Now he is a trustee emeritus.

In addition, Louis served five years as judge in district court, five years in superior court, and one year on the Maine Supreme Court. He was elected to the Portland School Board and the City

Council. He also headed the Civilian Defense Program and conducted classes for the American Red Cross.

Although his parents, Israel and Rebecca, an uncle, and a cousin (Dr. Caplan) signed a document guaranteeing the mortgage on the Orthodox synagogue they helped to start in 1904, Louis was asked to help establish a Conservative temple in 1948. Mrs. Elias Caplan, Mrs. Francis Elowitch, and Mrs. Ruby Packard asked Louis to call a meeting in the Woodford Congregational Church. Pledges of \$102,000 were collected at the first meeting. He did not limit his diet to kosher food early but disapproved of mixed marriage, a practice becoming more and more common among second and third generation Jews who refused to attend the Orthodox synagogue. Louis hoped to bring these Jews back to Orthodox synagogues—he still believed sincerely in Orthodoxy. Louis belonged to both the Orthodox and Conservative congregations.

He encountered anti-Semitism for the first time at Bowdoin College when he was not invited to join a Greek letter fraternity. He was accepted as a member of the Portland Yacht Club in 1938 and joined the Portland Country Club with the proviso that Jews would not be treated as second class citizens.

He learned from a friend that the Knights of Pythias were eager to sell their building on Cumberland Street and was able to persuade a number of people to buy the old brick building for use as a Jewish Community Center. Louis held a meeting November 1, 1937, to create a new center. He became president; Mrs. Ed J. Berman was vice-president; Ed J. Berman was treasurer; Mrs. Theodore Wasserman was secretary; and Maurice Davis was clerk. The first building on Wilmot Street was used for meetings only. They discovered that the five-story former Pythian building could be purchased for \$17,500. The Board of Directors pledged \$15,000. In 1938 the National Jewish Welfare Board voted to enlarge the Center from merely a meeting place of clubs to a creative force in the community—recreational, cultural, and other needs of its members were to be served. On November 13, 1938, the center was blessed by Rabbi Levittes in Etz Chaim Synagogue and opened to the public. The YWHA was dissolved, and the Center Women's Club was formed. The YMHA built the Center Library, equipping it with reading rooms and suitable furniture, magazines, and English and Yiddish newspapers.

For boys aged nine to eleven there was a Judean Club; for

eleven- to thirteen-year-old boys, Junior Maccabean; and for thirteen- to fifteen-year-old-boys, Tel Hai. For girls there was a Deborah Club. Adults debated "Can Democracy Survive?" among many topics in a lecture series under the guidance of Israel Bernstein, the chairman of the Education Committee.

A Sunday School was organized under the direction of Mrs. Bennett I. Shur, assisted by Mrs. Aaron Blumenthal for preschool children. Gerald Waxman conducted an artistic workshop. The Center Bulletin, the first Jewish Community weekly paper, started December 9, 1938; it was to encourage creative writing.

The center hosted USO activities, but since many members, including Louis, joined the military services during World War II, the membership in the center declined. Ed J. Berman succeeded Louis as president.

In 1928 the Home for the Aged was founded with Israel as attorney, Abraham as director, and Sarah as a very active volunteer social worker. It drew Louis's support when he became an attorney.

Louis believed some progress had been made to eliminate prejudice since five Jews served on the supreme court and some sat in district and superior courts. Before World War II Jews were considered noncontributing alumni at Bowdoin College. He believed there was still some anti-Semitism at the University of Maine and mentioned that Arabs at Bowdoin and Holiday Inn were active during the oil crises in the 1970s.

Louis reads the *New York Times* every day. He is active in higher education committees. "I want the whole picture of college support to change. There should be larger contributions, and costs to students [should be] reduced."