



Sarah and Morris Sacknoff

Morris Sacknoff

To celebrate 300 years of Jewish life in America, the Jewish Historical Society of Portland commissioned Benjamin Band, a high school teacher, to write the book *Portland Jewry, Its Growth and Development* in 1954. Band estimated the Portland community had started ninety years before. He defined a Jewish community as a collection of at least ten men having a cemetery, conducting religious services, and providing means to secure kosher food.

The Portland Lodge 218, Independent Order of B'nai B'rith, met all the requirements except to provide ritual butchers for kosher meat. In 1875 the lodge bought a lot in Cape Elizabeth for the first Jewish cemetery, sponsored High Holiday Service from 1874 to 1880, directed charitable and social services to the residents, and even sent contributions to other communities to aid widows and orphans. Members were entitled to five dollars

per week when they were too sick to work, but when they were well, they were assessed funds to help needy brethren. The lodge organized a *chevra kaddisha* (a burial society) to supervise the burial of members according to Orthodox ritual.

The lodge dissolved in 1880 because of dissension and lack of funds. Those who still wanted to belong to B'nai B'rith applied to a Boston lodge. There were probably thirty or forty Jewish families at the time, and most attended two synagogues that were almost exactly alike in Orthodox observance. There were so many marriages among the families that the community became one large family. When in November of 1943, the Bureau of War Records of the National Jewish Welfare Board asked all Jewish communities to count Jewish families, 838 families were registered.

Many of the Portland Jews came to escape pogroms in Russia and Austria-Hungary in the 1880s. By 1900 there were three synagogues for the eighty families. They conducted services in private homes, above stores, and in small buildings. Portland was called "Jerusalem of America" by other communities.

When he left his village of Medvin, near Kiev, as a lad of thirteen in 1893, Morris Sacknoff had only hope and determination, according to his daughter, Jen. He came to Fall River, Massachusetts, to live with his married sister, Rifka Granovsky. No time was lost attending school. He joined the other children and adults in the mill where he earned enough to contribute to the cost of food for the family. He soon realized he was making no progress toward his goal—becoming independent. He started as an itinerant salesman of notions, walking from house to far away house, learning English in order to sell his goods. Fortunately he had the strength to attend evening school and enough money to join a social club for dancing where he developed friends.

By the time he was seventeen, he moved to Portland to live with another sister, Sarah Solmer. He became part of her family while he worked for his brother-in-law. The Jewish community absorbed immigrants as if they were related to everyone there. Soon Morris joined a group of young men in a club that provided parties and other amusement. He was attracted to Sarah Berman, the sister of two club members. She had come from Latvia at age thirteen and was working for a German seamstress. She came from a village near Vilna where she learned to enjoy music and

beautiful things. Sarah lived with her sister, Dora Mack, until her marriage at age eighteen to Morris who was all of nineteen with a bankroll of five dollars and the possession of a horse.

Morris and Sarah had four children in ten years: Jennie Dorothy, Meyer, Samuel, and Edward. The fifth child, Rheta, was born after an interval of ten years. All of the children attended Ivy League-caliber colleges: Harvard, Simmons, Wellesley, University of Pennsylvania, and Bowdoin. Only Meyer and Edward returned to Portland.

Morris collected wastepaper and convinced others to sell him their collections. When he could borrow money, he bought a machine that compressed all this into huge bales that he sold to paper mills in New England. Huge rolls of newsprint came from these wastepaper bales. Morris employed six people at one time, which freed him to make many business and social contacts.

When Morris's younger brother Samuel came to America, he joined the family and began to work for Morris. Later his parents came with another brother and sister. Everyone was sheltered and supported by Morris as was customary in the Jewish community. His father, a Hebrew scholar, spent most of his life in the synagogue. According to Rita Willis, Samuel's daughter, he was chosen to inspect meat for "kosher" use during the last twenty years of his life, a responsibility entrusted only to the most pious and learned men.

As the paper business prospered, Morris and Samuel bought the business section of Wells, Maine, with the help of a third partner. There they established a casino, a clothing store, and a dance hall on the waterfront right on the ledge. Rheta said she spent every summer there on the beach. Morris would invite everyone he met to spend a weekend at the beach. This kept her mother, Sarah, cooking most of the time. One summer there were so many relatives, children, and adults, Morris had to set up a tent with six cots. The six-bedroom house couldn't accommodate the group. In winter they lived on the Eastern Promenade in Portland, facing Casco Bay and the islands.

By 1915 Morris was prosperous—he bought a six-passenger Buick that carried no less than ten passengers. He also bought two brick houses on Franklin Street—one for his family (the first he actually owned) and the other to rent to others. In addition, he built a little cottage on the premises for his parents. Jen remembered her grandmother as a tall, impressive woman who

always wore a lace-trimmed cap and a long fresh clean apron. "It was always a treat to visit her. She served delicious tea and stewed raspberries." Rita Willis remembered her grandfather as a well-respected man whose greatest pride was Morris as president of the Jewish Home for the Aged.

Morris helped immigrants from Europe entering Portland on their way to Canada or the West. Hundreds of people spent a night in his home before he arranged for their travel to a permanent home. The Sacknoff home was available to people who needed help. Many a wedding took place there. Sarah and her friends baked the jelly rolls. Rheta recalled a meeting with a friend she envied because her mother, a proprietor of a dress shop, clothed her friend in expensive clothes. This friend envied Rheta because Sarah made the house smell delicious with her Friday baking.

Jennie and her father were very close. She accompanied him to meetings where he got along very well with non-Jews as well as Jews. He was a Republican delegate to state conventions when Rheta was in high school. She wrote speeches for him to deliver. Somehow the boys did not get close to him. He was seldom home at night. He was very active in the community when the boys were growing up. They all attended Shaarey TPhilloh (Gates of Prayer) Synagogue and were bar mitzvahed there. Morris was the fifth president of the congregation as well as one of the founders when it opened in 1904. He observed most of the Orthodox rules such as the one prohibiting the handling of money on the High Holidays. During his thirteen years as president, he had a non-Jewish employee seated behind him to take money and write down pledges. The entire community mobilized to erect the building on Newberry Street that merged the two larger Orthodox congregations.

He was active in public endeavors almost from his move to Portland. He helped more established men form the YMHA and Shaarey TPhilloh, where he served on the first Board of Directors as an officer. In 1917 he was a member of Common Council, which governed Portland until 1923 when the city manager form of government was adopted. In 1915 and 1919 he was an alderman. When the mortgage of the synagogue was burned, Morris was one of the speakers in 1920. By 1929 he was president of the Hebrew Synagogue Society when the group deeded land to Mt. Sinai Cemetery Association. He was president of Vaad Hoir, an

organization that supervised Kashrut for Portland. In 1929 this group tried to coordinate the activities of divergent assemblages but mainly to "assure the healthy growth of the Orthodox community through avoidance of duplication and to provide financial support for necessary religious functions." A community rabbi was engaged and a single slaughterhouse was established. Support was given to the Portland Hebrew School, the United Hebrew Charities, and the Jewish Home for the Aged. He had served on the original planning committee to draw up a constitution and by-laws for the Home. He was president of the Jewish Home for the Aged from 1925 until his death in 1943.

Morris had been on the board of directors of the first Jewish Community Center. When Lewis Bernstein, the president of the board, was advised that the Pythian building on Cumberland Street was for sale, he appointed Morris to a committee to investigate the feasibility of moving the center. The building needed renovation, but the committee moved the center successfully. It became the place where many activities in the social life of the community thrived. Once a year there was a fund-raising ball. Sarah's and Rita's mother, her sister-in-law, sold tickets and baked goodies. Five days a week Hebrew School was attended. Here people were accepted even if they did not meet Peggy Bernstein's definition of an insider: "If you didn't have three grave stones in the cemetery, you were an outsider." Children mingled with non-Jews in school, but social activities were organized for only Jews.

Jennie described Morris as a good-looking, tall, proud man. He attended Saturday services dressed in striped trousers, a Prince Albert coat, and a tall top silk hat. He was very proud to be an American. He raised the flag wherever the family lived. He played on a baseball team formed at the center. On Sundays when games were scheduled, mothers, wives, and girlfriends cheered and brought picnic baskets. They boarded the Island Steamer on Commercial Street for the one-hour sail down Casco Bay to Long Island or Peak's Island. The sail home marked the end of a perfect day for the fans and players, remembered Jennie. Rheta fondly remembered picnics and blueberry picking.

Morris and his friends formed the Portland Hebrew Loan Association and lent money, interest free, to small businesses temporarily short of funds or to individuals to start self-supporting enterprises.

When the Sacknoff children were grown and married, Morris traveled through Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, urging people to build a home for the aged who could no longer care for themselves. Sarah also helped with this project. In 1928 the Home for the Aged opened in Portland, and some years later a new wing was built to house Jews and non-Jews of any age in need of convalescent care. It stands on a hill overlooking Casco Bay. The Home is incorporated in New Hampshire and Vermont so that their residents are also eligible for admission.

Morris's younger daughter, Rheta, a realtor in Chevy Chase, Maryland, said he never had a lot of money. When he needed to meet a payroll or needed assets, he would borrow money from a bank. He did not leave a fortune though he had the opportunity to do so when the tax structure was different; rather, he gave everything he had to his family. He prevented his father from marrying a third time—Man must not live alone!—by placing him in the Home for the Aged where he lived to be eighty-seven years old. When his brother Samuel died in 1928, the widow remained as a partner in the business. The children of both families grew up in the same household, sharing whatever Morris had.

He loved to be with people. He was active in many groups without becoming president. This took him away from the family physically, but his wife and daughters were very proud of him and appreciated his devotion to the community.