



Peggy Bernstein

Until 1923 when the city manager form of government was adopted, Portland elected public servants by wards to the City Council, made up of the Board of Aldermen and the Common Council. Ward 3, the mostly Jewish ward, elected Samuel Rosenberg, the first Jew born in Portland, to the Common Council in 1898. Before that he had been appointed assistant assessor and from 1904 to 1910 (chairman the last three years) he had been an overseer of the poor. In addition he served on the State

Board of Charities and corrections from 1919 to 1921.

Enthusiasm for public service ran high in the Jewish Community. It was the first time many of the Jews felt secure enough in their professional and business life to stand for election. Beginning in 1907, Harry M. Taylor, Samuel Davis, and Oscar Tabachnik were elected to the Common Council. Henry N. Taylor served on the Common Council in 1914 and 1915 and was elected to the upper house, the Board of Aldermen, for two years. He resigned as chairman to enter the navy during WWI. Edward A. Simon also served on the Common Council during 1916, 1917, and 1918; Morris Sachnoff served in 1917. When Samuel Davis was an alderman, he enjoyed being mayor for a day when Mayor Charles B. Clarke had to be absent in 1920. His friends remembered this even in the 1950s. During the last two years of ward government, David Sivovlos and Louis Bernstein served on the Common Council.

This was the community into which Israel Bernstein brought his bride, Rebecca Thurman Bernstein, in 1922. Israel was thirty-two and a well-established lawyer. Rebecca, called Peggy, had also been a lawyer in Boston. She was one of six children, four girls and two boys. Although both parents emigrated from Russia, they met in Boston. Her father was in the wholesale grocery business. He sent his two younger brothers to Harvard. Her maternal grandfather, Solomon Rabinowitz, also came to Boston, but later left with his three sons to live in Palestine.

Peggy graduated *magna cum laude* from Boston University Law School in 1918. She had been awarded the Ordronian Prize in 1917. When she was twenty-one, she worked with her father in his first independent venture, the Jacob Thurman Co., Dealers in Flour. She passed the Massachusetts Bar exam and practiced there. Maine gave her a reciprocal license to practice, but she never worked as a lawyer after she married.

She joined the two-year-old chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women almost as soon as she came from Boston and served as president of the Portland chapter in 1925. She became president of the New England region in 1929 and served as a member of the national board from 1935 to 1941. Israel and Peggy were founders of the Jewish Federation; Peggy was on the first board of directors and was elected its first vice-president.

She was chairman of the Community Relations Committee, and her ability to work with diverse and strongly opinionated

people is attested by the members of the committee: William Goodman, Irving Rothstein, Myer Karlin, Silas Jacobson, Harold J. Potter, Rabbi Morris Bekritsky, Rabbi Ephraim Bennett, Mrs. Lester M. Willis, Mrs. Frank Laben, Mrs. Harold P. Nelson, Mrs. Ben Troen, Mrs. Barnett I. Shur and Joseph W. Larkin, members of rival synagogues.

Peggy created the Jewish Family Services and served as president. When she became a member of the executive board and legislative committee of the Maine Conference of Social Welfare, she tried to convince Jews they should apply to the municipal agencies for help like non-Jews did. Finally the Depression itself forced Jews to relinquish the idea that only Jews should grant aid to Jews.

Her involvement in the general community led to the chairmanship of the International Relations Committee of the Maine Federation of Women's Clubs.

In the meantime, she was active in the group that formed the Jewish Community Center, and in her eighties she was honorary director of the Jewish Community Council of Southern Maine.

She served as director of the American Red Cross, the District Nursing Association, the Birth Control league, and the College Club of Portland. She was a member of Maine's Commission on the White House Conference on Children and Youth in 1950. She was a life member of the board of the Community Counseling Center, and for many years was active in the League of Women Voters. In addition, she served on the first board of the Portland Community Chest and was chairman of the Public Service Committee and vice-president of the Citizens Welfare Survey Committee that preceded the formation of the United Fund Services where she became a director.

While she headed these organizations, she spoke to many local and state groups and testified before Portland and State legislatures.

Although she had to curtail much of her activity later in life due to failing sight, she was still on the Board of Directors of the United Fund, was a trustee of the Portland Public Library, and was a trustee of Westbrook College. In her eighties she was also a sustaining member of the Women's Board of the Maine General Hospital in the Maine Medical Center.

She had two children. Sumner graduated from Harvard *cum laude* and from Harvard Law School; he is the senior member of

Bernstein, Shur, Sawyer, and Nelson. Helen is a magna cum laude graduate of Radcliffe, was elected *Phi Beta Kappa*, and went on to earn a Master of Education degree in Bridgeport, Connecticut, where she and her doctor husband are living now. Both children are following in the footsteps of Israel and Peggy Bernstein.

When I interviewed her, Peggy was delighted but modestly surprised by the honors heaped upon her. The law firm of Bernstein, Shur, Sawyer, and Nelson (founded by her late husband) still treated her as a member. She was given a testimonial dinner by the YWCA and another by the National Council of Jewish Women in 1962. In 1966 she was named Club Woman of the Year by Portland College. The next year she became an honorary alumna of Westbrook College. She received the Eleanor Roosevelt Humanities Award from the Israel Bond Drive in 1968. The University of Maine at Portland-Gorham gave her its Distinguished Community Service Award in 1969. Westbrook College awarded her the Deborah Morton Award in 1974, and later that year she was honored by the Portland section of the National Council of Jewish Women.

Peggy never forgot her relatives and her childhood. Her father, Jacob Thurman, had come from Kiev. When his mother died, his father, a scholar, brought his family and five children to his Boston home. Peggy's grandfather was supported in Europe by a banker and lived well. The oldest son, James, even wore a cape lined with white satin. He was a brilliant Hebrew scholar. The religious life in America disappointed Peggy's grandfather. He took his five children back to Kiev even though he had come to escape the pogroms. They did manage to escape the Nazis a few years later when Peggy's father responded to urgent calls for help and brought them all back again.

Jacob started in America by peddling. He was treated well by the established Jews, and they extended him credit. The conductors on the street cars in Boston hated peddlers because they took up too much room with their bundles. She later recalled, "Papa would throw the bundles on fast and then hop on. But once the conductor outwitted him by driving off without him. He was left without capital—out of business." He lived with a bachelor landsman who later started a furniture business. They saved every penny, and as soon as he had a small bank account, his father called for help. Not long after that he was able to establish his own home.

Jacob Thurman loved America and continually expressed his feeling that it was a blessing to live in America. He took his six children to the public library often and by example instilled a love of books.

Peggy's mother had one sister and five brothers. Her father had a grocery store in Boston. One day he took the three younger boys and went to live in Palestine—America was not Orthodox enough for him! He came back for a visit but left again. When he died, the sons came back to Boston.

In Boston Peggy's maiden name, Teherman, was spelled Thurman. With the name Rebecca Thurman, some people took her for a "Brahmin," a euphemism for Gentile. "I had certain doors open before they found out, and then one or two were closed," is all she would say about anti-Semitism in Boston.

Her older sister, Ann, became a dentist and married a lawyer. Her brother Aaron went to Harvard Medical School and is a surgeon. Her sister Sarah learned home arts, knit for the whole family, and married a businessman. Her sister Esther became a teacher. Her brother Harold was president of a bank until the Mafia moved in whereupon he resigned. He is an investment counselor now.

"We were proud to be Jews. As children we lived as Orthodox Jews," Peggy said. "Now some are conservative."

Her father bought a one-family house with his first five hundred dollars. Each child had a separate bed when it was customary for two or three children to share a bed. The house had a fenced-in yard where the children could play. He built a sukkot with a ceiling that could be raised to admit heaven. "It always rained, too," Peggy laughed.

Rebecca and her sister Ann played violins in the high school orchestra. Once a recital was scheduled on a Friday night. This involved two violations of Orthodox law—playing on the Sabbath and riding to and from school. They did not wish to fail the orchestra, but they feared their father's reaction. Finally they wrote a letter explaining their conflict and pinned it on their father's pillow. In the morning, he told them they should play because they owed it to their teacher, but the parents could not attend!

When she was in law school, he would meet her for lunch sometimes. She would not want to offend him by eating nonkosher food, but he told her to eat whatever she would if he were not there.

Friday night the family spent at home. The kitchen was turned into a living room. The wash tubs, the irons and ironing board, even the pots, were stored out of sight. The synagogue was a forty-five minute walk from the house, and everyone walked on holidays.

Rebecca remembers when her father went to New York by boat to visit wholesale grocers. He had no financial references, yet he came back with a credit of five hundred dollars and went into the wholesale grocery business. Later he became a partner in the Standard Grocery Co. After thirty-five years, the company went out of business. That is when he started his own flour and baking business with Rebecca as his lawyer. He went to night school to learn English; Yiddish was spoken at home. The children learned English in kindergarten. Mr. Thurman went to law school at night and, in fact, never stopped learning.

His two younger brothers, Sam and Israel, went to Harvard on scholarships. He lent them his good overcoat while he wore an old one. Professor Hildreth loved the boys and helped them obtain scholarships before they graduated in 1902 and 1903. These brothers were part of Rebecca's family and shared their home even after her father died. Jacob was unusual for his time and society in his regard for the importance of education for his daughters as well as his sons.

Although Rebecca went all through elementary and high schools with Jewish friends only, when she attended law school (no undergraduate college was a prerequisite then), she also had non-Jewish friends. Rebecca, who had to go to college one year because she was too young to be admitted to law school, turned down a date with a non-Jew the first day and never dated any but Jewish boys. There were eleven women in her class of 110 in law school. Two of the women became lawyers; primary emphasis was on marriage and children. Career women dressed like men and were strong suffragettes.

Her father dealt with non-Jews because they owned the factories and canneries. They betrayed their feelings when they called him a "white Jew," but he never felt any special animosity. Before he died, her father made Rebecca promise to keep the six children together, and the family members are still very close though they live far apart. In the Thurman family the priorities were books, education, and a good home. Even when other Jewish children were ashamed to bring their friends home,

Rebecca never had this problem. Her father moved the family to a better home in a better neighborhood. The members of the family rejoiced in each other's good fortune. They never thought about what it means to be a Jew and were never aware of anti-Semitism in school or at work.

When Rebecca married Israel in June 1922, she was the only woman in Portland with a college degree. Israel was already established as a community leader, and his father was highly regarded by the general community as well as the Jewish community. The young people had no choice but to live with his parents. They got along well because Rebecca understood the Orthodox life and she respected her mother-in-law. Peggy's mother-in-law was so loved that the National Council of Jewish Women established a Sara Bernstein Scholarship in her honor. Her father-in-law was head of the Hebrew School when Rebecca's son, Sumner, was a student there.

But Rebecca would not be smothered by the ghetto. "When I married, I was already a liberated woman in the sense that I was recognized as a person. Except for 'you stay home, and I'll go to the office,' nobody could have given me more encouragement than Israel. He helped me grow because I certainly sensed how provincial my Jewish community was."

The Council of Jewish Women was concerned with the whole community. It furnished Jewish leadership for social welfare, social services, and legislation, as well as support for the Kellogg Pact for Peace. At the luncheon in her honor, \$400 was raised for the organization, and more non-Jews came than Jews. Rita Willis said, "Peggy Bernstein was one of the greatest leaders in our community. She had the foresight to see the need to organize the various charities." After that, Jules Krems, with a master's degree in social work, was hired.

Rebecca worked with Margaret Payson and the Catholic representative, Mrs. Donahue, to lobby for social legislation in Augusta. They succeeded in having professional help appointed to welfare agencies. Governor Horace Hildreth was persuaded to hire professionals in the Probation Department in Cumberland County. She belonged to every organization that worked for Israel.

Yet she believed her family came first. She was never too busy to cook her husband's favorite foods or to listen to her children. She remembered Sumner came home from Hebrew School with a complaint—it wasn't fair that other boys were

punished for misbehavior but he was not just because he was a Bernstein.

Peggy and her family spent summers at Waters Landing in Casco Bay, but the Bernsteins remained in their first home when most of their friends and relatives moved to luxurious homes in new communities.