

Selma Black

One of the most active women in Portland, Selma Black grew up beside the Orthodox but thought there was life outside the Jewish community. Her parents had come from Neustadt in East Prussia; her maternal grandfather's brother, Reverend (not Rabbi) Aaron Aaronson, and his son Bernard Aaronson came to Portland from Boston in 1866. Her paternal grandfather's brother had come first and owned a whole block when Joseph Wolf came to Portland. By 1891 the German Jews had a thriving community to welcome Selma's mother who came from Syracuse to visit her sister. She married George Wolf in 1908.

To Selma, her mother was very special. "She was extremely bright, a good speaker, a community leader." Involved in study groups, she was chosen to greet Henrietta Szold, the founder of Hadassah, the international organization of Jewish women. She was one of a few Jewish women college graduates (Syracuse University) and taught in Syracuse before she established her home in Portland. Selma never heard Yiddish spoken at home.

The father was Orthodox but not "rigid"—he ate seafood. He was the only Jew in the Shrine Club for many years, ending as a thirty-third degree Mason. The family enjoyed a comfortable living from her father's wholesale grocery business. Selma's mother loved the Jefferson Theater where the family had season tickets for every Saturday matinee. In summer when there was no repertory or stock company present, travelling companies would

come. The Shakespeare Festival often performed both day and evening for one week. There were musicals Sunday afternoons at City Hall. Even Sigmund Romberg, the Hungarian-born composer, performed. Friday night was for parties. The women's Literary Union presented a lecture series during the week. Selma's mother would shop in Boston and attend the opera in New York. Vacations were spent at Old Orchard Beach or at Poland Spring.

As chairman of the Council of Jewish Women in both Syracuse and Portland, Selma's mother led the community on immigration and naturalization issues. She was director of reading for the Portland Public Schools and set up Americanization classes at Portland high schools for the children in addition to adult evening classes. She rang doorbells in the "India" section at Federal and Middle streets where immigrants came from Italy as well as Russia and Lithuania to bring them to class. Selma remembers her mother seated at the dining room table, filling out citizen applications for people who never knew their original names or port of exit or entry. The papers would come back. The process would start over again.

Selma's family did not attend services at a synagogue. She played with non-Jewish children until she went to Deering High, and even though there were no Jews at Deering High School, there were plenty of Jews at Portland High school. She did not date non-Jews. She attended Hebrew School five days a week for two years because her friend Rita Sacknoff's (Willis) father was president of the board and Selma's father was on the board. She felt she did not learn much. Her sister, Charlotte, married Sydney Wernick and became very active in Jewish social and charity work.

Selma said she never experienced anti-Semitism. Everybody in her family—aunts, uncles, cousins, and their families—went to college. She started at Peabody Law at age sixteen and left after two years to write copy for the *Boston Herald Traveler*. For two years she attended Boston University and finished at Portia Law School with a degree, LL.B., and came back to Portland in 1937. At age twenty-one she passed the bar exams in Massachusetts and Maine. She practiced law until 1940 when she married Benjamin Black and moved to Boston where he was a salesman.

While her husband served three years in the U.S. Army, Selma worked with Dorothy Payson in the Citizen Service Corporation and volunteered at the Jewish Community Center and the Little Theater Workshop. As president of the Council of

Jewish Women, she assisted in the development of Head Start, Bonds for Israel, and in organizations that Rebecca Bernstein, Rita Sacknoff Willis, and Charlotte Wernick served.

While living in Boston from 1947 to 1954, she was also active in the National Council of Jewish Women, the League of Women Voters, and was in charge of study groups at all the Reform temples. In Portland, when Selma and her husband came back to assist her father in the business, she worked with Women in Community Service, for the Fair Employment Practices Act, on the Ban the Bomb Project, and in groups that brought together Catholic, Negro, and United Church women. She was voted honorary vice-president of the National Council of Jewish Women. She helped establish the Council of Social Agencies, the Citizen's Committee for a Boys Training Center, Stevens Training Center, and the Jewish Family Services.

After World War II Selma went to Washington to testify against the Immigration Act and reported back successfully. "We were allowed 100,000 displaced people above the quotas." With the help of Dorothy Payson, she set up a refugee service committee in Portland. The Christian churches and the Jewish community took in the refugees. She also set up a Jewish refugee committee as part of the Jewish Federation to provide employment, housing, medical care, and clothing for them. In 1965 she coordinated federal projects in Portland public schools.

As for religion, she explained, "My husband came from a very religious family, so religious that he doesn't have any." Their son, Scott, went back to religion. He was Bar Mitzvahed and lives in New York as a member of the Stephen Wise Synagogue, a Reform temple. He goes to service every Friday evening and Saturday morning.

Their daughter, Barbara, had no Jewish friends in Portland. She attended Camp Naomi for six summers where she enjoyed the camp experience with other Jewish children.

Said Selma, "What does Jewish mean? It's an identity. It's a heritage. I would not want to see my children out of the faith. I feel that Jews have gone through so much for being Jews for so many generations that I hate to see them throwing it away in one generation. If I see or read things that happen to Jews anywhere, I feel a kinship with them, and I feel almost guilty that they are suffering and I'm not. That's almost mystical."