

Sumner Bernstein

Sumner, the first child of Rebecca (Peggy) and Israel, was the only male born in his generation in his large extended family in Portland. When he was five years old, his mother suffered a facial paralysis. He was sent to Boston to live with his mother's parents. In the household of his father's parents he learned how to live as an Orthodox Jew, but in Boston he was exposed to a learned (Hasid) Jewry rather than a strict adherence to tradition. Soon after his mother's recovery, Sumner came home to a kosher home, but the family did not attend synagogue on Saturdays because they lived too far to walk. All major holidays were observed, however. Sumner attended two-hour sessions at Hebrew School most days after public school and rode the streetcar home in the dark winter days. He prayed every morning "laid tefillin" until he was fifteen years old. (The "tefillin" are boxes that Orthodox Jews tie to their foreheads and arms for prayer.) When he was a bar mitzvah, he did the whole service himself.

Sumner joined the U.S. Army at age nineteen and was discharged three-and-a-half years later. He had entered Harvard at sixteen and had not chosen a profession, but while at Officer Candidate School he decided to return to Harvard to study law. The profession was natural for the son and nephew of lawyers. He graduated *cum laude* from Harvard College and Harvard Law School.

At Boy Scout Camp, Panther Pond in Raymond, he encountered prejudice for the first time. One Sunday morning as he sat

on his bunk, excused from church service, the last boy who walked by scoffed, "You dirty Jew." He was not traumatized, however, his parents had prepared him for anti-Semitism.

Sumner married Rosalyn Spindel, a Radcliffe girl he met at Hillel. They had two children, Beth and Andrew, who were both bar mitzvahed at Beth El Synagogue where Sumner was president of the congregation. Beth has been to Israel three times; Andrew went once. Beth married Dr. Michael Schneider.

Like his parents, Uncle Louis, and other members of his family, Sumner was active in the Jewish community. He helped to establish a cemetery for Conservative and non-Jewish spouses, and the use of non-Jewish funeral homes. All of this was not possible at the Orthodox Mt. Sinai Cemetery. He raised funds as a member of the Hebrew School Committee, helped his father break the bar against Jews in the Rotary Club, and joined Brotherhood Lodge because Jews were not admitted to Masonry. He admired Rabbi Sky and helped him march to Selma, Alabama, for civil rights by selling \$300,000 worth of Israel Development Bonds. "We could have raised more—there was no sacrifice; it was only great compared to what non-Jews could raise."

Sumner represented the American Jewish Committee. He presented anti-bigot materials to teachers in the public schools.

At a Sodality Brotherhood dinner attended by 900 Catholic men from every parish in Maine, Monsignor Noland gave a pro-Arab speech after a trip to Israel. Sumner offered to explain the other side of the issue to any group that invited him. No one responded, even though he had known many of the people all his life.

"Irving Howe said, 'It is no longer necessary to be careful, to be defensive.' I don't believe it. I don't think any realistic person, I don't care who he is, thinks the world has turned a corner and that the problems of human unhappiness, dissatisfaction, which get translated into general condemnation like anti-Semitism or anti-black, or anti-anything else are going to disappear from this world."

Sumner serves on the national board of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee that lobbies the U.S. government on behalf of Israel. For many years he worked with the Maine Jewish Council covering Bangor, Lewiston, Auburn, and Portland. He estimates that only 10 to 15 percent of the people he works with are conscious of the need for continual vigilance against bigotry.

Sumner explains the importance of vigilance: "Being Jewish

is part of me. Those who feel that the Holocaust should not even be taught—I feel sorry for them. They don't understand how human beings work; they don't understand the importance of loyalties and traditions, of history. I believe in it completely. They live in a vacuum if they don't realize that I am just one atom in an on-going chain. Everything that went before me, and everything that surrounds me and everything that goes on is part of me, and my particular role is that I was born a Jew in America. I grew up in a society which was free! I am part of a people whose history gives me a great heritage. It's a responsibility, not just a blessing. Something kept these people alive."

True to his heritage, Sumner won election to the Portland City Council and the Board of Directors of the Portland Savings Bank. He raised funds for the Community Chest (now the United Fund), the YMCA, the Republican Party, and served as director of the Boy Scouts. In addition, he became chairman of the Maine Board of Bar Examiners.