

“WHY NOT A JEWISH GIRL?”:  
THE JEWISH EXPERIENCE AT PEMBROKE COLLEGE  
IN BROWN UNIVERSITY

BY KAREN M. LAMOREE

The February 21, 1896, issue of *The Organ of Congregation Sons of Israel and David* reported in the women's column that Brown University's newly-established Women's College was raising money for its endowment and urged the women of the congregation to contribute to the cause of educating the women of Rhode Island. The first Jewish woman to graduate from Brown was probably Clara Gomberg, class of 1897, who listed her address as 214 Benefit Street, Providence. The number of Jewish women increased slowly, but steadily over the years. By 1942, however, the dean of the college, by then known as Pembroke College in Brown University, noted an admissions policy, "...We accept all [Jewish women] who come to us from Providence, and enough others to make a proper proportion in each dormitory. We reject each year now 100 to 150 Jewish applicants, nearly all of whom are fully prepared." Clearly, between 1891 and 1942 attitudes and policies became less hospitable to the admission of Jewish women.<sup>1</sup>

These changes reflect not only the issue of anti-Semitism, but issues of class, race, ethnicity and gender, common to many institutions of higher education. The admission of women to Brown was engendered by nearly twenty years of community agitation by educator Sarah E. Doyle, the Rhode Island Women's Club, the *Providence Journal*, and parents of prospective students. Brown was established in 1764 by Baptists and although the president was required to be a Baptist minister until 1926, its charter stated that "into this liberal and catholic institution shall never be admitted any religious tests." The people of Rhode Island viewed the school, which had educated so many of their sons, with proprietary interest. The admission of women was promoted successfully, therefore, by appeals to state pride and Progressive sensibilities of justice.

Brown began admitting women in 1891 under its coordinate system with a mandate to provide a collegiate education for the women of Rhode Island, particularly those who were unable to afford to attend school away from

---

Karen M. Lamoree is the Christine Dunlap Farnham Archivist of Brown University.

home. Southeastern New England women responded immediately to this long-awaited opportunity, and the enrollment went from seven in the first year to approximately 200 by 1900. The coordinate system was designed to provide women with the advantages of both a university faculty and curriculum and those of a small women's college. The women were admitted and graduated under the same requirements, but lower level classes were usually segregated by gender. The women's classes took place in storefront buildings on Benefit Street until Pembroke Hall was built in 1897 by the women of the Rhode Island Society for the Collegiate Education of Women.<sup>2</sup>

This early period, under President E. Benjamin Andrews, a passionate and charismatic advocate of women's education, was one in which all students academically prepared to begin collegiate study were admitted. Under the coordinate system the college maintained a separate admissions office. The only information required of applicants was name, address, parents' name, and high school grades. While many of the applicants were known to Andrews or the college's dean, Louis Snow, interviews were not required.<sup>3</sup>

The vast majority of students came from the lower-middle and middle socio-economic classes and were local residents, living with family or friends. No dormitory accommodations were available until 1900 and non-commuting students lived in approved boarding houses. Many women were special students who arranged their classes around work schedules and were past the standard age for college enrollment. Efforts to regulate student behavior were stymied by these conditions and Dean Snow's dislike of reprimanding women. The only college-wide organization for the women was the Christian Association, then an auxiliary of the national, evangelical Young Women's Christian Association. The Christian Association, as at other colleges, sponsored the freshman reception.

The atmosphere of the first nine years of women's admissions at Brown was not one likely to inspire widespread discrimination in admissions or in college life. The Women's College operated under a mandate to educate all qualified Rhode Island women and numerical growth was encouraged. The women were similar in socio-economic background, in desire for intellectual challenge, motivations for social mobility and/or career advancement. In addition, because of their gender, these women among themselves did not challenge ideas about the purpose of education at elite colleges — preparation for leadership roles in society at large. The women were aware of the need to prove their capability to doubters. The general atmosphere encouraged the women to band together and to excel, to the extent that the women invariably outperformed the men scholastically. Women were equated with that group of people who, in the college man's eye, did not approach college from the "proper" perspective. Typically, the college man, interested in sports and fraternity life above all else, viewed

---

scholastic achievers as belonging to either immigrant groups, the lower classes, or the religious. The men<sup>4</sup> vilified the women as “greasy grinds,” although acceptance of individual women was the norm. Jewish women, therefore, if they conformed to the stereotype of the Jewish student — studious, serious of purpose, not wealthy, urban — would have conformed to the norm for almost all of the women at Brown University in the 1890s.



Banjo and Guitar Club, Pembroke College, 1896. Clara Gomberg is second from the right

The woman who was probably the first Jewish woman to graduate from Brown entered a self-selected community of overachievers, one conscious of group identity and the need for solidarity. Clara Angela Gomberg was a Russian immigrant, born in 1873 in Novogorodsk in southern Russia. She attended Classical High School in Providence and entered Brown in September 1893. Gomberg was a popular member of her class, although not a member of either of the two sororities. She was a member of the important Musical Clubs Board, which included the Glee Club and the Banjo and Guitar Club. Photographs of the quartet of musicians show a close-knit group of which Clara was clearly an integral part. The class notes indicate that she gave a toast at an 1896 class supper, and apparently her efforts were remembered favorably because she was asked to be

toastmistress at the class' 20th reunion. Her reminiscences reveal her closeness to President Andrews<sup>5</sup>, who seems to have set an overall tone of civility and acceptance for the Brown community.

To some extent the atmosphere of studiousness, casual social life and haphazard discipline would change when Andrews' successor, William H.P. Faunce, fired Snow because he felt it improper for a man to be dean of a women's college. Faunce hired Dr. Anne Emery, who was not only a classical scholar and creator of a separate "life together" for the women at the University of Wisconsin, but also was most definitely a gracious "lady." Faunce hired her, in part, to help him enforce middle class mores and codes of behavior. Lady-like behavior was prescribed and taught, particularly by Emery in her role as housemother of the new dormitory on Benefit Street and by the Student Government Association established under her aegis. The women were encouraged to form their own separate clubs, and sororities boomed. Unsurprisingly, the flourishing of exclusiveness resulted in bigotry. By 1903 the Catholic women, most of whom were Irish, had formed a separate sorority, Beta Delta Phi — undoubtedly a result of discrimination and not desire for their own club. The membership of Jewish women in sororities, however, varied, with some in Alpha Beta (the most prestigious) or Zeta Zeta Zeta, while others were not members of any Greek letter society.<sup>6</sup>

Emery and Faunce were successful in their design of the separate "life together" for the women at a time when coeducation was coming under attack, particularly by private universities. Emery resigned in 1905 and was replaced by Lida Shaw King, who was the daughter of a Brown trustee. Not only to our late twentieth-century eyes but to those of some of her students, King was inordinately concerned with propriety and, perhaps, issues of class. Under King, the first known overt discrimination occurred. Oral histories of Jewish alumnae who matriculated under Dean King do not mention any problems with her, but the same cannot be said for Black students.

It is important to compare the experiences of minority groups because their treatment is often related, particularly in relation to dormitory residence. Four daughters of the Minkins family, Blacks from Pawtucket, graduated from Brown, but not without incident. King forbade two of the sisters from attending their proms, but rescinded the prohibition after the news was reported in the papers. King's prejudices were made clear a year earlier when she had given failing marks to both Rosa and another student of poor circumstances for passing work.<sup>7</sup> It seems that in Dean King's mind being of a lower socio-economic class was as undesirable as being of a non-White race.

The Minkins, however, participated fully in the life of the college. They were commuting students and did not suffer from King's *de facto* policy

---

of forbidding Black students in the dormitories. A light-skinned Black woman from Washington, D.C., "passed" and lived in Miller Hall. When her race was discovered in 1916-17 she was expelled from the dormitory<sup>8</sup>. In June 1917 the Executive Committee of the college reported that:

It was the opinion of the committee that the admission of young women of the colored race to classes was not objectionable; that for the present their admission to college dormitories was undesirable, also that colored young women from a distance should not be encouraged to enter the college.<sup>9</sup>

This policy statement was a compromise between desires to limit Black enrollment and the college's mandate to educate Rhode Island women. King, nonetheless, continued to allow a steady increase in Jewish enrollment during her tenure, and in 1922 the Christian Association reported to Rabbi Samuel Gup of Providence that there were twenty Jewish women at Brown<sup>10</sup>, making an average of five per class or approximately 5% of the total. In contrast only 2.9% of Brown men were Jewish.<sup>11</sup>

Faunce replaced King in 1922 with Dr. Margaret Shove Morriss. Morriss is an enigmatic figure, and her personal feelings on race, class and ethnicity are unclear. Although she befriended individual Jewish women, the architecture for the Jewish quota system was created during her tenure. Morriss was dean of the college from 1922 to 1950. Under her guidance Pembroke went from a regional school to one of national reputation. As the college became increasingly popular among applicants, it could be more selective in its students. Under Morriss' tenure it became more difficult for women to obtain admission to Pembroke than it was for men to be admitted to Brown. Morriss accomplished Pembroke's transformation during a period when the existence of women's higher education was under attack.

The 1920s were a period in which issues of race, ethnicity, class, and gender intensified and became ever more interrelated. The presence of women on campus again became an issue of class. The specter of coeducation, according to some men, harmed Brown's prestige by making the university similar to state universities which were for the poor.<sup>12</sup> The 1920s, a period of rising bigotry and prejudice against the new immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, particularly Jews, culminated in restrictive immigration quotas. Jews became associated with the immigrant urban poor at many colleges, paralleling societal trends, and quotas reflective of academic nativism were enacted at Harvard and Yale, for example.<sup>13</sup> In this context of class, racial, and sexual prejudice, it became increasingly important for women at Pembroke to adhere to White, middle class, Protestant codes of behavior. The equation of Jews with immigrant behavior resulted in discrimination at other institutions of higher learning,<sup>14</sup> and it is possible that it also affected Pembroke.

---

Another factor in the Jewish "problem" was that the combination of Jewish cultural emphasis on education, desires for social mobility, and increased economic power created an influx of Jewish applicants to colleges at the same time that student body composition and attitudes were changing while Pembroke was becoming more selective in general. In a circular argument, as a college became more competitive it could be more selective, but one way to become more competitive was by being more selective. Increasing numbers of upper middle and upper class women were attending college, and decreasing emphasis on scholastic achievement on campuses nationwide rendered the motivation and intensity of Jewish students aberrant at some colleges. This was not necessarily true at Pembroke, however, where the women continued to outperform the men scholastically throughout the years.

Although admissions standards were tightened during the early to mid 1920s, Pembroke continued to admit the academically qualified without making distinctions for class, race, and religion with the exception of Black resident students. While most other colleges seem to have enacted Jewish quotas in the 1920s,<sup>15</sup> evidence of concentrated efforts to homogenize the racial and ethnic background of the student body do not appear in Pembroke application forms until the mid 1930s. Eva A. Mooar, a Radcliffe graduate, was hired as a dean of admissions in 1927 and it was under her administration that the admissions process changed,<sup>16</sup> although we do not know at whose instigation. The application form, the first screening device of all admissions offices, was not amended until 1936.<sup>17</sup> In that year the form began to ask prospects for the first time to self-report their race, and, significantly for Blacks and Jews, proposed living arrangements. Because the cards completed by the deans for each matriculated student seem to have been completed after a student was accepted, their usefulness lay in creating statistics on the class after composition. The cards asked the student for her citizenship and religion; for parents' birthplace, citizenship, occupation, education, and religion. In 1928 the cards were amended to include language spoken at home, and race. The information yielded by these cards was probably used in limitation decisions, but not for individual admissions. Interestingly, students had a great deal of trouble completing the questions about race and nationality, regardless of their background. For example a student who entered in 1944 reported her race as "Syrian," but the admissions office amended it to read "White."

The students' difficulty was exceeded only by Mooar's own confusion in establishing characteristics. Was Jewishness a race or a religion? The religion section's note varied between "Hebrew" and "Jewish," while the race section was most often completed as "White," although infrequently it could be "Hebrew" or "Jewish." It seems that Mooar did not consider Jewish women a separate race, as other deans did, such as Virginia

---

Gildersleeve of Barnard<sup>18</sup>, although Dean Morriss would refer to “that race” in her 1942 description of the admission of Jewish women.

An interview summary sheet in each student’s file included sections for interviewer’s evaluation of the applicant’s “personal appearance, family background, mental equipment, traits, financial, activities, interests, goal.” The acquisition of this subjective descriptive information occurred prior to student self-reporting or preparatory school correspondence in the admission process. The cards and interview sheet commentary usually related to appearance, family, and personality. This selection reflects racial, ethnic, and, most importantly, class biases, which could be directed at any applicant, but most often at those not conforming to White, Anglo-Saxon standards. Through the 1930s and early 1940s Mooar and/or her assistants commented most often on the characteristics of women she thought might be Jewish. Examples of Mooar’s attempts at characterizing students appear below<sup>19</sup> and illustrate the admissions office’s concerns about the composition of the student body. (Note that these comments were made by Mooar from 1929-1945).

Student A '33: “Can’t tell whether Jewish or not.”

Student B '36: “Father has wavy hair, few front teeth and a marked accent. Says they speak German at home. Germans or Jews? Are blonde, so probably the former.”

Student C '36: “Snobbish.”

Student D '37: “Pretty girl with a southern accent.”

Student E '43: “Likes people, inclined to race prejudice.”

Student F '44: “Not especially Jewish features.”

Student G '44: “Tall, dark, rather attractive recognizable Jewish features.”

Student H '45: “Small, refined features. Color just off-white. 32 years old. Mother, white — deceased. Father black. Sister married a white man.”

Student I '48: “Looks Italian.”

Student J '48: “Miss G. told her dorm situation not too good for large numbers (crowded) and told her we have quota.”

Student K '48: “Splendid all-around type, Exactly what we want.”

Student L '49: “Nice, ‘money’ people.”

Clearly, the Admissions Office was preoccupied with determination of race, class, and ethnicity.

It is not surprising that we begin to see reports about the admissions of Jewish women at Pembroke only after the form was amended in 1936. The class of 1940 was the first for which the deanery was able to establish characteristics of applicants with relative accuracy. It is in 1942 that the first discussion of the Jewish quota appears in the records of Pembroke's Advisory Committee. Dean Morriss reported to the alumnae, faculty, and trustees assembled:

We have accepted every student we can get, regardless of whether we can house or not, provided she is adequately prepared. We always take as many Jewish students as we can. The theory is that we accept all who come to us from Providence, and enough others to make a proper proportion in each dormitory. We reject each year now about 100 to 150 Jewish applicants, nearly all of whom are fully prepared. Pembroke College is popular with that race because we have such nice Jewish girls in our highly selective group, and because they are well received here among other students.<sup>20</sup>

Dean Morriss was a national leader in championing the war effort and the causes for which the United States was fighting, which makes her quota policies all the more ironic.

Also revealing is a 1943 report from Eva Mooar which groups Jewish women with financial aid applicants and public school students, i.e., with a "lower" class of students.<sup>21</sup> This categorization would appear again in the late 1960s over discussions about increasing the admissions of Black students to Pembroke and Brown.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the Executive Committee heard complaints about dormitory room shortage, and in 1940 the deanery reported that applications for admissions had doubled since 1930.<sup>22</sup> The 1943 report from the deanery alluded to increasing applications from Jews. In 1945 Mooar commented on startling increases in applications from all groups:

It should be remembered, however, that they [the statistics] are probably more padded this year than ever. (More applicants have applied to two or three colleges.) *This is not only true of the Jewish girls.* Word has gone around that the women's colleges are crowded and applicants are taking no chances. [emphasis added]<sup>23</sup>

It seems clear from these reports that Jewish women were applying to colleges in numbers admissions offices considered higher than in previous years. Goldstein and Goldscheider's 1967 study of Providence Jews revealed

---

that Jewish women over the age of twenty-five were more than three times as likely to have attended college as non-Jewish Providence women. They also reported little significant difference between the median years of schooling for Jewish women from 25-44 and 45-64 years of age, except for those who were third generation Americans (which were not part of the Pembroke cohort, in general).<sup>24</sup> We can assume, therefore, that the women entering Brown in the period under discussion, largely the 45-64 age group in 1967, were more likely to attend college than their non-Jewish contemporaries and were also more likely to enter college than those 65 and over. Like the Asians in the 1980s, Jews may have seemed to be flooding colleges because cultural emphases on education and an emerging cusp of economic stability made them more likely to desire higher education. This perception was heightened, it seems, by Jewish women's "padding" — applying to several colleges, or "safety schools" — a practice common today, but not 40-50 years ago. Colleges, then and now, were concerned with maintaining "proper proportions" for many reasons,<sup>25</sup> but unlike other schools Pembroke seems to have treated its Jewish students equally once an applicant passed through the admissions gauntlet.

The experience of Jewish women after matriculation as reported in oral history interviews was a positive one. Most do not mention any awareness of quotas or remember any subtle or overt discrimination. Although Judith Weiss Cohen '44 recalls "knowing" that she would not be eligible for a certain scholarship as another Jewish woman had recently been its recipient, she recalled that "They did give me a partial scholarship and raised it every year . . . There was never the slightest feeling of discrimination from the faculty, students, the administration . . . [Dean Morriss] was very good to me, she encouraged me a lot in my career goals . . . We had a wonderful relationship." Zelda Fisher Gourse '36 recalled that her heritage was an issue in an election, but that she won the election.<sup>26</sup> All of the alumnae underestimated the number of Jewish women per class, perhaps a result of feelings of isolation.<sup>27</sup> A typical comment was that of Celia Ernstof Adler '25, "I was the only Jewish girl in my class but I never felt anything anti-Semitic."<sup>28</sup> Much of the cohort were Russian immigrants, or as time went on, the children of Russian immigrants, while others were of Polish or German extraction. This distribution was typical of Providence's Jewish population, of which three-quarters of its naturalized citizens in 1906 were of Russian or Polish nationality.<sup>29\*</sup>

Sarah Mazick Saklad '28 typifies in some ways the Jewish student at Pembroke of the period prior to 1945. She was the daughter of Russian immigrants and attended Providence's Classical High School. She recalled in an oral history interview<sup>30</sup> that "Going to school . . . getting education

---

\**Editor's Note:* For an example of a Jewish member of an early class fitting into college life, see Appendix, p. 141, "Musical Memories" by Rose Presel.

was the [number] one priority." She entered Brown and wanted to graduate in three years and go on to medical school. Dean Morriss counseled her that haste could harm her grades but arranged for Sarah to enroll in a course for which the professor felt she was unprepared. Morriss encouraged Sarah to apply to Johns Hopkins Medical School and arranged for the monies to pay for the schooling. Dr. Saklad's interview made no mention of Jewishness, although she did comment on the widespread unpopularity of daily chapel, a dislike unrelated to students' religious background.

The Mazick Saklad story is important for several reasons: as an example of Morriss' behavior, the fact that it was known by many of the students, and an interesting comment by a member of the class of 1931 in her interview that she had felt Morriss was "sort of anti-Semitic" because of her "superior attitude and [in] some of the girls she befriended." But, she continued, her perception must have been faulty given Morriss' championing of the Jewish Mazick Saklad.<sup>31</sup>

The interview of Zelda Fisher Gourse '36<sup>32</sup> portrays another Jewish experience and one of structural assimilation — the acceptance of a minority group as a full part of the institution. Like Sarah Mazick Saklad, Zelda's parents were Russian immigrants, and her mother in particular, "always hungered for education and said her children were going to be college graduates." While Zelda's education itself was clearly of great importance, the highlight of her four years was her election to the position of Student Government Association president. She was the first Jewish woman to attain that position, and her background was a factor in the election. The 1934-1935 election, Zelda recalls, was different from previous elections. "It had been a closed circuit, but that year . . . it was open to the whole student body and you could campaign. I remember a Jewish girl in my class who came from Boise, Idaho, who went to my best friend and said I'd never make it. My best friend, who's not Jewish, didn't think I'd make it either." While the votes were counted, Zelda said, "I got into my car and drove to the Seekonk River and said to myself, 'Dear God, Why not a Jewish girl?' The girl running against me was not Jewish . . . that night my mother said I had a phone call, I'd been elected!" Only one incident related to her heritage marred her year in office and that prejudice came from outside the university.

Zelda, as Student Government president, read all of the Association's incoming mail. She opened the mailbox to find anti-Semitic mail from Communist organizations which read, "The Jews will take over the world. You as student government president should do all you can to thwart what they will do." The letters seemed to have been written by an uneducated person with not only a poor grasp of written English, but also a lack of imagination in assuming that the president could not be Jewish. Dean Morriss advised Zelda to ignore the mailings as the work of cranks, and

---

although Zelda felt they were serious, she realized there was little she could do about them.

Zelda also played a leading role in her class Sophomore Masque and was senior speaker on Ivy Day, the culminating ritual of four years at Pembroke. In an ironic twist, the first Jewish president of student government was also a member of the Christian Association board. Zelda characterized the Christian Association, however, as "not necessarily Christian, [but rather] it was a religious organization to further understanding." Although it would not be until the 1940s that the students would debate changing the name of Christian Association to one more all-encompassing, and a list of places of worship in the student handbook in the 1930s did not include synagogues, as early as 1933 the Freshmen Council advised its successors to change the traditional date of the freshman reception as it fell on a Jewish holiday.<sup>33</sup> If a woman whose Jewishness was an integral part of her character could be on the "Christian" Association board, it seems clear that the acceptance of which Morriss spoke did indeed exist on the women's campus. This level of tolerance and freedom from racism on the part of students was not true for the men if one only glances through some of their publications.<sup>34</sup>

The period of discrimination against the admission of resident Jewish women followed early efforts to ban Black women from the dormitories and occurred during a time in the 1930s when the world was becoming aware of German actions against the Jews. Clearly the Pembroke administration failed to see any connection between their policies and anti-Semitism. No reasons were ever given for these policies, but factors included anti-Semitism, issues of class, and the creation of a "proper" residential atmosphere which precluded Black women entirely and limited Jewish residency. These problems do not seem to have intruded, however, on the Jewish women's experiences after admission.

One of Morriss' accomplishments was changing Pembroke from a commuter school to a residential college. The student body, some colleges felt, should be a microcosm of the larger society, and Jews, Catholics, and Blacks should not be "overrepresented," i.e., colleges should maintain the homogeneous student bodies of the past. One way of ensuring adherence to the mandate to educate Rhode Island women and yet maintain "proper proportions" in residential life was to continue to admit commuting Jews and establish a quota in the dormitories, which would ensure "proper proportions." Because admission for resident Jews was more selective than for resident non-Jews, it was the marginal student who suffered. This selectivity was particularly problematic prior to the 1947 erection of the large dormitory Andrews Hall. Morriss had been stymied in her efforts to create a residential college by the lack of modern dormitory facilities, and many students were housed in haphazard fashion. The influx of students

during World War II under Morriss' accelerated curriculum exacerbated the housing problem, particularly since the Pembroke dormitories were used for Navy personnel. After 1947, however, adequate housing became available.

Concurrently with the erection of new dormitory facilities came a national trend against discrimination, particularly discrimination toward Jews in higher education. In Mooar's 1940-1949 Admissions "Policy" file are two items that demonstrate that she was aware of this trend and its possible consequences and one letter from an alumna with a different perspective.

The alumna, class of 1900, reported in 1944 to Mooar that an acquaintance had told her that a Pembroke student left the college because there were too many Jews there. The alumna went on, "I'm wondering if this statement is correct because as I read the news from Pembroke there doesn't seem to be a large number of Jewish women. I'm asking for information not because of any personal feelings on the matter, but simply to refute any misstatements about my Alma Mater which may be floating around." Mooar's reply carefully straddled the fence:

The number of Jewish girls at Pembroke College is not large. Generally we are very proud of our Jewish students for they are unusually fine girls, and their contribution to the life of the College is good. Occasionally, of course, we have a student who is disappointing, but that is true of the Christian girls also. The girl to whom you referred in your letter transferred to Pembroke College because she was dissatisfied with the college from which she came; she has now transferred from Pembroke because she was dissatisfied here. I think, perhaps, she is the kind of person who is going to find something wrong everywhere she goes.<sup>35</sup>

Mooar, like Barnard's Gildersleeve,<sup>36</sup> complimented the Jewish women while maintaining limitations on their numbers.

Discrimination would become less acceptable as World War II went on. In 1944, then Army Private Bernard Kusinitz '41 wrote from Fort Church in Rhode Island to his alma mater:

Gentlemen:

I am writing this letter in the spirit of the highest indignation and regret. I was about to send a donation to the Alumni Fund amounting to a substantial increase over previous donations. However, I was just informed that a very dear friend of mine was refused admission to Pembroke because of religious reasons. I need say very little more.

At a time like this when my comrades, and perhaps myself at any time, are being called upon to sacrifice their lives for democracy and freedom of religion, I feel very little desire to associate myself or contribute to any group connected in any way with any form of religious discrimination. It was especially shocking to hear that my beloved Alma Mater was such a group.

W. Chesley Worthington of Alumni Relations sent a letter meant to be soothing to Pvt. Kusnitz asserting that no discrimination could exist at Brown, given its charter. Worthington sent copies of both letters to Mooar.<sup>37</sup> Mooar's file also contains a series of clippings describing events in New York City in 1946. The clippings report on the findings by the Mayor's Committee on Unity, chaired by Brown trustee Charles Evans Hughes, Jr., class of 1909, of alleged discrimination against Jews, Blacks, and Catholics in New York's private non-sectarian institutions of higher learning. The mayor's office was reported as planning to use the tax code which forbade discrimination by tax-exempt schools to force compliance with non-discriminatory laws.<sup>38</sup>

The Pembroke deanery, from the evidence in these files, was made aware of possible financial repercussions from their quota system. These considerations, combined, perhaps, with available housing, probably engendered a more sensitive approach to Jewish admissions. The admission of and assignment of dormitory space to Blacks would await the 1950s-60s for amelioration.

The history of Jewish admissions to Pembroke College in Brown University, then, can be broken down into at least three distinct periods. The early period, 1891-1927, was characterized by open admissions to the academically qualified. The students were highly motivated, and the women's community was one in which scholastic achievement and seriousness of purpose were considered the goal and the norm, respectively. The Women's College was largely a commuter school of urban lower-middle and middle class students. Attempts were made to inculcate lady-like behavior in the students, especially in the backlash against the supposed connection between coeducation and lower-class colleges. Black women were forbidden from residing in the dormitories, although local women continued to be admitted.

Dean Morriss' entrance in 1922 marks the beginning of Pembroke's emergence as a college attracting a national student body. This coincided with increasing national emphasis on non-scholastic endeavors and behaviors, increasing admissions of women from upper classes, an influx of Jews into colleges and universities, and a trend toward prejudice. Into this context came reports of quotas at other Ivy League institutions, and it should not be surprising, therefore, to see Pembroke following the lead of its Ivy League peers as it attempted to become ever more competitive

on a national basis. It should be noted, however, that the quotas were only for residential students. Pembroke still operated under a mandate to educate the women of Rhode Island. Commuting Jewish women were accepted on the same basis as their non-Jewish peers. The best residential Jewish students were also judged on the same basis as the other applicants. It was the marginal residential Jewish woman who was less likely to be accepted than a marginal non-Jewish woman. After matriculation, Jewish women seem to have been fully accepted by the students and faculty, according to our oral histories. Jewish women were aware of other members of their cohort, but underestimated their number and may have felt isolated.

The era following World War II seems to show some evidence of a growing economic and social sensitivity to the potential problems of quotas. Further research will no doubt show that the quota system was dropped shortly thereafter. Morriss retired in 1950 and Mooar followed shortly thereafter.

Like the Asians of the 1980s, Jewish women of the 1920s — 1940s were a victim at many private colleges and universities of an influx of applications of the qualified. This increase challenged administrators' imperatives for the proper student body composition as defined by their assumptions about race, class, and ethnicity.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*The Organ of the Congregations Sons of Israel and David*, v1(5), February 21, 1896, p.1. Pembroke College Dean Margaret Shove Morriss in the Pembroke College Advisory Committee minutes, August 5, 1942, p.1.

<sup>2</sup>For information on the history of Pembroke College see, for example: Linda M. Eisenmann, *Women at Brown, 1891-1930, "Academically Identical, But Socially Quite Distinct,"* Harvard University, Graduate School of Education, Doctoral Dissertation, 1987, and Grace E. Hawk, *Pembroke College in Brown University 1891-1966*, (Providence, RI: Brown University, 1966).

<sup>3</sup>Pembroke College — Admissions Record Book.

<sup>4</sup>For information on relations between the sexes at Brown and Pembroke see, for example: Karen M. Lamoree, "An Historic Relationship: Pembroke Women and Brown Men," address given March 8, 1987, Brown University, and Mary Ann Miller, "The Pembroke Problem: Defining Women's Place in Brown University, 1891-1928," Brown University Honors Thesis, 1985, American Civilization Department.

<sup>5</sup>Clara Gomberg received her A.M. from the University of Nebraska in 1905 and became a teacher of modern languages, Latin, civics, and American history at Wheaton College and a variety of preparatory schools. She continued her interest in music, giving recitals of Russian songs to benefit World War I relief efforts. She died in Havana, Cuba, in 1940, and the Pembroke Alumnae Association noted (in what seems to be meant as a compliment) in her obituary, "She was born in Russia, of Russian parentage, but she was so vital and alive in her manner that she seemed typically American." Ironically, in later life, the woman who was probably the first Jewish woman to graduate from Brown turned to

---

I would like to thank Judith Weiss Cohen and Iona Harris for their help in research for this article.

Congregationalism. Clara Gomberg biographical file, Photograph file -- Pembroke College -- Musical Clubs Board, Pembroke College -- Class of 1897 -- Meeting minutes, October 1896, n.p., and Elisha Benjamin Andrews Papers, Reminiscences: Clara Gomberg.

<sup>6</sup>Louise Bauer and William T. Hastings, eds., *Historical Catalogue of Brown University, 1764-1934*, (Providence, RI: Brown University, 1934), *Liber Brunensis*, 1893-1908 and *Brun Mael*, 1909-1914.

<sup>7</sup>Oral history interview with Beatrice Carter Minkins and Rosa Jessup Minkins, March 10, 1982, with Katherine Hinds.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>Pembroke College -- Executive Committee -- Meeting Minutes, June 15, 1917.

<sup>10</sup>Lucille Rogers, general secretary, Christian Association, Women's College in Brown University, December 7, 1922, to Rabbi Samuel M. Gup of Providence in Topic file Pembroke College -- Students, Jewish. The figure given in 1922 should not be used as an indication for subsequent years as an unscientific survey of the class composition seems to indicate growth. Increases in this period would have been tied to the Rhode Island Jewish population, as the college remained largely local through the end of the 1920's.

<sup>11</sup>Marcia Graham Synott, *The Half-Opened Door: Discrimination and Admissions at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, 1900-1970*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), p. 16. An example of the connection between minority groups is Brown Dean Otis Randall's proposal to discuss limitation of Jewish and Black men at the 1920 meeting of the Association of Academic Officers of New England. In Synott, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup>See, for example: Lamoree, Miller, the *Brown Daily Herald* -- Managing Board's *Scrapbook* from 1928, various articles in the *Brown Daily Herald* and the *Brown Jug* through the 1920s.

<sup>13</sup>See, for example: Dan A. Oren, *Joining the Club: Jews and Yale, 1900-1970*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1985), pp. 38ff. and Synott, especially pp. xvii and 17.

<sup>14</sup>Barnard's Dean Virginia Gildersleeve, for example, wrote, "Many of our Jewish students have been charming and creative human beings...on the other hand...the intense ambition of the Jews for education has brought to college girls from a lower social level than that of most of the non-Jewish students." In Lynn D. Gordon, "Annie Nathan Meyer and Barnard College: Mission and Identity in Women's Higher Education, 1889-1950," *History of Education Quarterly*, v26 (4), Winter 1986, p.516.

<sup>15</sup>Synott, p. 17.

<sup>16</sup>The information following in the text was retrieved from the Pembroke deanery's individual student files. Concerns for privacy do not allow us to identify the individual file from which a quotation is drawn.

<sup>17</sup>Radcliffe seems to have instituted a limitations program around 1936 also. The percentage of Jewish freshmen there increased from 17.7% in 1934-35 to a high of 24.8% in 1936-37 to a new low of 16.5% in 1937-38. In Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1985), p.144. It seems probable that the number of Jewish women would have continued to increase if a limitations program was not at work.

<sup>18</sup>Gordon, p. 518.

<sup>19</sup>No identification of identity is possible for reasons of privacy, but the quotations come from the Pembroke deanery's individual student files.

- <sup>20</sup>Morriss in the Pembroke College Advisory Committee meeting minutes, August 4, 1942, p.1.
- <sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, April 6, 1943, p.1.
- <sup>22</sup>Pembroke College – Executive Committee meeting minutes, October 29, 1940.
- <sup>23</sup>Morriss in Pembroke College Advisory Committee meeting minutes, April 3, 1945, p.2.
- <sup>24</sup>Sidney Goldstein and Calvin Goldscheider, *Jewish Americans: Three Generations in a Jewish Community*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), pp.65-71.
- <sup>25</sup>"Geographic Diversity" was a byword for discriminatory admissions at colleges. Gildersleeve at Barnard, for example, admitted to quotas which limited the number of local women, especially Jews, but reminded her audience of the need for maintaining geographic diversity. In Gordon, p.516. This policy of discrimination against local students can be considered an abrogation, in part, of some of the reasoning for the college's establishment.
- <sup>26</sup>Oral histories of Jewish women include those of Gertrude Eisenberg Fageron by Thomas C. Downs, May 2, 1982; H. Zelda Fisher Gourse by Sasha Oster, May 13, 1988; Dorothy Foster Mosher Brown and Rose Presel by Barbara Raab, 1981; Sarah Mazick Saklad by Sandra Livingston, April 12, 1982; Rose Miller Roitman by Rebecca G. Rothman, 1982; and Judith Weiss Cohen by Carol Fenimore, February 25, 1986.
- <sup>27</sup>Bessie Bloom Wessel '11 reported that this isolation at Connecticut colleges was a result, in part, of the Jewish community's failure to welcome students to temples in the same way the Christian churches did. In Bessie Bloom Wessel, "The Jewish Girl at College," *The Jewish Woman*, v4(2), April 1924, p.4. Wessel's son, Dr. Morris A. Wessel, in a letter to Mildred Sidney Marks (Pembroke '38), Dec. 13, 1988, wrote about his mother "One of the interesting memories I have of her Pembroke experience was how much she looked forward to going to reunions. She would fall into the arms of her classmates... I always thought this to be a rather remarkable event, since as she told it she was one of the first Jewish girls to go to Pembroke, certainly one of the first poor Jewish girls who walked from Lippitt Street, and arrived cold and frozen, but evidently accepted with great warmth by her classmates."
- <sup>28</sup>Celia Ernstof Adler, Interview by Judith Weiss Cohen, September 24, 1988.
- <sup>29</sup>Information on the students' backgrounds comes from the oral history interviews and the Pembroke deanery's individual student files. Information on Providence's Jewish community is available from, for example, Goldstein and Goldscheider, p. 26, and Geraldine S. Foster, *The Jews in Rhode Island: A Brief History*, (Rhode Island Ethnic Heritage Commission and Rhode Island Publications Society, 1985).
- <sup>30</sup>Mazick Saklad interview.
- <sup>31</sup>Miller Roitman interview.
- <sup>32</sup>Fisher Gourse interview.
- <sup>33</sup>Pembroke College – Student handbooks, 1933, 1935 and Pembroke College – Freshman Council notebook, 1933.
- <sup>34</sup>See, for example, the *Brown Jug*.
- <sup>35</sup>Margaret N. Goodwin, August 15, 1944, to Pembroke College Registrar. Eva A. Mooar, associate dean and director of admission at Pembroke College to Margaret N. Goodwin, August 21, 1944, in Pembroke College – Admissions Office – Policies, 1940-1949 file. Note that Mooar does not mention scholastic achievements, but rather the Jewish students'

"contribution to the life of the college." This is an example of the confusion over the purposes of women's education and the increasing importance of being an "all-around girl," rather than an intellectual or "grind." (See, for example: Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), pp.279ff. and Solomon, pp.157ff). Significantly, Jewish women should have excelled given the selectivity with which they were chosen. The deanery missed opportunities to enhance the college's reputation through the number of its alumnae pursuing graduate study, as Jewish women seem to be more likely to do so (Goldstein and Goldscheider, p.65).

<sup>36</sup>Gildersleeve, who administered a system to limit local women, e.g., Jewish women, in the name of geographic diversity, commented on the Jewish women at Barnard, "The Jews were of course an important element in the make-up of our student body...the various religions got along well together...and the Jews generally mingled with the others in the student body on friendly terms and were active in student affairs." In Virginia Crocheron Gildersleeve. *Many a Good Crusade*, (New York: Macmillan, 1954), p.73. Significantly, Barnard's limitations were supported by Barnard founder Annie Nathan Meyer, a Sephardic Jew from New York, partly for reasons of class. In Gordon, pp. 516, 517.

<sup>37</sup>Bernard Kusnitz to Brown University, May 19, 1944. W. Chesley Worthmington, director of alumni relations, to Kusnitz, May 22, 1944. In Pembroke College -- Admissions Office -- Policies 1940-1949, file.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.* These clippings include: Benjamin Fine, "Bias in Colleges against City Youth Charged in Report," *The New York Times*, January 23, 1946; Benjamin Fine, "Curb Is Demanded on Bias in Colleges," *The New York Times*, January 24, 1946; and "Tax-Free Colleges Face City Scrutiny," *The New York Times*, January 31, 1946.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

##### Primary Sources:

(All of these sources are available from the Christine Dunlap Farnham Archives and the University Archives of Brown University):

Andrews, Elisha Benjamin Papers, Reminiscences: Clara Gomberg.

Bauer, Louise and William T. Hastings, eds., *The Historical Catalogue of Brown University 1764-1934*, (Providence, Rhode Island: Brown University, 1934).

*Brown Daily Herald* -- Managing Board, *Scrapbook*, 1928.

*Brown Jug*.

*Brun Mael*, 1909-1914 [yearbook of Pembroke College in Brown University].

Eisenberg Fagerson, Gertrude, Oral history interview with. May 2, 1982, by Thomas C. Downs.

Ernstof Adler, Celia, Interview with. September 24, 1988, by Judith Weiss Cohen.

Fisher Gourse, H. Zelda, Oral history interview with. May 13, 1988, by Sasha Oster.

Foster Mosher Brown, Dorothy and Rose Presel, Oral history interview with. 1981 by Barbara Raab.

Gomberg, Clara Angela. Biographical file.

*Liber Brunensis*, 1893-1908 [yearbook of Brown University].

Mazick Saklad, Sarah, Oral history interview with. April 12, 1982, by Sandra Livingston.

*"Why Not a Jewish Girl": The Jewish Experience at  
Pembroke College in Brown University*

139

- Miller Roitman, Rose Beatrice, Oral history interview with. 1982 by Rebecca G. Rothman.
- Minkins, Beatrice Carter, and Rosa Jessup Minkins, Oral history interview with. March 10, 1982, with Katherine Hinds.
- The Organ of the Congregation Sons of Israel and David*, v(5), February 21, 1896.
- Pembroke College -- Admissions Office -- Policies, 1940-1949, file.
- Pembroke College -- Admissions Office -- Record Book.
- Pembroke College -- Advisory Committee -- Minutes.
- Pembroke College -- Class of 1897 -- Meeting Minutes.
- Pembroke College -- Dean -- Individual student files, c1925-1950.
- Pembroke College -- Executive Committee -- Minutes.
- Pembroke College -- Freshman Council notebook.
- Pembroke College -- Student handbooks.
- Photograph files -- Pembroke College -- Musical Clubs Board.
- Presel, Rose, Interview with. September 1988 by Judith Weiss Cohen.
- Weiss Cohen, Judith, Oral history interview with. February 25, 1986 by Carol Fenimore.
- Secondary Sources:
- Eisenmann, Linda M., *Women at Brown, 1891-1930: "Academically Identical, But Socially Quite Distinct"*, Harvard University, Graduate School of Education, Doctoral Dissertation, 1987.
- Foster, Geraldine S., *The Jews in Rhode Island: A Brief History*, (Rhode Island Ethnic Heritage Pamphlet Series, Providence, RI: Rhode Island Heritage Commission and Rhode Island Publications Society, 1985).
- Gildersleeve, Virginia Crocheron, *Many a Good Crusade*, (New York: Macmillan, 1954).
- Goldstein, Sidney and Calvin Goldscheider, *Jewish Americans: Three Generations in a Jewish Community*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968).
- Gordon, Lynn D., "Annie Nathan Meyer and Barnard College: Mission and Identity in Women's Higher Education 1889-1950," *History of Education Quarterly*, v26(4), Winter 1986, pp. 503-522.
- Hawk, Grace E., *Pembroke College in Brown University, 1891-1966*, (Providence, RI: Brown University, 1966).
- Horowitz, Helen Lefkowitz, *Alma Mater*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984).
- Lamoree, Karen M., "An Historic Relationship: Pembroke Women and Brown Men." Address given March 8, 1987, Brown University.
- Miller, Mary Ann, "The Pembroke Problem: Defining Women's Place in Brown University 1891-1928," Brown University Honors Thesis, 1985, American Civilization Department.
- Oren, Dan A., *Joining the Club: A History of Jews and Yale*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).
- Solomon, Barbara Miller, *In the Company of Educated Women*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1985).
-

Synott, Marcia Graham, *The Half-Opened Door: Discrimination and Admissions at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, 1900-1970*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979).

Wessel, Bessie Bloom, "The Jewish Girl at College," *The Jewish Woman*, v4(2), April 1924, pp.3-4, 33.

## APPENDIX I

### LIST OF JEWISH STUDENTS AT PEMBROKE COLLEGE IN BROWN UNIVERSITY

Classes of 1897 to 1926

This incomplete list was compiled from a 1922 list of the Christian Association, from the *Historical Catalogue of Brown University, 1764-1934*, and from interviews by Judith Weiss Cohen. It may inadvertently include non-Jews and exclude some Jews.

Clara Gomberg '97	Nettie Wilsker Heinum '20
Beulah Hahn Nordlinger '00	Sarah Crovitz '21
Gertrude Weise Lederer Wolf '02	Gertrude Eisenberg Fagerson '21
Anna Leah Fox Goldberg '04	Molly N. Rubenstein Genensky '21
Eliza E. Bruce Fishel '04 special student	Rose M. Finkelstein '22
Josephine Bauer Fishel '04 special student	Celia Kaufman '22
Rose B. Bachrach Pollock '06	Sarah Cooperstein '23
Ida F. Herman '06	Ruth M. Gup '23
Louise Schutz Boas '07	June D. Heller Brecht '23
Sarah Shapiro Grover '07	Sarah Jacobson '23
Katherine C. Goldonofsky Rosenblatt '08 special student	Dessie Kushelevitch Cohen '23
Irma Pearl Scharzkopf Dreyfuss '09	Eva Rabinovitch '23
Anna Irene Finklestein '09 special student	Bella Rubenstein '23
Bessie Bloom Wessel '11	Ida Rubenstein '23
Hattie Greenblatt ;11	Grace D. Shein '23
Sarah D. Burge Reitman '12	Rose Marks Brown '24
Florence E. Yahraus Vose '12	Goldie Corash Michaelson '24
Edna Solinger Lyons '15	Regina Greifinger Goldstein '24
Freda S. Rose Eusebdiff '15	Ethel E. Lippman Schreiber '24
Blanche A. Schiller Hook '15	Fannie Rapfogel Eiseman '24
Helen L. Cohen Hirshland '17	Anna J. Borden '25
Lena R. Lopiansky '17	Celia Ernstof Adler '25
Ruth Rosenbaum '17	Lillian Levin Sussler '25
Esther Barnet '18	Elizabeth Rubin '25
Jennie Cooperstein Caust '18	Marian Brooks Strauss '26
Rose Presel '18	Rebecca P. Coonen Grayson '26
Asya Katz '19	Ethel M. Fish '26
Sophie Mogilevkin Robinson '19	Yvette W. Frank Markensohn '26
Nettie Goldberg '20	Grace Kaufman '26
Charlotte A. Mikalson Gast '20	Lois Klein '26
Clara G. Riseroft (or Reiseroff) '20	Mildred Smith '26
Rosa L. Schneider Wessel '20	Pearl P. Weinberg '26
Minna G. Schreiber London '20	Ruth L. Woolf Adelson '26

## APPENDIX II

---

### MUSICAL MEMORIES

BY ROSE PRESEL

My first musical memory goes back to my first piano lesson when I was six years old. My parents, Joseph and Esther Presel, were very fond of music and planned to have their four children, Samuel, Rose, Charlotte and Howard, play musical instruments. My first piano teacher, with a diploma from the Leipzig (Germany) Conservatory, was Percy F. Middleton, who was considered the best teacher in Rhode Island. My sister and I took three lessons a week and never missed a day of practicing the piano. What a thrill it was to receive the first copy of sheet music with a picture on the cover and title, after using exercise books for the first year!

As we progressed, we began to play Mozart and Beethoven sonatas and compositions of other famous composers such as Schubert and Schumann. We then began to play works that were composed for two pianos, and we devoted our later concert career to performing entire programs of two-piano music. We owned possibly the largest collection of music for two pianos, including transcriptions of great works made by my sister, Charlotte.

Our first public recital was performed when I was ten years old and my sister was eight. It was held at the Froebel Hall\* in Providence. Each of us played solo groups, and we played one group of two-piano music. I played the first piano concerto of Mendelssohn with my teacher at the second piano. The *Providence Journal* reported: "An audience numbering about 200 was present in Froebel Hall, corner of Brown and Angell Streets, last night to enjoy the presentation of Rose and Sadie\*\* Presel...in a programme which would be considered difficult by many artists....Miss Rose responded to long applause by rendering a waltz from Moszkowski and Miss Sadie's encore was an Etude by Wollenhopt."<sup>1</sup>

We began to become well-known and were invited to play for local music clubs and private affairs. As teenagers we were asked to join the Chopin

---

\*Now the Samuel and Rieka Rapaport Hillel House.

\*\*My sister's name was Sadie Lotte, but when we began performing professionally, our manager suggested she use the name *Charlotte*.

Club, and we performed for the Club very often during the following years. I became President of the Club in 1979, the year of celebration of the 100th anniversary of its founding.

We often played for organizations which planned to raise funds for charitable purposes. Before Alumnae Hall was built on the Pembroke College campus, we were asked to perform a two-piano concert to raise funds for the building. The concert took place on Saturday evening, May 6, 1922, in Pembroke Hall on the top floor, then the College Chapel, now the Library.

The teacher who prepared us for our later concert career was Felix Fox, concert pianist, graduate of the Paris Conservatory and Director of the Fox-Buonamici School of Music in Boston. He frequently performed as soloist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. For many years, under his direction, we performed solo recitals and two-piano concerts at Steinert Hall, the main concert hall in Boston at that time.

Charlotte and I made our New York debut in a concert of works for two pianos in Aeolian Hall and received excellent reviews from New York music critics. Many of our musical friends from Rhode Island attended the concert. After the program a member of the audience came to the Green Room to congratulate us. He was an elderly, white-haired man who told us that the last time he had heard the Liszt Concerto Pathetique, which we played, was in Weimar, Germany, when Liszt and his pupil performed it. This man was the composer John Orth, who was one of Liszt's last pupils.

It is interesting to note that Paul Whiteman and his orchestra gave a concert at Aeolian Hall on the same day on which we performed. Our concert was in the afternoon and Whiteman's in the evening.

We procured the services of a manager, who arranged bookings for us in New York, Boston and other New England cities. Brochures advertising our recitals quoted Philip Hale, music critic of the *Boston Herald*, "Playing without notes there was complete understanding between the two pianistes (sic) with a resulting excellence in unity and precision,"<sup>2</sup> and James Gibbons Huneker of *The New York Times*, "The Misses Presselle\* are pretty, unaffected, and play effectively...their accuracy, speed, synchronization, and technical fluency are admirable."<sup>3</sup> Among the clippings I have saved is one from the *Jewish Review* "An American Paper for American Jews" saying "The harmony and perfect synchronization and blending...have won for them the praise of the music critics."<sup>4</sup>

We frequently performed in New York for the American Music Optimists, whose president was Mana Zucca, the composer. This organization

---

\*The sisters were known as Presselle for their professional appearances.

sponsored the performances of American music. While we performed for them, we had the opportunity of meeting many musical artists such as Metropolitan Opera singers and members of New York orchestras and ballet groups.

The newspaper *New York Mail* sponsored free concerts for the public, and we were engaged several times to play in the auditoriums of the city's large high schools. We often played radio concerts sponsored by the *Providence Journal* to celebrate American Music Week, and we gave the Chopin Club's President's Day Concert twice.

During the Depression our manager reported to us that concert performances were not being paid the usual fee but performers could be offered payment for expenses only. This fact did not trouble us because we were not fond of traveling and found often that it was impossible to obtain two good pianos for performances. Therefore, we then decided to give up our concert tours and to confine our performances to places nearer home.

As a student at Pembroke College, I continued my musical activities with my sister, and I wrote the music for several songs for my class. Charlotte



Charlotte and Rose Presel

Although they played two pianos, the photograph was altered for the publicity brochure to look as if they were at one large piano.



Charlotte and Rose Presel

composed the music for a Greek classical Sophomore Masque and the music for an operetta called "The Black Diamond," which was performed at Brown University. I received Bachelor's and Master's degrees from Brown University in modern foreign languages.

After graduation from college, I was asked to replace temporarily the teacher of French and German at Hope High School, who had resigned. Although I had never planned to enter the teaching profession, I found that I liked teaching young people, and I remained at Hope for many, many years, becoming head of the Foreign Language Department for twenty years until my retirement.

People often asked how I could travel extensively to give concerts while I was a high school teacher. I remember taking the 3 p.m. train to New York, changing my teaching clothes for an evening gown, playing a concert, taking the midnight train back to Providence, and getting up early the next morning to go to my classes at Hope.

During my teaching career I was active in many organizations such as the Alliance Francaise, the Germanic Society, the Rhode Island Modern Language Association and the New England Modern Language Association, of which I am a past president. One of the programs sponsored by the

---

Department of Foreign Languages at Brown and the Modern Language Association was a concert for two pianos in which my sister and I performed a program of compositions by composers of different countries to illustrate national styles of music in relation to their languages. This event was broadcast over Station WPRO, where my sister was a member of the staff. For many years she broadcast programs, among them "Cousin Charlotte's Music Club," which drew over a hundred members. Under the name of June Abbott, she conducted a popular women's radio program, and as a concert pianist she performed programs of classical music daily.

During my years of teaching I introduced my students to the culture, especially music and literature, of the countries whose languages they were studying. I had a large collection of records which I used frequently in my classes. Even today when I meet former students at concerts or at Temple Beth-El, they will remember a favorite song or recite a famous poem or a few lines of a play which they had read in class. I look back fondly at the many years I spent teaching young people, and I hope I have had a small part in the development of their later lives.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Providence Journal*, March 11, 1911

<sup>2</sup>Brochure, "Rose and Charlotte Presselle Two-Piano Costume Recitals," Ernest Briggs, Inc., 1400 Broadway, New York

<sup>3</sup>Brochure, "Presselle Sisters Score Great Success." Music League of America, Inc., One West Thirty-fourth Street, New York

<sup>4</sup>*Jewish Review* "An American Paper for American Jews", October 12, 1923

---

### JEWS IN RHODE ISLAND LABOR: AN INTRODUCTORY INVESTIGATION

BY PAUL M. BUHLE, PH.D.

I call this an introductory investigation because the study of Rhode Island labor is not even as advanced as the study of Rhode Island Jewry, and we must therefore attempt to put in place some elementary building blocks before we can begin to structure our analysis of this important but overlooked subject.

Jewish immigrants to the United States and their children, from the 1890s to the 1940s, did immense tasks in Jewish life of the US, Europe and Middle East, not forgetting South America, and with very few resources, created a coherent culture out of fragments available to them. Within that culture they created a literature, a theatre, and a folks arts movement second to none in any language, in only two generations. They created several of the most democratic unions in the United States, and those unions, especially but not only the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, had an impact upon all working Americans, lifting standards of living, standards of production, and quality of life. They provided decisive support for not only their own movement, Zionism, but also for the anarchist movement, the socialist movement, the communist movement, the anti-fascist movement, the civil rights movement, and more to the center of the spectrum, the New Deal.

In every case, their commitment was disproportionate to their numbers, a fact which does not mean that all Jews were idealists. Of course they were not. But they were, in larger percentages than Americans of any other kind, touched by the hope for a renewal of the society and of the world. They also recognized, correctly, that the fate of world Jewry *demanded* worldwide renewal — economic and social cooperation instead of competition, people's needs before profits — and not just Jewish renewal. Anything less imperiled Jewish survival.

Therefore, I address Jewish labor history in Rhode Island not as a study

---

This paper is a revision of a talk given at the Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association's mid-winter meeting, December, 1987.

Dr. Paul Buhle teaches U. S. History at the Rhode Island School of Design and is editor and author of many books.

*Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes*, Vol. 10, No. 2, November, 1988

---

of a finite number of workers in a finite series of institutions, but rather as a part of a larger Jewish tendency, one material side to a Jewish mood which might have been stronger elsewhere — and was — but which existed here, too.

Rhode Island always lacked the critical number of Jewish industrial workers whose presence set the tone for progressive labor in Greater New York and had a strong influence in Philadelphia, Chicago, Rochester, Boston, and even New Haven.

Therefore, lower and middle class Jews of Rhode Island, like those of many other places, intersected primarily as supporters of Jewish movements elsewhere — readers, members, financial contributors — and of labor and social movements not predominantly Jewish in character, both within and outside Rhode Island.

This does not mean that Rhode Island Jews were merely spectators of other movements. Smallish branches counted in Jewish movements, especially in times of need or disorientation. Readers counted, financial contributors counted a great deal. To give an example of national importance, the Poale Zionist Alter Boyman initiated in Providence the Third Seder, a major method of the Poale Zionists nationally to fund the colonization of Palestine. No city the size of Providence had so large and active a Poale Zionist movement generally. To give another kind of example: Rhode Island's Lawrence Spitz became the dynamo of textile and later steel workers, and of the major social reform movements in health, welfare and housing desegregation movements of the 1950s. And the story does not end here.

In the last ten years, outstanding trade union leaders in more traditional and white-collar sectors have been Jews. By no accident: they are, I would almost say, seeing labor through a difficult time with their perseverance and dedication. This is an old story for Jewish idealism. Also, unionism has finally come to professions and occupations where Jews have existed in considerable numbers for a long time — not only to teaching but social service work, state employees and health care.

To try to understand all this, I shall be working in two directions simultaneously: by deductive reasoning, from the general national and international movements to their local affiliates; and by inductive reasoning, from what I've been able to glean from interviews and from materials in the Rhode Island Historical Society and the Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association.

Let me begin with the first notice that Rhode Island officially makes of its Jews, an article in *The Providence Journal* of August, 1888, called "The Jew Quarter" and subtitled, "Filth and Squalor Dangerous to Health." Five years later the *Journal* described a Jewish settlement on Charles Street

---

as “a scene . . . that is rarely seen by civilized eyes,” and three years still later, under the title, “A Tour of the Shawmut Street Colony — Filthy Surroundings Threaten the Health of the City.”<sup>1</sup>

What do these images tell us about Rhode Island Jewry? Less, probably, than they tell us about the way Jews were looked upon by the Yankee population which owned the *Journal* and shared its view of the world. They were not blatant anti-Semites, although generations would pass before Jews would win entry into many avenues of Rhode Island life, from jobs to certain public beaches and exclusive clubs. Rather, they placed Jews in the general framework of new immigrants, which is to say, poor and dirty, brought to do the jobs that Americans did not want to do. Jews were useful, as they quickly proved themselves. But they were not entirely to be trusted. The 1896 *Journal* article suggests that other groups kept their diseases to themselves, but that Jewish peddlers working around the city would be likely to infect the general population.

That is a wonderful, terrible metaphor, just exactly what Jews have *always* been accused of doing, and what idealists — from the famous traveling shoemakers in the French Revolution to the roving pickets of the 1930s American labor movement — have always done. They move around. They spread not diseases but cures.

The *Journal* noted, elsewhere in these same years, that the Jews were a very respectable population in general. They had already in the North End of the 1890s begun that historic population-dance with Rhode Island Blacks, sharing territory, moving to Constitution Hill while Blacks moved out, as Blacks among others would later replace Jews in the South End, and as Blacks and Jews continue to exchange places off North Main today. In the *Journal's* constant effort to discover and analyze superiorities among the ethnic and racial groups — implying always their own ultimate superiority — the Jews came out relatively high. But not without a taint.

The idea of a taint increased, somewhat, with the first descriptions of Jewish unionism and of union meetings at the old Liederkrantz Hall on North Main Street. Not only did Jewish tailors organize a union; they entered, during the worst depression in the nation's history up to that point, into an audacious seven-week strike against the merchant tailors. And the police charged that three of them punched scabbing non-strikers. Only a few months or years in the country, the *Journal* seemed to imply, and Jews had already begun to act like the Irish, or worse, like the socialists, never very numerous in Rhode Island but always feared.<sup>2</sup>

About the same time, Providence Jews became active as socialists, supporting the desperate strikes of Olneyville textile workers against starvation wage-reductions in the early 1890s and helping in the attempt to form a new national industrial union of textile workers, headquartered

---

in Providence, in 1896. These struggles also failed. But along with German-American brewery workers, the Karl Marx circle of Italian artisans, the Irish-American following of textile union leader James P. Reid and a scattering of Yankee radicals, Jewish tailors and other Jews became the solid center of the Rhode Island Socialist Party. As socialists, they would play an important role in Rhode Island labor for two generations.<sup>3</sup>

The *Journal* took no apparent notice — none that I could find — of the organization of the Workmen's Circle around the turn of the century. Edwin Brown's essay\* provides many more details. As Brown emphasizes, the Workmen's Circle would be, for many Jews, the key mechanism by which they would gain an education in labor ideas and through which they would support the labor movement.

From the experience of the early *Landsmanshaften*, the organizations of immigrants from various areas, and from the German-American socialist *Sterbe and Krankenvereine*, death and sickness benefit societies, the Workmen's Circle drew its methods and goals during the 1890s. To workers, but through them also to the community at large, the Arbeiter Ring or Workmen's Circle offered insurance protection generations before Social Security existed. It was not much protection, but it was enough to keep a workman who was sick a short time from becoming destitute or to keep a widow from losing everything she had because of funeral expenses.

But even more than that. The Workmen's Circle from its earliest organizing was also a social and educational center, and sometimes an entertainment center too, for the whole Jewish community. It kept a library in Yiddish and English, it brought in Yiddish lecturers from New York or Boston when possible, it held weekly discussion meetings on world topics, and it generally encouraged self-education and social enlightenment.

I do not yet have the necessary evidence to make a crucial case for Providence's importance in this regard. But we know that the Workmen's Circle failed in New York City in its initial period of the 1890s because of the terrible depression but also because it competed with so many other organizations and clubs. It succeeded and re-established itself, on a permanent basis, outside New York, in cities like Providence, where the competition was much less severe and the Workmen's Circle became the unquestioned center of Jewish working class life.<sup>4</sup>

But note that this is not to discount the role of other types of immigrant Jewish mutual benefit organizations in Providence working class life. The hevrahs (groups of men who came together to pray and study Torah in the old country) had a major role also, but not the same as the Workmen's Circle. Soon I will come to the Poale or Labor Zionists and the Verband, which operated on a path somewhere between Jewish self-interest and the

---

\*"Workmen's Circles and Jewish Labor Unions," p. 157.

broader ideals of the socialist movement. Their importance grows as the role of progressive Jewish nationalism becomes clearer in the wake of the First World War.

One particular contribution of the Workmen's Circle became very important in the next opportunity and crisis facing Rhode Island labor. In most of Rhode Island by 1905 or thereabouts, hardly any unionism had been securely established, except a narrow craft unionism in a few scattered trades, such as the building trades. The recession beginning in 1907 destroyed most of the unions which remained, as employers drove down wages and workers could not afford to pay dues. But beginning in 1909, and accelerating in 1911-12, a new series of strikes by new immigrants, unskilled workers, shook the country, including Rhode Island.

The famous strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1912, set off great excitement in textile mills across our state shortly after. A parade of Providence socialists marched from Smith Hill to Federal Hill in support of the Lawrence strike leaders, who had been arrested on trumped up charges. They were joined by a contingent from Olneyville, where an Irish-American Socialist had been elected in 1911 to the state legislature. From textiles, the center shifted to the garment industries. The International Ladies Garment Workers Union had just won a great strike for recognition in New York, and Boston tailors had struck in sympathy with local garment workers. In Providence, an organizing drive led by the Industrial Workers of the World sought a comprehensive contract with the department stores and finishing shops, employing more than a thousand. Mass meetings were held in Yiddish, English, and Italian.<sup>5</sup>

At this moment, Rhode Island Jews might have played an important national role in what was widely considered one of the most oppressive American sites of industrial labor. A breakthrough would have brought the kind of social improvement delayed until the 1930s and the Congress of Industrial Organizations. But police, employers and conservative union leaders joined hands to ban demonstrations and forbid use of public halls. The local labor newspaper noted, "Never before in the history of the labor movement in this city has any organization of working men and women been more bitterly assailed."<sup>6</sup> The tailors were defeated.

There is a sequel to this defeat. During World War I, the labor shortage once again made great strikes possible, not only in textiles but also in the most oppressive and dangerous of industrial trades, jewelry. Here, the mostly Jewish-Italian union, the International Jewelry Workers Union, came into a virtually open-shop environment and began to bring decent conditions into shops where \$1.50 per day was an average wage, and child labor, unsanitary and extremely dangerous working conditions prevailed.

Here, perhaps for the first time, Jews operated in the Rhode Island labor

---

movement as a minority of a workforce made up largely of new Italian immigrants, but represented a majority of the leadership — and also, it has to be said, a certain number of the employers who came to Providence to escape unionization in New York.

In a short time, 3 to 4,000 workers joined the union in Providence and the Attleboros; the most important jewelry workers' strike in New England history began at Ostby & Barton's. Again, history might have been made, all the more so because Providence would become the costume jewelry capital of America. But again, and for the last time in Rhode Island jewelry until the 1940s, jewelry workers had gone all out without improvement of conditions or pay. Employers successfully responded to the threat with firings, policy attacks and blacklisting of union members. In some cases, health standards would remain dangerously low until the passage of the Occupational Health and Safety Act of the 1970s. It was a Jewish defeat, without question, and a source of continuing shame for Rhode Islanders with a conscience.<sup>7</sup>

By the 1920s, conditions had improved somewhat for Jews in Rhode Island. Many were successful by this time in establishing small-scale businesses of their own; others got along in retail shops or managed in the tailoring trade. But America of the 1920s, including Rhode Island, was a time of fierce political reaction, of Klu Klux Klan parades at Roger Williams Park with echoes of anti-Semitism. In short, Jews had moved up, especially relative to other new immigrant groups, but American life had not become any more democratic, especially not in an ethnic or racial sense. Finally, all through this period of hopes and disappointments, unionism, war, and revolution, Jews remained in touch with their European families, whose condition and very existence grew more and more endangered.

For these reasons, Jewish communal life, emphasizing values of the labor movement even when not part of it in an industrial sense, flourished as never before in Rhode Island, from the 1920s to the 1940s. The Workmen's Circle, numbering a hundred or so active members and a periphery of perhaps 500 in all, stepped up its activities. It opened a Yiddish shul on the East Side in 1924 and soon another one in South Providence. The teacher, Beryl Segal (a recent immigrant from Russia, by way of the West) also led the Friday discussion group. It was a lively circle of people who, as his daughter Geraldine S. Foster says, should be described as working people in the most literal sense; they were Jews who worked with their hands whether they were one-man businesses, or carpenters, painters, or tailors. They represented Jewish progressive, communal activity at its highest point in Rhode Island history.

Segal had come to Providence because a cousin of his wife's, Alter Boyman, had already become a major figure of the Poale Zion, the labor

---

Zionists, not only locally in Providence but nationally as well. A founder of Labor Zionism and a mentor of David Ben Gurion's, Pincus Caruso, who was 97 when interviewed in Miami, said that Providence was a beehive of Poale Zionist activity. Under Boyman's dynamic leadership, the Poale Zion had a local membership of at least a hundred, with its own educational meetings and cultural affairs. The members and their children also participated in Workmen's Circle affairs.<sup>8</sup>

Alter's wife, Sara, and Chaya (Irene) Segal, meanwhile, soon led what would become the largest of any of the progressive Jewish organizations, the Pioneer Women\*, with at least 300 members. The depth of feeling for the communal spirit may be measured in how it spread through the entire family — father, mother and child.<sup>9</sup>

It is worth emphasizing that the Poale Zion was a labor, socialist movement, despite the fact that its membership was considerably more middle class than that of the Workmen's Circle. This is not a contradiction in terms. Its enthusiasts, like Alter Boyman himself, moved up somewhat in business or the professions, but without losing the ideals of a different and better way of life, not only for Jews but for all people. (Poale Zion was militantly opposed to the Zionist "Revisionism" of the Likud Party's predecessors. For Labor Zionists, Israel had to become a land of cooperative labor and of justice for all its citizens. As Pincus Caruso told me, they remained committed to those goals to the very end.)<sup>10</sup>

There was one dark spot in this development: the split between the Left, the "Linkies" as they were called, and the Workmen's Circle. In many other cities, where a new influx of Jewish immigrants came into industrial work in the 1910s and 1920s, the Yiddish-speaking supporters of the Soviet Union were the younger and more vigorous activists who became the leaders of new communal institutions, such as Yiddish choirs, theatre, and such unions as the furriers and others. They also led the popular movement against Fascism, and later for a short period played a major role in supporting young Israel, strange as that now may seem.

In Rhode Island, where industrial conditions brought few new Jewish proletarians, this Jewish Left never had much strength. But its leaders played a major role in the unemployed movement, which used to fill what is now Kennedy Plaza with mass rallies in the early 1930s. Former Workmen's Circle members, along with newer recruits, were members of a lively International Workers Order (later Jewish People's Fraternal Order) branch in South Providence.<sup>11</sup> Years after the 1920s split of the Workmen's Circle branch ("down the middle," according to Beryl Segal) the two sides, as nationally, achieved a *modus vivendi* of sorts in anti-Fascist causes and support of new industrial unions (including a few, such as the furriers,

\*Now called *Na'Amat*.

which had Jewish members locally). The strength was far less than it had been before the division.

The greater loss was to the power American culture held over the younger generation of Jews; to move up almost demanded assimilation in some form, at least the casting off of obvious Jewish accents. Public schools, the radio, sports, the whole spectrum of youthful experiences tended to draw young Jews away from communalism of the immigrants.

By the 1930s, losses could already be felt somewhat. On the one hand, as Judith Smith's book, *Family Connections*, points out, many older Jewish tailors lost their trade in fine clothes, so that the main area of Jewish participation in traditional unionism practically vanished. The Workmen's Circle and Poale Zion energetically supported Norman Thomas or followed other Rhode Islanders in supporting Franklin D. Roosevelt. Although the Providence Poale Zion maintained the vision of socialism into their members' old age of the 1940s-50s, the dream of great changes in the world passed increasingly to the singular vision of Palestine, not so much for themselves directly (very few Rhode Islanders would make *aliyah*\*) as for a world community of Jews.<sup>12</sup>

The 1940s made these tendencies tragically absolute. The Holocaust made Israel a priority, even for many who had always opposed Zionism and continued to be unenthusiastic about Zionism as an ideology. World War II, for American Jews of younger generations, brought a new dimension of Americanization, social life in the Army and the GI Bill afterward, with the prospect of suburbs and the baby boom just around the corner.

In some larger Jewish districts, like the Bronx, the Holocaust touched off a new urgency for Yiddish teaching; in Rhode Island, the distances students now had to travel and the cost of gasoline to get there proved too much — the Workmen's Circle shuls closed in 1946. On the other hand, the outburst of prosperity at the end of the 1940s plunged Americans, remembering the Depression, into a new world of consumerism and mass entertainments. The 1930s vision of a pluralistic America, with communities of different kinds and even different languages adding something decisive to democracy, was pretty much washed away. Every kind of ethnic life suffered culturally, and Jewish life, too. Yiddish lost its Eastern European center, and with Ben Gurion's decision for a mono-lingual Hebrew culture, its hopes for the foreseeable future in Israel, too.

But there were important gains along with these losses. Here we speak about Jews as individuals, rather than as representatives of Jewish groups in Rhode Island labor and social movements. These individuals grew out of, and represented, the finest traditions of the Jewish social movements in a wider arena.

---

\*Immigration to Israel.

The first I will discuss briefly is Larry Spitz, without a doubt the most dynamic labor leader of the industrial union movement in Rhode Island. From a Providence South side background in the Depression, he found his way to New York where he observed the International Ladies Garment Workers Local 22, which had at the time the most extensive social and cultural program of any union in the United States. Relocating himself in Woonsocket, which he had quite accidentally toured in a union theatre company for the labor play, *Waiting for Lefty*, he discovered the Independent Textile Union, a mostly French-Canadian organization that had led dramatic strikes in that city but had not yet stabilized itself.

In a short time, Spitz became the Secretary General, the thinker, the speaker and the leader of the first successful industrial union of textile workers in Rhode Island, and one of the most successful in any city in the nation. Through his leadership, the ITU developed a model program of comprehensive unionization, improvement of working conditions and wages, and also extensive cultural and educational programs, health care, and even cooperative housing. After service in World War II, Spitz returned to Providence, where he became sub-director of the steelworkers union.

Here again, but in a wider arena, he made the steelworkers a center for progressive unionism and social programs. Through his leadership, social-minded labor leaders joined with the Diocese and Jewish leaders such as Irving Fain to push through programs such as open housing and to launch Rhode Island Group Health Association as a health plan for workers and the poor. Spitz also led the fight against corruption in unions and the corrupt use of business influence to distort the state's economic development. In these ways, Larry Spitz blazed the way for other Jewish leaders of Rhode Island trade unions from the 1950s to the 1970s, including Nat Kushner of the Retail Workers, Milton Bronstein of the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), Morton Miller of the Hotel and Restaurant Workers, among others.<sup>13</sup>

From the 1930s to the 1960s, it almost seemed as if Jewish influence on Rhode Island labor was limited to leadership, but not because of the absence of Jewish employees. It was just that unionization had to catch up with the white-collar and professional worker, son or daughter of the tailor, the retail clerk and small businessman. The best single example is the high-school teacher, historically undervalued and underpaid until unionization in the 1960s and 1970s began to add dignity and better pay, upgrading the profession. William Bernstein, president of the Coventry Teachers Union, stated that out of approximately 10,000 high-school teachers in the state, at least 1,500 are Jews. This should not surprise us, but it is an extraordinary figure nonetheless. Along with the social service worker, the office worker and others of similar types, they are the hope of the labor movement in the coming era. We can also be sure that Jews

---

will not only be present but in important roles, leading and educating. I can point first of all to Charles Schwartz, Director of the Institute for Labor Studies and Research, the think-tank of Rhode Island labor's future. It is a characteristically Jewish position.

There is still another important sense, a sense still broader, of Jews and Rhode Island labor. Those Workmen's Circle and Poale Zion branches did not see the society they dreamed of creating in America actually come into being. But they saw, and supported, the rise of a New Deal coalition which brought the most democracy Rhode Island had seen in all its history. That coalition, supporting Governor Green, was an ethnic and working people's coalition foremost; it survived for almost two generations.<sup>14</sup>

Julius Michaelson, whose political career was foreshortened by the disintegration of that old alliance and by the emergence of a more conservative era in Rhode Island politics, may be seen as the last of that school, the last of the children of Jewish immigrants whose parents belonged to workingmen's benefit associations. But the story, as I have indicated, is not finished. We have another era before us — after Reagan — and the political questions of justice, peace, education and all the others remain unanswered. What role will labor play in them, and what role will the newer generations of Jews play in them in Rhode Island? We do not know. But we do know, as the advocates of woman suffrage used to say sixty or a hundred years ago, that a river does not rise above its source.

The sources of Jewish participation in labor and labor-related social movements and causes are, as demonstrated briefly, of great importance. If I have taken you, and myself in my research and interviews for this essay, just a few steps in understanding the history, I will have succeeded in my modest efforts.

---

I wish to dedicate this essay to the memory of Beryl Segal, leader of the Providence Workmen's Circle, who personified the link between the Jewish tradition of social causes and the labor movement. I had the great good fortune of interviewing him in 1977, and I am only sorry that I did not then have the knowledge to ask more detailed questions. I wish also to thank Geraldine Foster for her information, encouragement and assistance in my historical efforts.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Providence Journal*, August 1, 1888; August 1, 1893; and November 29, 1896

<sup>2</sup>*Providence Journal*, June 13, 1896

<sup>3</sup>The best discussion of this strike period is in Paul Buhle, "Italian-American Radicals and the Labor Movement, 1905-1930," *Radical History Review*, #17 (Spring, 1977).

<sup>4</sup>The standard source remains Sh. Sacks, *Di Geshikhte fun Arbeteir Ring* (New York: Arbeiter Ring, 1925), two volumes. There are, however, few direct mentions of Providence. Other citations of Providence Jewish labor (*i.e.*, socialist) activity can be found scattered in Yiddish radical newspapers such as *Di Arbeiter Tzeitung* and *Di Yiddish Kempfer*.

<sup>5</sup>"Italian-American Radicals," *op. cit.* Unfortunately, it must be reported that the ILGWU, in bitter hostility to the Industrial Workers of the World, joined employers and the *Providence Journal* in appealing to Jewish tailors to abandon the strike and return to work.

<sup>6</sup>"The Garment Workers Strike," *Labor Advocate* (Providence), April 6, 1913.

<sup>7</sup>See *The Jewelry Workers Monthly Bulletin* (New York), for 1917-18, especially "Help to Win the Strike at Ostby and Barton's Shop, Providence, RI," May, 1917. *Report of the Commissioner of Labor...1916-1919* (Providence, 1920), 179-83.

<sup>8</sup>Beryl Segal Interview, 1977 (by Paul Buhle), Oral History of the American Left, Tamiment Library, New York University; duplicate in Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association library.

<sup>9</sup>Chaya (Irene) Segal Interview, 1987 (by Paul Buhle), Oral History of the American Left, Tamiment Library; duplicate in Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association library.

<sup>10</sup>See Paul Buhle, "Jews and American Communism: the Cultural Question," *Radical History Review*, #23 (Spring, 1980). His volume, *Marxism in the US* (London: Verso, 1987), also has an extended re-interpretation of Jewish radical history in the U. S., based upon Yiddish sources and several hundred interviews with veterans of various causes.

<sup>11</sup>David Kolodoff Interview (by Paul Buhle), Rhode Island Labor Oral History project, Rhode Island Historical Society. Kolodoff, secretary of the Jewish People's Fraternal Order, has been most gracious and helpful.

<sup>12</sup>Judith E. Smith, *Family Connections: A History of Italian and Jewish Immigrant Lives in Providence, Rhode Island, 1900-1940* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), especially Chapter Two, "A Family Culture of Work." The *Pesach Blott* (later retitled in English, the *Providence Passover Journal*) is an extraordinary and evidently little-known source of Labor Zionist history, including some local history. See for instance A. Boyman, "Letter to a Friend," in the 1938 number, describing the problems in maintaining Jewish fraternal activities. "He created the Third Seder: A Tribute to Alter Boyman," *Histadrut Foto News*. March, 1966, describes Boyman's (and Providence's) historic role in this tradition.

<sup>13</sup>The Lawrence Spitz Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, are the best source for this story. See also Buhle's oral history of Rhode Island working people, *Working Lives: An Oral History of Rhode Island Labor* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1987), especially Chapter Four, "Entering the Postindustrial Age, 1941-1960."

<sup>14</sup>On the 1934 Strike, see James Findlay, "The Great Textile Strike of 1934: Illuminating Rhode Island History in the Thirties," *Rhode Island History*, Vol. 42 (February, 1983).

## WORKMEN'S CIRCLES AND JEWISH LABOR UNIONS

BY EDWIN C. BROWN

It is said that beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. If that be true, to the newly arrived immigrant and downtrodden laborer the workmen's circles were things of beauty. They were succored and comforted, enlightened and enriched by the humanitarian compassion of the circles.

To others who did not understand, or appreciate the mission of the circles, the members were considered a band of radicals who were void of principle. In the words of Confucius, "Everything has its beauty but not everyone sees it."

Regardless of point of view, the workmen's circles were dedicated groups of men and women who, among other things, played an important role in the Americanization of many immigrants who had fled their home-lands to escape persecution and poverty. The circles also played an important role in easing the burden of the common laborer.

During the latter years of the 1800's when Eugene Debs and Morris Hillquit were expounding their views on a more democratic society, the workmen's circles were created. The national organization was established in 1892 by 25 cloak makers in New York who foresaw the need of such an agency. It was chartered as an insurance society, and in addition it advocated formation of co-operatives which provided funeral expenses, purchased burial plots, paid medical costs, and provided sick and health benefits. It also promoted brotherhood among members by publishing newspapers, books, and pamphlets, and conducting forums, debates and lectures, so that members would be better informed. The circles also operated summer camps for the health and recreation of family members. The national organization was responsible for establishing affiliated circles in various localities.

In Rhode Island the Workmen's Circle was chartered on December 11, 1909, by William Baxt, Peter Marcus, Hyman Haimsonn, Morris Miller, Albert Cobrain, Louis Kortick and Isaac Weinbaum. The stated purpose was, "to promote the social welfare of its members, and for fraternal benefits and mutual assistance." Several local chapters were established to serve

---

Edwin C. Brown was Secretary-Treasurer of the Rhode Island A.F.L.-C.I.O. from 1953 to 1985.

the members in Rhode Island. Among them were circles #14-#71-#110-#251-#499 and one in Pawtucket, plus another in Woonsocket. At one time circles #14 and #251 were headquartered at 128 North Main Street in Providence.

Members of these mutual benefit societies brought to the New World much of their complex religious, cultural and secular experiences they had inherited from the societies in their homelands. They were also students of history and were aware of what caused the demise of the old guilds that had functioned in Europe during the eleventh and eighteenth centuries. With those experiences as background the circle members supported co-operatives and the rights of labor unions. They were opposed to war, and the active and concerned Jews placed war and crime on the same level as crimes against humanity. They also opposed the abuse of child labor and the payment of the prevailing pitiful low wages.

Many members of the circles had migrated from the Vilna and Minsk areas of the Pale where they were stocking makers, ladies tailors, printers, carpenters, locksmiths and cigarette makers. After their arrival in Rhode Island many were employed as bakers, peddlers, hat and cap makers, carpenters and in the needle trades.

Another segment of the Jewish community earned their livelihood by operating tailoring establishments, pawn shops, second-hand stores, boarding houses, boot and shoe repair shops, restaurant and bakeries.

Around the turn of the century a majority of the Jewish population resided in the North End and South Providence sections of Providence, and about one third of those in the Providence-Pawtucket area were members of one of the Workmen's Circles. These local circles existed, not only for humanitarian and educational purposes, but they entertained and advanced the welfare of their members while assisting and comforting those who had migrated to Rhode Island in search of a better life style.

To carry out their mission, the circles conducted two schools in Providence, one at the Workmen's Circle Lyceum on Benefit Street, which was opened in 1924, and the other at the Circle's Library on Willard Avenue, next to Bazar's Bank in South Providence.

The local circles conducted weekly lectures, forums and debates to help keep the members informed about the issues of the day and assist the newly arrived immigrants to become familiar with their new environment.

There were also frequent discussions about the rights of laboring people, and at the library members read and discussed a variety of social, economic and political subjects. The circles were considered the gathering place where every young man with progressive ideas belonged. Because of the

---

controversial nature of some of the discussions, the circles were considered the center for active Jews, including the radicals and socialists of the day.

In addition to the programs and acts of charity conducted by the circles, the organization purchased plots of land at cemeteries for burial of deceased members and their families.

The Hebrew Bakers Union, Local #122, was a child of the Rhode Island Workmen's Circles. The Local was an affiliate of the Bakery and Confectionary Workers International Union of the American Federation of Labor and was established on April 23, 1907. On February 2, 1952, the Sick Benefit Corporation of Local #122 was chartered by the State of Rhode Island. Charter members of the Corporation were Albert Brody, Abraham Rubin, Frank A. Moskol, Joe Landry, George Fedetski, Louis Schwartz and Dave Gluksman. The stated purpose of the corporation was "To provide sick and disabled benefits to members of Hebrew Bakers Union Local #122 and the doing of everything connected therewith and incidental thereto."

The Workmen's Circles, as advocates of the co-operative movement, at one time operated bakeries at 391 1/2 and 593 Chalkstone Avenue in Providence.

When members of the Textile Workers Union were on strike in Olneyville, Jake Pavlow, President of a local Circle, with other Circle Associates, visited the Textile Workers Union Headquarters to determine what assistance their circle could provide. After reviewing the situation, they decided that the Textile Workers were driven to strike by the mill owners. They concluded that, "When the water had reached the necks of the workers and they felt that in a little while they would drown, they went on strike. It was the only weapon in the hands of the laborers."

Pavlow and his associates agreed to arrange with the members of the Hebrew Bakers Union to bake bread every day for the striking textile workers. It was through such acts of brotherhood that the circles were considered the Red Cross of the Labor Movement.

On April 23, 1932, Hebrew Bakers' Local #122 observed its 25th Anniversary with a dinner at Zinn's Banquet Hall on Mathewson Street in Providence. The members of the Banquet Arrangement Committee were Joseph Fish, J. Kessler, B. H. Brody, Alfred Davis, Hyman Abrams, J. Landy, Chairman, and Al Brody.

The officers of Local #122 at the time they observed their 25th Jubilee were Joseph Fish, President; Benny Braid, Treasurer; Abe Braid, Financial Secretary; and Joseph Hamer, Recording Secretary.

During and after World War I active interest in the local Workmen's

---

Circles declined. In 1923 efforts were made to stimulate activity among the 500 members in the existing circles in the State. On Sunday, April 29, 1923, a membership drive meeting was held at Elks Auditorium in Providence in an attempt to attract to the fold English-speaking Jews, women and youths.

Mr. B. Dubinsky, Chairman of the local Circle, introduced Joseph Baskin of New York, the principal speaker. Following the meeting in the Elks Auditorium, a dinner was held at the Dreyfus Hotel, also on Washington Street, in Providence. Unfortunately these efforts did not meet with a high degree of success.

Another meeting was held, also in Elks Auditorium, on Sunday, December 31, 1923, for the purpose of electing officers. The following were chosen: David Sack, Chairman; John Fisher, Treasurer; Henry Brill, Financial Secretary; Nathan Ginsberg, Recording Secretary; and Abraham Koppelman, Sick Committee.

During the course of the meeting Isaac Rotenberg, Jacob Pavlow, Harry Sherman and David Sack of Providence addressed the gathering in Yiddish.

The economic downturn of business during the 1930's caused havoc for the local circles. They lost their home on Benefit Street and combined activities between their South Providence headquarters and an office on Snow Street. However, interest continued to decline, and the local circles passed from the Rhode Island scene during the years of World War II.

The Rhode Island Workmen's Circles were not the first, nor only, workingmen's organizations in the State established to perform humanitarian deeds on behalf of the working men and women of the Jewish community. Among other local Jewish labor organizations chartered to serve their community better were: The Rhode Island Shoemakers Aid Association chartered on April 18, 1894, by Getze Cohen, Harris Cohen, Hyman Wienberg, Joseph Sandler, Abraham Cohen, Zelz Wopert and Jacob Miller, for Mutual Aid to Shoemakers in case of sickness and distress.

The Cooperative Union of Cigarmakers chartered on November 14, 1896, by Abe Cohen, Max Newfield, Louis Shatkin, Ike Rosenberg and Harry Cohen, for the purpose of social, mental and practical advancement of its members and the mutual assistance and improvement of Cigarmakers in respect to their trade.

The Providence Tailoring Progressive Association chartered on January 21, 1901, by Abraham Gold, Benjamin Cohen, Frank Matersky, Herman Weiss, Louis Sacknowitz, Alberth Engel, Bernard Greenstein and Morris Finkler, for beneficial and social purposes.

The Peddler's Protective Union chartered on June 21, 1906, by Barney

Bennett, Simon Mushnick, Samuel Jacobson, Sam Levy, Abe Silverman and Morris Bezen, for mutual assistance and protection.

The Providence Hebrew Butchers Association chartered on June 30, 1909, by Charles Halpern, Max Mittleman, B. Mushlin, Jacob Premack, Max Cohen, Harry Mittleman, William Solomon, Jake Cohen, Jacob Rosenfield, J. Fineman, A. Abramson, Morris Siselman, Jacob Berger and N. B. Greenstein, to assist and aid its members in a fraternal and benevolent manner.

The Providence Protective Ladies' Tailors Association, chartered on March 20, 1912, by Harry J. Leon, Max S. Lazarus and others for the mutual benefit and protection of its members.

The Providence Protective Junk Peddlers' Union chartered on March 27, 1916, by Charles Holland, Barney Lupin, Morris Cohen, Morris Adelman, J. Kopit, Morris Zevotoff, Oscar Dimond, Joe Gold, Abraham Max, William Geventer and S. Kittey, for mutual protection and advancement of the business interests of its members.

The Hebrew Butchers Association of Providence chartered on August 2, 1916, by David Orliansky, Charles Halpern, Philip Keller, Wolf Malatt and Max Primack, for the mutual assistance in cases of need or distress.

The Independent Rhode Island Junk Peddlers' Union chartered on August 26, 1916, by Abraham Melomet, Jacob Kotlen, Mendel Orenstein, Max Howitz and Frank Shatz, to conserve the interests of the junk peddlers of the State; to assist them in securing better conditions for earning a livelihood and to aid in the material and sociological progress of its members.

The Jewish National Workers' Alliance of America, Branch 41 of Providence, 1944. The name was changed on October 30, 1950, to the Farband-Labor Zionist Order, Branch 41, with 110 members. The charter members were Max Berman, Solomon Lightman, Joseph Biller, Samuel Sprecker and Harry Chaset, to provide for the payment of funeral and burial benefits and promote Jewish national spirit, and social, economic and educational betterment of the Jewish population of Rhode Island.

From the souvenir booklet of the 25-year jubilee celebration of the Baker's Union Local 122 — April 23, 1922.

Brothers! Saturday the 23rd of April, we will celebrate our 25 years of existence. This will be the loveliest chapter in our history, since we organized to defend economic (material) conditions. Today we shall review an account of our work.

Twenty-five years ago, a very small number of us, who slaved long, dark nights to bake bread for others, ourselves did not have enough to eat. The conditions under which we worked

---

were extremely hard. After that, it was understood that there must be an end to such a condition. At that time then, the bakers gathered and made it clear to themselves; this can go no further! Talk about a union began, which will defend the interests of the bakers; and Local 122 was founded.

Many struggles did we endure during that time. The boss many times set his pointed spears against us, to destroy (annihilate) us. We stood up to them with unified strength, and destroyed their spears. True, we have not attained everything, we have a great deal to struggle for. And to this end, and only then will we and we alone enjoy the full fruits from our work.

Meanwhile today, in the day of our 25 year Jubilee, may we be greeted with the work that we did until now, let us take a fresh enthusiasm for our continuing striving until the end, until no longer there be oppressors and oppressed.

We wish to extend heartfelt thanks to all organizations and the Jewish public for their true sympathy for the entire time to our Baker's Union.

We thank you, all our previous officials of the local, a special thanks to the current officials: Brother Joseph Fish, President; Brother Benny Braida, Treasurer; Brother Abe Braida, Financial Secretary; and Brother Joseph Hamer, Recording Secretary.

We greet all our friends — all who rejoice together with us.\*

#### Bibliography

"Chartered Organizations", *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes*, Vol. 2. Number 1. June, 1956

Eleanor F. Horvitz, "Old Bottles, Rags, Junk!" *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes*, Vol. 7, Number 2, November, 1976.

*Rhode Island Herald*, April 19, 1966

*New York Times*, November 10, 1985

*Providence Journal*, April 30, 1923; December 31, 1923; May 29, 1925

*Federation Voice*, September 8, 1966.

Souvenir Booklet, April 23, 1932, Hebrew Baker's Union, April 23, 1932

Judith E. Smith, *Family Connections: A History of Italian and Jewish Immigrant Lives in Providence, Rhode Island, 1900-1940*, (Albany: State University Press, 1985)

\*Translated from the Yiddish by Geraldine S. Foster.

I wish to thank Eleanor F. Horvitz, Librarian-Archivist, Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association, and Lillian N. Schwartz, Librarian, Temple Emanu-El, for their help in the research for this article.