

**Caring for their Own:**  
*Jewish Community of Rochester 1920-1945*  
*and the Development of New American Jewish Identity*

by  
Sara Halpern

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## **Abstract**

Nestled along Erie Canal in upstate New York, Rochester hosted the second largest Jewish population in the state of New York by 1940 with over 30,000 Jews. This paper explores this community in two ways. First, it strives to answer the broad question of American Jewry's inaction during the years that Adolf Hitler was in power. Rochester was something of an exception to the historical trend. Rochester Jews cooperated for the sake of preserving Judaism and the Jewish people and did what they could within their limited economic and political framework. Second, their unity around this topic derived from the changes in the community after the Immigration Act of 1924 blocked the flow of newcomers from Eastern Europe and during the Great Depression. This and other local catalysts gave Rochester Jews an opportunity to redefine the meaning of being Jews in America and Americans in a Jewish sense during the political, social, religious, and economic turmoil in the United States.

## Introduction

The exile forced the Jews to scatter all over Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East and thus they developed their own communities with traditions, customs, languages, and interpretations of the Torah. The histories of their new homelands also influenced the Jews' lives and perception of their own identities. Hence as the first European Jews began to arrive in America starting in 1654, each group had its unique culture that separated them from other Jewish immigrants as well as other immigrant groups. Consequently, the Jew to Jew encounter in America, especially in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, mirrored the Europeans' first interactions with the Native Americans. It resulted in an identity and cultural clash that would last until World War II. That led to a birth of American Judaism that, like the nation of the United States, took a century to grow to become a world leader in a different sense of faith than imagined. Similar to America's internal wars in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that tested its legitimacy, conflicts in the Jewish communities shaped what American Judaism would become by 1945.

The revealing story of American Jewry's conflicts, triumphs, and reconciliation over a century must be told through a lens. What made a Jewish community tick in America? How did America's promise of golden opportunities and freedom influence the Jews' perspective of their new American (Jewish) identity? In turn, in what ways did the Jews adapt to the American society and ethos to transform the meaning of Judaism in America? Could Judaism still be defined as a faith? The diversity within the Jewish Diaspora and in American society created no one single answer. This collage offers an even larger complex question: Why, as the future leaders of world Jewry, did not the



American Jewry do enough to save European Jewry from complete annihilation? Then they became unprepared default leaders in 1945 when Germany surrendered.

The case study of the Jewish community of Rochester, New York, serves as a microcosmic examination of American Jewry during the interwar years. By understanding a community's history, the answer to American Jewry's role in saving (or not) the victimized European Jews becomes clearer. Rochester's Jewish history paints a detailed picture of a Jewish community struggling and striving for changes and reconciliation for the good of the Jewish people. Prior to the 1920s, the German Jews and Eastern European Jews set up parallel social institutions and faced class conflicts with one another in the workplace. After World War I and the Immigration Act of 1924, the Rochester Jews felt a pulse. Eastern European Jews moved up in the social ranks, closing the economic gap with the German Jews. The German Jews soon became outnumbered. Both groups of Jews felt increasingly dissatisfied with tensions in the community. Slowly, they began bridging their differences for the love of Rochester and Jewish people through labor and synagogue reforms. They moved their social organization meetings to more neutral places. At the same time, the Eastern European children began growing up as second-generation Americans. The formative years of the community in transition during the Great Depression challenged young peoples' perception of their American Jewish identity. Unlike their parents, these people considered themselves as "Americans" in fullest sense. Yet, most of their childhood revolved around an increasingly strong Jewish community that consistently reminded them of their Jewish identity. The experience of America in the war and battling for the

European Jews' survival taught Rochester Jews, of all ages, the congruency of American and Jewish values.<sup>1</sup>

These years also redefined what American Judaism would mean as a faith, as American Jews became increasingly secular. The materialistic culture of the 1920s and the Crash of 1929 diluted the importance of religion and faith in God. The Great Depression changed what Judaism meant in America. In this process, three pillars grew out of this era: individuality, sociability, and philanthropy. With the addition of American home and battle front experience, the last pillar came about during the war: responsibility. America's participation in the war challenged these ideas that would shape the faith of American Judaism, as value-based rather than theological. Consequently, these pillars held up during these hard times and stabilized communities, especially new ones that erupted after the war.

Examining a transforming Jewish community exposes deeper issues beyond the broad debate of American Jewry's divided reaction to the Holocaust. American Jews learned over time, slowly, that in order to preserve Judaism in America, they must first consider each other as Jews, nothing else. In order for them to become default leaders of world Jewry, they had find peace as community first. Rochester's Jewish community proved that. Furthermore, the transitional years in American Jewish history focused on the reconstruction of the American Jewish experience— in American *and* Jewish senses that would change the face of American Judaism. This ultimately equipped the American Jews for their new role however weak their leadership was during the Holocaust.

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<sup>1</sup> Rochester Jewish community was a mid-sized community in comparison to the larger ones in New York City, Los Angeles, Miami, and other cities. It was home to the second largest Jewish population in the state of New York after New York City.

## Historiography

Examining American Jewish history is not an easy task, let alone interpreting this diverse population's actions and attitudes. The major problem is the shifting balance between the American and Jewish worlds. American Jewish history is, because America became the home of many different Jewish communities, defined by the local and national history. In Germany, highly assimilated Jews strongly identified with German national culture, language, and history. In Poland, Russia, and the rest of Eastern Europe, Jews maintained their own Jewish culture with little or no connection with their residing country's nationalism. In America, American Jewry balanced between acculturation and continuity. Judaism prevailed over the perceived danger of its disappearance, the meandering journey, and the degree of religious freedom in the United States.<sup>2</sup> The study of American Jewish history requires highly sophisticated framework.

American Jewish historians have chosen several ways of looking at American Jewish communities and the development of their identity. One is the influence of American trends and events upon the Jews on local and national levels.<sup>3</sup> The other is how the Jews contributed to America's history.<sup>4</sup> The focus of these examinations has been the development of American Jewish identity over time. What is an American Jew? How was an American Jew in the 1980s different from one living in the 1850s? The definition of one's identity has largely been characterized by the issues of his day, both in

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 64-65.

<sup>3</sup> See Gulie Ne'eman Arad's *America, Its Jews, and the Rise of Nazism*, Henry Feingold's *Bearing Witness: How America and Its Jews Responded to the Holocaust*, and other works dealing with the United States and the Holocaust because it was a time period where Jews' relationship with the United States was very uneasy and the U.S. government's policies affected the Jews' abilities to save the European Jews.

<sup>4</sup> See Beth Wenger's *The Jewish Americans: Three Centuries of Jewish Voices in America* (Doubleday Press, 2007), Jonathan Sarna's and Ellen Smith's *Jews of Boston* (Boston: The Philanthropies, 1995), and other works strongly focusing the Jews as the subjects of the discussion with America as the backdrop.

the United States and Judaism. So an American Jew living in the 1850s could be in disagreement of what was an American Jew with another one in the 1890s.

Historians have explored different ways to handle this reciprocal historical relationship and identity issues: case studies or broad thematic surveys. Two books covering 350 years of American Jewish history, *Jews of the United States: 1654-2000* and *American Judaism* were simultaneously published in 2004 by Hasia Diner and Jonathan Sarna respectively. Their books were the first to cover the entire history in several centuries and their approaches to the subject matter differed. Both of these books tell similar storylines but with different focuses that can influence a first-timer reader on how she will perceive American Jewish history.

Diner emphasizes the development of American Jewish identity and factors that shaped it. In *The Jews of the United States*, Diner explores the progress of Jewish communities, how different periods shape the American Jewish identity, and tracings of continuity from New York City to the frontiers to the suburbs. She uses migrations and historical movements both in American and Jewish histories over the centuries to examine the ways American Jews define their identity and culture. She argues that American and Jewish histories are so intertwined that American Jewish historians cannot isolate one and make hypotheses based on “what if...”<sup>5</sup> American Jews were essentially integrated throughout American history and, even before mass immigration from Europe, the Jewish Diaspora had a role to play. Her combination of two typical approaches to American Jewish history, to emphasize that Jews in America were in a symbiotic relationship with society at large, is an important analytical insight.

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<sup>5</sup> Hasia R. Diner, *Jews of the United States: 1654 to 2000* (Berkeley: University of California, 2004), 1.

Sarna's *American Judaism* strongly connects American Jews' religious history with that of Christianity in America. Christian religious trends were mimicked by American Judaism, especially as Reform Judaism became "Americanized" in terms of reflecting practices and images of Protestant churches. Sarna explicitly writes that the history of American Judaism in no way directly parallels Catholicism or Protestantism; rather, American Judaism is unusual in that it is both religion and cultural-ethnic identity. Judaism pragmatically reflected current American religious trends and yet retained its story of people struggling to keep their faith and finding it again after losing it. Sarna writes with emphasis that American Judaism is "also a story of revitalization."<sup>6</sup> Sarna's concentrated focus on the Jewish religion is particularly important to understand the deep divisions among the Orthodox, Reform, and Conservatives, and how American Jews mimicked gentile trends. Rochester Jewry was no exception here— it was a devout community, yet a great majority of the Jews were secular.

In addition, Sarna explains his interpretations of certain terminology with broad definitions. He eliminates the terms "generation," "assimilation," and "denomination" from his discourse in order to present the actual reality.<sup>7</sup> He argues that taking out "generation" is effective in periodizing American Jewish history because Judaism constantly evolved over time, shaped by events in the United States and the world. Nothing held an aura of revolution. As for assimilation, Sarna claims that Jews chose not to assimilate and instead it was made inevitable by events in the United States and Europe though many historians disagree with Sarna's concept. Finally, he connects the idea of denomination as something much more appropriate for Christianity than

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<sup>6</sup> Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism*, xiv.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

Judaism.<sup>8</sup> His assessment of American Jewish history focuses more on the Judaism aspect of American religion history in which is more attractive to readers who connect the idea of Judaism as a religion rather than an ethnic culture.

I disagree with Sarna on every point about his terminology. First, it is necessary to define “generation.” One is to give an idea of how far along the Jews were in being absorbed into the American society and losing their roots. This specifically reflects the pragmatism of American Jewry in retaining their connection to their Jewish identity as historians discussed in this paper demonstrated. This also includes Sarna in his line of argument on the development of American Judaism. Therefore, in this paper, when I speak of “older” generation, I am meaning the group that was born before the turn of the century— either as immigrants or natives. By contrast, the “younger” generation is defined as people in their late teens to their mid 30s during the Depression and WWII. This is also called the “Depression” or “WWII” generation as these events drastically changed the young idealists’ outlook for their future. The importance of each generation’s American experience cannot be emphasized enough as the paper will demonstrate. Furthermore, Beth Wenger adds that this generation could synthesize their American life and Jewish traditions in finding their niche with their American Jewish identity.<sup>9</sup> The previous Eastern European generation could not; they steadfastly held to their roots. The children of the WWII generation understood little of the world that their grandparents grew up in. Thus, as this paper is already focused on a specific period (1925-1945), I must divide and define each segment and how their upbringings affected their outlook and perspectives.

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

<sup>9</sup> Beth Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression* (New Haven: Yale University, 1996), 7.

Second, Jews *made* the choice to become part of the American society through assimilation as strongly evident in cultural approaches such as Deborah Dash Moore's and Hasia Diner's. Sarna argues that American freedom and values forced the Jews to acculturate, to make Judaism more acceptable to Jews and gentiles alike. Otherwise, Judaism would "assimilate"—in other words, disappear.<sup>10</sup> I do not believe that Judaism or any cultural or religious practices would ever disappear because at least several people would stay involved. American Orthodoxy hardly differed from Israeli or Russian, only slightly modified. Jews could still go to any synagogue in the world and expect the same basic rituals and Hebrew prayers. The American Jews made a *choice* to fashionably adapt to their new surroundings. As I described above, the older generation did *not* assimilate in comparison to their children or grandchildren. Assimilation, by my definition, is a strong form of physical adaptation to the new society. In no way do I believe that Jews completely abandoned their emotional ties to Judaism except in rare cases. Sarna hints that the Jews' assimilation in America meant completely severing their physical and emotional connection with Judaism as a whole.<sup>11</sup>

Lastly, Sarna's definition of denomination is valid despite the wide acceptance of using denomination in the vernacular among Jews and scholars for years. He accepts this but argues that it is incorrect for the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>12</sup> Since I am moving towards middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I will use denomination in the sense of this young generation embracing their assimilation in America including adopting some of the Protestant trends. Furthermore, a certain stream of Judaism used to be associated with an ethnic group and from 1920s to 1950s the lines between the ethnic groups began to blur.

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<sup>10</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, xix.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, xix-xx.

No longer could anyone assume that a Reform Jew was a German. More and more Eastern Europeans began to move away from Orthodoxy. Thus, denomination will be used interchangeably with “stream” or “movement” in this paper. Sarna’s argument fails for this paper and therefore I will use my own definition of these terms as described above.

Lucy Dawidowicz clearly argues for American Jewish identity as a personal decision, rather than religion affiliation. She counters Sarna, having grown up during the Great Depression, by defining “Jewishness [as] a matter of personal choice” in America and Jews embraced this voluntary opportunity. In contrast, many pre-war European governments passed discriminatory laws against Jews, giving the Jews no choice except to comply with the explicit label in order to avoid further harassment. She adds that America’s loose framework of Jewish communities and society at large necessitated affirmation of Jews’ individual decisions in expressing their Jewish identity. Clearly, the question of “what is a Jew” migrated to America from Europe and like any other society, Jews and non-Jews alike formed perceptions of defining a Jew. The issue became much more complex as ethnic Jewish immigrants streamed through American ports, adding new ways of demonstrating their Jewishness. At the same time, no society was immune from the natural psychological phenomenon in search for social acceptance. Accordingly, Jews had to negotiate their desire to belong in the American society while shaping the meaning of being Jewish in America. Dawidowicz points out that the community and synagogues play influential roles in giving substance to the people’s



Jewish identities. Thus, her insight clearly demonstrates what I am attempting to show with Rochester Jewish community.<sup>13</sup>

Historians examining case studies argue that a microscopic view of American Jewry can reveal general trends in American Jewish history. Let us start with New York City Jews, the largest Jewish community in the United States with roughly upwards of 27% of the total population by 1920.<sup>14</sup> New York City was generally a reflection of the Jewish immigrant community: No historian has explicitly stated, but many suggest, that these Jews gave birth to American Judaism because its population was so concentrated over several large neighborhoods in the Bronx, Lower East Side, and Brooklyn.<sup>15</sup> By late 1930s, 40% of American Jews lived in New York City, and these Jews helped to define American Jewry.<sup>16</sup> This astonishing number raises questions about the lives of all other American Jews. More importantly, the credibility of using New York City to define American Jewish history and identity is at stake. Moore found that Miami and Los Angeles led the development of an American Jewish identity that so American Jewry could finally comfortably embrace, outside of New York City.<sup>17</sup> Beth Wenger examined a specific understudied topic in New York City Jewish history during Great Depression. Regardless of the broad question, case studies such as these open up new subjects of discussions and debates among historians. My examination of Rochester Jewry raised new issues beyond common themes in American Jewish history such as its major

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<sup>13</sup> Lucy Dawidowicz, *The Jewish Presence: Essays on Identity and History* (New York: Holt, Reinhart, and Winton, 1977), 61-66.

<sup>14</sup> Lee Shai Weissbach, *Jewish Life in Small Town America: Jews in Small Town America, a History* (New Haven: Yale University, 2005), 18.

<sup>15</sup> Deborah Dash Moore, *To the Golden Cities: Pursing the American Jewish Dream in Miami and L.A.* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 5; Diner, *Jews of the United States*, pp. 205-207, 226.

<sup>16</sup> Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Moore, *To the Golden Cities*, 2-3.

contribution to Rochester's economy and how we may reexamine American Jewish history with that.

As we look at case studies, we must first look at how historians approach large cities such as Miami, Los Angeles, and New York City that became major Jewish centers. Moore, in her survey of Miami and Los Angeles in post World War II era, pinpoints these rapidly developing communities as the first places where American Jews realized their American Jewish Dream. Both cities had tiny Jewish populations that numbered only in the hundreds which exploded into thousands during the major internal migration after World War II. She affirms that “nowhere did the possibilities to start afresh, unhampered by the mistakes and burdens of the past, appear as vividly as in the two American dream cities...promised newcomers a present and a future.”<sup>18</sup> These case studies allowed her to defend the proposition that “today we live in a world [American Jews of 1950s] shaped. Their choices redefined many components of American Jewish identity.” Then she unequivocally writes that Miami and Los Angeles confirmed her theory.<sup>19</sup> Moore argues that American Jewish identity could not grow out of the northeastern cities because the cities still carried baggage from the immigrant era. Jews needed a fresh start to their lives where days of immigration and internal conflicts would become memories.<sup>20</sup>

The exploration of Jews in Rochester will seek to counter Moore's argument; it was not always necessary for the Jews to uproot their lives in order to define new, post-war American Jewish identity. Developing American Jewish identity could take in the form of evolution rather than revolution that Moore implies in her introduction; she told

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, vi.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

of radical contrasts between the “paradise” cities and cities burdened by the past in her introduction.<sup>21</sup> Miami and Los Angeles did not signal a complete break from the past as Jews still had to deal with their role as leaders of the world Jewry. American Jews, *everywhere*, faced similar identity challenges.

Beth Wenger’s work on New York City Jews during the Great Depression reveals the roots of an American Jewish culture that would later become part of American Jewish identity. Historians have largely ignored the disruption in the Jews’ social and economic mobility. They told the stories of successes with the mass immigration and Jews’ struggle to make it in their new world. Then they moved immediately over to the battle for Jewish survival during World War II as European Jewry perished in the gas chambers. During World War II and thereafter, American Jewry rose to the occasion by becoming the leaders of world Jewry.<sup>22</sup> Wenger asks for a pause to reflect upon how the Great Depression and rapid onset of anti-Semitism affected American Jewish culture and social life. The Great Depression impacted Jewish families, the Jews’ places in employment, the Jewish votes in United States politics, and communal organizations.<sup>23</sup> This particular point is essential to this paper’s discussion of the evolving Jewish community and identity in Rochester during this same period. Additionally, the thesis will refute Moore’s idea of “difference” by comparing Wenger’s findings of New York City Jews to Rochester Jews in the same era.

Furthermore, in her other book, *Jewish Americans*, Wenger emphasizes that the interwar years demonstrated a paradox between American Jews’ social and economic stability and their insecurity stemming from rising anti-Semitism, Nazism, and the

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 20.

<sup>22</sup> Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 2, 8.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5, 8-9.

Depression. Jews faced challenges and expectations that would help to shape their American Jewish identity. The case study of Rochester Jewry will very closely match Wenger's observations of American Jewry as a whole.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to these examples of various approaches and paradigms in American Jewish history, some works have been carried out about Rochester Jewish community in particular. Stuart Rosenberg wrote the first book on Rochester Jewish history from its beginnings in the 1843 to 1925. Unlike Moore who picked a particular time, in his research, Rosenberg demonstrates how American Jewish identity in Rochester evolved throughout 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that would shed some light in both American and Jewish histories. The book gives a microcosmic view of American Jewish history and how exactly certain events changed the Jews' perception of their American Jewish identity. For example, he suggests that the first time the German Jews in Rochester felt "American" was during the Civil War because they viewed themselves as *citizens* of the Union in their war efforts.<sup>25</sup> In no way does he attempt to finalize a time when Rochester Jews reconciled with their American Jewish identity; the Jewish community remained plagued by ethnic tensions among the Germans, English, Poles, Galicians, and Russians. In his perception, American Judaism had yet to be born by 1925. It is important to note that Rosenberg's work was published in 1954 and his perspective on American Jewish history and identity is unique in the sense that later scholars would argue that 1950s was the defining era for American Jews. Rosenberg's major point in writing a comprehensive local history was that it would reflect American Jewish history. The Jews of Rochester shared the same doubts, apprehensions, excitements, and hopes as Jews elsewhere in the

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<sup>24</sup> Wenger, *Jewish American*, 197-199.

<sup>25</sup> Stuart Rosenberg, *The Jewish Community in Rochester New York 1843-1925* (New York: Columbia University, 1954), 17.

United States. Their abilities to adjust to the Promised Land would be tested by pragmatism and the strength of democracy.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, his work also makes valuable contributions as the first comprehensive history of Rochester Jews, and established the basis for American Jewish history there.

In this paper, the University of Rochester's Jewish Oral History Project and the *Jewish Ledger*, the Jewish community newspaper, serve as primary sources in writing Rochester Jewish history from 1920 to 1945. My assessment of both sources reveals that Rochester Jewish community during this time period largely fit in the broader mold of American Jewish history. The interviews in the collection were conducted in 1976. Several considerations apply: the problem of hindsight in the post-Holocaust world and an inflated perception of the "good old days," as much had changed since the war and the Depression. The interviewers exhibited skepticism at times but allowed the interviewees to talk. Overall, the picture emerging from the interviews of the Jewish neighborhood on Joseph Avenue was very rosy. The *Jewish Ledger* published articles about important contemporary issues that concerned the community, particularly Zionism and fraternal organizations. The *Jewish Ledger* consistently reflected the interviewees' opinions and values. Nonetheless, these sources left many gaps that I had to draw conclusions from about general American Jewish history and conduct personal interviews for further information about Rochester.

Rosenberg's book serves as a starting point for this paper, taking on the next historical period of the Great Depression and World War II in Jewish Rochester. With a Jewish population of 30,000 by 1938 in a total city population of over 325,000, Rochester possessed the second largest Jewish population the state of New York, after New York

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

City.<sup>27</sup> The paper will provide an overview of Rochester Jews in the economy and at the University of Rochester and raise the significance of Joseph Avenue as the catalyst for blurred ethnic and religious tensions. These factors led to the development of secure American Jewish identity by 1945 in Rochester. Furthermore, the oral interviews reveal some conflicted claims with membership data relating to number of Jews involved in social and religious organizations. The interviewees insist that Joseph Avenue was a small, insular, and devout community but the numbers for synagogues and major organizations raises the question on the levels of secularization. To resolve this exceptional claim, this paper will also put the interviews in the context of American Jewish history to demonstrate the importance of case studies revealing the complexities of American Jewish history.

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<sup>27</sup> Henry Schneiderman, ed. *The American Jewish Yearbook* 5698. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1937), 749.

## Rochester: City of Quality

Rochester's uniqueness rested in the locals' pride of what the city, located on its beautiful Genesee River in upstate New York, could boast. The Erie Canal streamed through downtown and many of Rochester's growing suburbs; it provided constant shipping and transportation for the city's many industries and the people's leisure enjoyment. The University of Rochester offered high quality education for students and professionals-to-be. The University's Eastman School of Music also attracted talented musicians and showcased many famous symphonies. People found jobs in the University, the medical and legal communities, and many small industries. Rochester, unlike many other cities in the Northeast and Midwest, avoided problems of yellow journalism, massive strikes, degrading conditions in the tenements, et cetera. Instead, the Federal Writers Project's guide accuses Rochesterians of being "too self-complacent" because the locals pointed out that Rochester simply always had a lot to offer for everyone, even during the Depression.<sup>28</sup> We must take note of several important elements that set Rochester apart from other cities in New York and in the Northeast in particular.

First, the American social justice movement literally grew out of Rochester. Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass began their campaigns there. Anthony led Rochester women to take interest in abolition, temperance, education, and equal voting rights. She appealed to the people in Rochester to take interest in civic responsibility and public welfare. The women did not follow Anthony; rather, they led. The second Red

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<sup>28</sup> American Guide Series, *Rochester and Monroe County* (Rochester: Scramtom for the City of Rochester and the Genesee Book Club, 1937), 50.

Cross chapter opened in 1881. The University of Rochester opened its doors to women by 1893.<sup>29</sup> Even women attempted to cast their first votes after the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments were passed in 1868!<sup>30</sup>

Second, Rochester's economy largely depended on small industries, not large monopolies. Its citizens gave Rochester different nicknames over time that reflected the current industrial boom: "The Flour City," "The Flower City," and "City of Homes." "The Flour City" was coined in the 1820s after the completion of the Erie Canal allowed the local flour businesses to ship thousands of barrels a day cheaply.<sup>31</sup> "The Flower City" came when the nursery industries boomed in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and beautified the city.<sup>32</sup> Lastly, "the City of Homes" came in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when more than 43% of the population owned homes before the Depression.<sup>33</sup> Even as some of the larger companies such as Gleason Works (machinery for dentistry and automobiles) grew, their specialized and highly technical production came in limited quantities by comparison with mass-production companies elsewhere.<sup>34</sup>

Though Rochester saw cyclical trends, several businesses remained the mainstays, consistently supporting the economy. The longest running industry, clothing making, dated back to the 1820s with the shoe makers. But when the German Jews came in 1843, they brought their skills and capital to the city to become leaders of Rochester's men's clothing industry. This particular industry boomed after the Civil War as more and more Jewish immigrants filed in. The German Jews paved the way for Rochester's small

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-68.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>34</sup> Blake Kelvey, *Rochester: An Emerging Metropolis 1925-1961*. (Rochester: Christopher Press, 1961), 16.



industries characteristically; they opened up a large number of small shops that allowed for greater diversity of fabric and attention to custom tailoring. In fact, by 1933, only few of those businesses had actually merged. The clothing trade influenced the development of accessories industries owned by non-Jews.<sup>35</sup>

Though tailoring and clothing manufacturing remained strong through early 20<sup>th</sup> century, two new labor gentile monopolies grew in 1920s: Eastman Kodak and Bausch and Lomb. They came to define Rochester for the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century even as the Jews slowly moved away from clothing manufacturing by 1950s. These companies changed the employment landscape, with a profound negative effect on the second-generation and highly educated Jews until after World War II. Eastman Kodak and Bausch and Lomb required employees with degrees in chemistry and physics for its optical and camera development. These two companies came to be Rochester's largest employers and nationally renowned by 1930s.<sup>36</sup>

The University of Rochester easily fed these companies its science graduates and they were all gentiles, no Jews. The University rejected many Jewish applicants to maintain its quota. Similar to other universities like Harvard and in cities with significant Jewish population, the University of Rochester maintained a quota in proportion to the class.<sup>37</sup> For example, Jews made up only 8% of admitted classes. In medical school, only two of forty-two students were Jewish. Dr. Norris Shapiro recalled the dean of

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<sup>35</sup> American Guide Series, *Rochester and Monroe County*, 106.

<sup>36</sup> Kelvey, *Rochester: An Emerging Metropolis*, 17.

<sup>37</sup> Wenger, *Jewish Americans*, 200.

medical school warning him of discrimination in the admissions process.<sup>38</sup> Despite the quota, many Jews applied to the University for merit scholarships.<sup>39</sup>

Therefore, despite their high levels of education, Jews could not apply for employment in these lucrative companies. The Jews generally perceived that companies practiced discriminatory hiring, particularly during the rise of anti-Semitism in the 1930s. Norris Shapiro graduated from the University with a degree in Chemistry and he recalled that “it was pretty well-accepted that most Jews who graduated in Chemistry would have to go elsewhere to get a job.”<sup>40</sup> Garson Meyers, another graduate with a Chemistry degree, agreed. However, he lucked out in attaining employment with Kodak in the late 1910s before anti-Semitism increased in the 1920s and 1930s. His interviewer at Kodak took greater consideration in Meyer’s competency than his ethnic and religious background. Meyer’s supervisor also gave him his own lab where Meyers had the power to hire more Jews for Kodak.<sup>41</sup> Otherwise, the companies limited the Jews to the finance departments or the Jews were out of the picture.<sup>42</sup> Yet, this all fell under the general perception that Jews should know their place in American society. If quotas and restricted existed in several places, then any gentile-run institution would close its doors to the Jews. Furthermore, it was before the Equal Employment Opportunity Act in 1964 and until then, employers legally could refuse jobs to the Jews regardless of their

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<sup>38</sup> Kelvey, *Rochester: An Emerging Metropolis*, 4.

<sup>39</sup> Norris Shapiro, interviewed by Brian Mitchell, June 10, 1976, Rochester Jewish Oral History Project, University of Rochester, 5.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>41</sup> Garson Meyers, interviewed by Brian Mitchell, Rochester Jewish Oral History Project, University of Rochester, 19.

<sup>42</sup> Elliott Landsman, e-mail message to author, November 9, 2007.

qualification.<sup>43</sup> For the Jews trying to fit in American society, it was seen as important to avoid any disruption that would exacerbate any tensions between them and the gentiles.

Even if these big employers did not typically employ the rising number of white-collared Jews, these successful companies kept Rochester out of the brunt of the Depression. Historian Blake Kelvey points out several factors that kept Rochester afloat compared to Washington or New York City. First, people remained confident in their production and the soundness of Rochester's banks, both steady since early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Second, innovative industrial leaders, skilled workers, and a lively culture contributed to the prosperity and self-sufficiency of Rochester's economy. Lastly, by 1930, Rochester had revamped its government system for greater efficiency.<sup>44</sup>

All of these elements, social justice, economy, and the condition that Rochester was in during the Depression, influenced the Jews in Rochester during the interwar years. These particular outside factors contributed to how the Jews would shape their community and American Jewish identity for the future.

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<sup>43</sup> Wenger, *Jewish Americans*, 200.

<sup>44</sup> Kelvey, *Rochester: An Emerging Metropolis*, 55.

## **At Home in Jewish Rochester: The 1920s and 1930s**

Most Jews lived within a mile or two radius from Joseph Avenue, the heart of Jewish Rochester. Cohen's deli restaurant, the first men's department store, several kosher butchers, grocery stores, and many shuls lined this street. Joseph Avenue provided everything that a Rochesterian, Jew or gentile, could ever need within walking distance between shops. Children played along the sidewalks and walked to Public School No. 9 around the corner from their homes. The Jewish Home for the Aged and Children, in separate buildings respectively, were also situated not far from Joseph Avenue. In essence, Jewish Rochester mirrored many other ethnic Jewish neighborhoods all over the country in major cities with its own community, economy, and social and religious life. But it also had its own special ways reflecting Rochester's unique characteristics.

Although Joseph Avenue was the only central area for Rochester Jewish community, many more than several thousand Jews lived in Rochester. In fact, *American Jewish Yearbook*, by American Jewish Committee, found that over 33,000 Jews lived in Rochester area by 1938.<sup>45</sup> The 1930 U.S. government census figured the total population of Rochester at 328,152, making it the third largest city in New York State.<sup>46</sup> The Jews of Rochester thus comprised about 10% of the total population and Rochester had the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest proportion of Jews after New York City (where 27% of the population was Jewish).<sup>47</sup> The Bureau of Jewish Statistics in 1917 and 1918 compiled a survey and calculated estimates of Jewish population in various sized cities. It concluded that any

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<sup>45</sup> Schneiderman, *The American Jewish Yearbook* 5698. 749.

<sup>46</sup> American Guide Series, *Rochester and Monroe County*, 43.

<sup>47</sup> See Moore, Diner, and Wenger.

city that had population of over 100,000 people had an average of 4.5% of Jews within that population. Therefore, in this case, it listed New York City as an exception to this rule. There were nine other cities where Jews totaled more than 10% of the city's population, and presumably Rochester was one of them.<sup>48</sup> The population of Rochester Jews stabilized as in elsewhere in the United States after the 1924 Immigration Act and it barely declined until after the move to the suburbs in the 1950s. Stability in the Jewish population was one of the major factors in the development of American Jewish culture Rochester-style. This also strengthened the Jewish community during the interwar years.

A "community" could be defined in two ways. First, people have the basic idea of community as a group of people serving and watching out for each other. Second, one area would define its community differently from another based upon the dynamics of the group. For example, New York City's Jews in the 1930s was not one large community. Wenger characterizes these particular Jews, "the sense of community, constructed differently in each neighborhood, shaped the rhythm and tone of Jewish life in the 1930s, offering Jew a sense of security in hard times."<sup>49</sup> In Rochester, Joseph Avenue defined the Jewish community in Rochester albeit not the representation of American Jewry. Yet, two local historians' viewpoint applied to all Jews, "What counted was their irreducible sense of community, the expressiveness of their own language, the sights and smells of their neighborhood and the sense of responsibility they felt for their own."<sup>50</sup> Regardless of divergence among American Jews, the Jews carried their definition of community from Europe to America. America's offer of greater freedom and

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<sup>48</sup> "Directory of Jewish Local Organizations in the United States," *American Jewish Yearbook*, 20 (1918-1919), 339-78; Weissbaum, *Jewish Life in Small Town America: A History*, 18.

<sup>49</sup> Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 95.

<sup>50</sup> Michael Dobkowski and Barbara I. Lovenheim, *A Family Among Families: The Jewish Home of Rochester* (Rochester: Jewish Home Foundation, 1998), 6.

independence for the Jews separated their new American experience from their old country. Furthermore, as Sarna explained, America changed the Jews' attitudes and perspectives. Democracy, liberty of conscience, church-state separation, and voluntarism all allowed Jews to redefine what Judaism would mean in America. Economic opportunities also reshaped the Jews' lives.<sup>51</sup> In all, America transformed the Jews' perception of themselves but the Jews' common roots in helping one another remained unaltered.

For Rochester Jews, Joseph Avenue gave birth to important elements that still exist today: kosher butcher and tailoring businesses, the Jewish Home (for the Aged), the Jewish Community Council (now the Jewish Federation), and synagogues of different streams. Joseph Avenue was the heart since the arrival of German Jews in 1840s until 1945. The German Jews gradually moved out of Joseph Avenue as the influx of Eastern European Jews came in between 1900 and 1924.<sup>52</sup> By coming here, the Eastern European Jews could pick up the rhythm and tone of Rochester Jewish community. But they also changed it with their own traditions and ideas. Joseph Avenue was a poor neighborhood, granted, but its rich history and community affairs became the pride of Rochester Jewry. Yet all the changes brought about tensions between the German and Eastern European Jewry in every aspect of American Jewish life from employment to social organizations to synagogues. The 1950s saw a shift in internal migration of the Jews from Joseph Avenue out to Monroe Avenue in Brighton; the Jews still brought the

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<sup>51</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, xvi.

<sup>52</sup> Irving and Eugenia Ruderman, interviewed by Dennis Klein, July 11, 1977, Rochester Jewish Oral History Project, University of Rochester, 31; Peter Eisenstadt. *Affirming the Covenant: A History of Temple B'rith Kodesh, Rochester, New York 1848-1998*. (Syracuse University: Syracuse, 1999), 144.

institutions with them. They did not abandon them but decisively closed some places for various reasons such as the Jewish Children's Home and Cohen's restaurant.

The history and development of Rochester's economy in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was closely linked with the growth of the Jewish population. The economic history reveals the symbiotic tensions between the German Jews and Eastern European Jews. The Federal Writers Project guide described the Jews' relationship to Rochester's economy, "[the Jews] lent their genius to the development of industry and commerce."<sup>53</sup> The highly skilled and educated German Jews came to Rochester in 1840s and brought their capital with them to develop a clothing industry. Quickly, this Jewish owned industry became established as a mainstay of Rochester's economy after it saved Rochester's economy from the agricultural depression in 1850s and provided many jobs for the new wave of Jewish immigrants in 1870s from Poland. Some of the leading factories included Michaels Stern, L. Aldier Brothers, Levy-Adler, H.C. Cohn, and Hickey-Freeman.<sup>54</sup> Its decentralized system allowed for a wider variety of choices and offerings both for the worker and the consumer. At the same time, many locals barely noticed the impact of this particular clothing industry. A local historian observes, "The sewing machine is already doing more than the water power can do hereafter. The important industry of clothing manufacture is one of the most extensive and important in our city." Then he praises the Jews' "thorough" thinking process and credits their large capital for breaking the ground for an alternative industry to water power.<sup>55</sup> By late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the clothing industry's financial success earned the locals' trust in the companies to buoy Rochester's economy during difficult agricultural times. Furthermore, the

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<sup>53</sup> American Guide Series, *Rochester and Monroe County*, 48.

<sup>54</sup> Dobkowski and Lovenheim, *A Family Among Families*, 2.

<sup>55</sup> Rosenberg, *Jewish Community in Rochester*, 9-10.

citizens would also appreciate the Jews' unyielding power and influence over the economy during mass immigration. The German Jews could easily hire the impoverished Eastern European Jews for employment without increasing the Americans' fear of competition at any time. Yet the Eastern European Jews found their working conditions appalling in the 1880s despite companies being owned by their own brethren.<sup>56</sup> In fear of an uprising by the Eastern European Jews, twenty-one German-Jewish businessmen formed the Rochester Clothier Exchange in order to develop uniform policies and practices, including refusal to recognize any union activities.<sup>57</sup>

Soon enough, the Eastern European Jews retaliated with collective action. They expected a promise of satisfactory working conditions and wages but like elsewhere in the United States, they were poor. First, they participated in Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor. From the beginning of their immigrant days, they barraged the industrialists with strikes.<sup>58</sup> The first chapter of Amalgamated Workers was in New York City and the second came to Rochester after Amalgamated hosted its first convention there in 1916. Jews in Amalgamated fought for better working conditions while communicating in Yiddish, Amalgamated's mother tongue.<sup>59</sup> Amalgamated was all-Jewish since the garment workers were generally Jewish so no other ethnic group joined in the cause. Like other unions, it focused on collective bargaining and arbitration to industrial relations in order to reduce the number of strikes and lockouts, especially by 1920s. The 1930s hardly saw any strikes in Rochester that the Federal Workers Project

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 123-124.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>58</sup> Phyllis Kasdin, *The Future Begins with the Past: An Archives Exhibit of Jewish Rochester* (Rochester: Fossil Press, 2005), 82.

<sup>59</sup> Rosenberg, *Jewish Community in Rochester*, 155-156.



praised the relationship between the workers and employers as “so well adjusted that for an 18-month period not a single grievance was brought before the arbitrator [in 1933].”<sup>60</sup> The strain between the Jewish industrialists and workers reflected many of the tensions in the German Jew-Eastern European Jew relationship. The formation of these organizations exacerbated this conflict because of economic class differences. German Jews had capital from Germany and made profits. Arthur Lowenthal, owner of Lowenthal and Sons Knitting Mills, described the German Jews’ egotistical attitude, “[the] definite display on the part of the German Jew was his own opinion of superiority.” He acknowledged that he avoided hiring Jews as much as possible because his business was not unionized and he did not want to deal with the strikes.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, the Eastern European Jews came to America with no money and had to start from scratch.

The new organizations also forced the German Jews and Eastern European Jews to confront their differences. The meetings started out of interest for the Jewish community and Jews’ major contribution to Rochester’s economy. In 1919, the two groups signed an agreement that engendered a new mutual relationship. In 1923, the union sought to restore the wages after a wage cut in 1921 to avoid upsets within its ranks. In 1926, Rochester Clothier Workers increased its wages modestly, and other companies followed suit to avoid strikes. By 1928, some members merged their factories, or took their own paths and these moves positively affected their relationship with Amalgamated. Both sides wanted stability in the workplace and after another contract was signed, the Rochester Clothier Workers’ membership exploded to 10,000 workers, making this particular labor sector of the city as the forerunner of labor relations

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<sup>60</sup> American Guide Series, *Rochester and Monroe County*, 113-114.

<sup>61</sup> Arthur Lowenthal, interviewed by Tina Isaacs, June 21, 1976, Rochester Jewish Oral History Project, University of Rochester, 5-6.

in Rochester.<sup>62</sup> Rochester in general provided a high quality of life, so that workers had little reason to complain about their working conditions even in many small businesses which actually never unionized. Jews led most of the way for labor relations and the employers' fair treatment of their workers. The magnitude of strikes never reached the same levels as in the Midwest and in New York City partly due to Rochester's lack of big industries.<sup>63</sup>

To prove the impact of Amalgamated's strength and influence on Rochester's union workers and employers, Rochester historian Blake Kelvey notes only several small-scale strikes largely related to the relief projects contrasted to the ones in the Midwest which were offensives against the employers. After the implementation of Section 7a of the National (Industrial) Recovery Administration strikes revived in Rochester in 1933. The shoe industry began the first strike and then the clothing industry came several weeks later; both effectively forced some of the industrialists to join the workers' associations to safeguard their interests. In addition, Amalgamated nearly eliminated its competition, United Garment Workers, from all companies except for one. Otherwise, Rochester saw some series of walkouts by the relief workers in 1934 and a couple of isolated strikes throughout the New Deal period.<sup>64</sup>

Aside from the major contributions that the Jews made to Rochester's economy in clothing manufactures, they opened up businesses along Joseph Avenue. While the clothing industry remained an important part of Jews' economic life in Rochester, the 1920s saw diversification in occupations that would serve well for the Jews in the 1930s.

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<sup>62</sup> Kelvey, *Rochester: An Emerging Metropolis*, 19.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*; Shepard and Fran Nusbaum, interviewed by Nancy Rosenbloom, July 15, 1976, Rochester Jewish Oral History Project, University of Rochester, 69.

<sup>64</sup> Kelvey, *Rochester: An Emerging Metropolis*, 73, 77, 82, 85

Many of the mom-and-pop stores belonged to the Eastern European Jews who earned their savings from their old jobs in the clothing industries when the first came in 1900s. They set up retail, knitting works, and grocery chains, and so forth.<sup>65</sup> Many Jews in the medical, dental, and law professions ran their own practices as they could not join gentile practices that refused to accept Jews. It must be noted that the growing number of Jews in white-collared professions originated in second-generation Eastern European Jews seeking to Americanize their occupations regardless of barriers in the gentile world.<sup>66</sup> Rosenberg observes that not only working in white-collar jobs sped up the process of Americanization but it stimulated the unity between the Eastern European Jews and the German Jews.<sup>67</sup> By 1930, the economic and occupational gap between the two groups would be closing.

All of the Jews, regardless of gentile attitudes, had all kinds of clientele walk through their doors including Poles, blacks, and gentiles. For example, Bess and Jack Cohen, owners of the famed Cohen's restaurant which opened in 1934, welcomed inner city people and truckers for breakfast in the mornings. They served professionals for lunch. They offered special deals with the University of Rochester students for a 10% discount on their meals. The students took advantage of this especially on Sundays when gentiles closed their businesses. The Cohens and their gentile employees made sandwiches all day and delivered food to the campus. Even the students' parents called up the Cohens to assure that their children were being fed well with home-style cooking

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<sup>65</sup> Rosenberg, *Jewish Community in Rochester*, 161-162; Kasdin, *The Future Begins with the Past*, 82.

<sup>66</sup> Rosenberg, *Jewish Community in Rochester*, 158; Hasia Diner, *A New Promised Land: A History of Jews in America* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2003), 73.

<sup>67</sup> Rosenberg, *Jewish Community in Rochester*, 162.

and offered credit if the student had no money.<sup>68</sup> The businesses on Joseph Avenue provided a one-stop for everything a Rochesterian living downtown could ever need. The diversity in businesses reflected the growing desire of the Jews to serve their friends and develop a community. The easing tensions between German Jews and Eastern European Jews from the heyday of class differences, strikes, and unions led to compromises for the better of the community by the late 1920s.

Jews called their community on Joseph Avenue “home.” Its diversity lay in the contributions of different Jews who brought over their culture, religion, and customs. The people greeted each other in Russian, Polish, German, Yiddish, or broken English.<sup>69</sup> An adult Jewish couple summed up the vibrancy and insularity: on Saturday nights and Sundays Jews from all over shopped and walked up and down to visit their kosher butchers, bakers, tailors, and whoever else they could patronize.<sup>70</sup> The children found instant friends and play dates, saw adults running errands, popped in Keilson’s Drugstore for ice cream, and *shul* hopped with their families on the high holidays.<sup>71</sup> The ten-block long street had over ten Orthodox shuls spread along on side streets.<sup>72</sup> The Reform synagogue, Temple B’rith Kodesh, and the Conservative synagogue, Temple Beth El built only less than two miles away at most. A public library stood in the corner

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<sup>68</sup> Jack and Bess Cohen, interviewed by Tina Isaacs, June 14, 1976, Rochester Jewish Oral History Project, University of Rochester, 8.

<sup>69</sup> Ruth Lempert, “Growing Up in the Old Neighborhood: A Memoir of Joseph Avenue, Part Two,” *Rochester History* 54, No. 3. (Summer 2002): 7.

<sup>70</sup> Shephard and Fan Nusbaum, interviewed by Nancy Rosenbloom, July 15, 1976, Rochester Jewish Oral History Project, University of Rochester, 8.

<sup>71</sup> Jack Wolsky, interviewed by Dennis B. Klein, July 13, 1976, Rochester Jewish Oral History Project, University of Rochester, 34; Leon Sturman, interviewed by Brian Mitchell, July 8, 1976, Rochester Jewish Oral History Project, University of Rochester, 42; Ruth Lempert, “Growing Up in the Old Neighborhood,” 8.

<sup>72</sup> Dobkowski and Lovenheim, *A Family Among Families*, 5.

intersecting with Selinger Street for Jews to socialize.<sup>73</sup> New immigrants flocked to Public School No. 9 for evening English classes.<sup>74</sup> Everyone knew each other, including famous public figures like Rabbi Philip Bernstein of Temple B'rith Kodesh. People caught the trolley that ran all the way to Charlotte Beach.<sup>75</sup> All kinds of businesses dotted the street, primarily Jewish owned. It was more or less a large ghetto in nature.

Initially, the German Jews lived on Joseph Avenue until the mass immigration changed the landscape of Rochester's Jewish neighborhoods. German Jews often deserted their old neighborhood when the Eastern European Jews came to America. The internal migration in Rochester lasted from 1900s to the 1930s when neighborhoods and streets became defined by ethnicity and economic classes. To begin with, the tenement housing that lined Joseph Avenue represented poor economic status as Jews had to rent. When Jews climbed the economic ladder, they moved out of the tenements into larger two to four family homes on the side streets. Diner noted that this migration and trade up for better housing reflected the Jews' self-worth as Americans, striving for the best.<sup>76</sup> Rochesterians did not name the city as "City of Homes" for nothing—Jews actually owned homes once they moved off Joseph Avenue.<sup>77</sup> The Russian Jews clustered on Vienna, North, and Kelly Streets.<sup>78</sup> They shared Baden and Hanover with the Polish Jews. The rest of the Polish Jews lived on Hudson, Chapman, Clinton, and St. Paul.<sup>79</sup> German Jews moved to Brighton on Highland Avenue. Despite facing antisemitism from

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<sup>73</sup> Wolsky, interview, 34.

<sup>74</sup> Nusbaum, interview, 9.

<sup>75</sup> Wolsky, interview, 50.

<sup>76</sup> Diner, *Jews of the United States*, 240.

<sup>77</sup> Wolsky, interview, 31, 50.

<sup>78</sup> Alfred Landon, interviewed by Tina Isaacs, July 23, 1976, Rochester Jewish Oral History Project, University of Rochester, 6; Elizabeth Schwartz, interviewed by Dennis B. Klein, June 2, 1976, Rochester Jewish Oral History Project, University of Rochester, 13.

<sup>79</sup> Nusbaum, interview, 10.

landlords and sellers offering the basement or nothing, Jews also lived in gentile neighborhoods. Some of the gentile families did eventually move out by 1940s. Others noticed the Jews' well-kept lawns and accepted the Jews as good neighbors. The wealthier Eastern European Jews lived down on Park Avenue, St. Paul, Conkey, and Harvard Streets. The German Jews lived on North Goodman Street and East Avenue.<sup>80</sup> Some Jews, primarily German Jews, chose to live in non-Jewish neighborhoods like Clifford Lovenheim's family on Sawyer St and Arthur Lowenthal on South Union Street.<sup>81</sup> The demographic spread of Rochester Jewry could compare to what Beth Wenger noted in Jewish New York City, "[Jews] creat[ed] new ethnic enclaves, [and they] continued to live together with other Jews in neighborhoods where they built a distinct Jewish culture."<sup>82</sup> The neighborhoods reveal the economic and ethnic diversity of Rochester Jewry and yet, Joseph Avenue remained the central area for the Jews to gather.

Joseph Avenue housed several alternative living institutions that reflected the strength and concern of the Jewish community to ensure that everyone had a warm place to stay. They became integrated into the Jewish community. These residents lived in non-traditional homes such as the Baden Street Settlement, Jewish Children's Home, and the Jewish Home for the Aged. Though only the Jewish Home for the Aged survived past 1947, Baden Street and Children's Home played important roles. The Jewish Children's Home grew out of the old Jewish Orphan Asylum and Jewish Sheltering Home to provide better environment for Eastern European children in 1914 on Gorham

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<sup>80</sup> Kasdin, *The Future Begins with the Past*, 106.

<sup>81</sup> Clifford Lovenheim, interviewed by Brian Mitchell, July 7, 1976, Rochester Jewish Oral History Project, University of Rochester, 4; Arthur Lowenthal, interview, 3.

<sup>82</sup> Wenger, *Jewish Americans*, 198.

Street. The German Jews also had their own Children's Home on Genesee and South Streets.<sup>83</sup> The Jewish Children's Home established a mission to create a place of refuge for children in a small community with modest shelter so that the children would have a chance to grow and give back to the community.<sup>84</sup> It also gave a place for the children to develop their Jewish identity in a religious sense and to socialize as it attracted many programs such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters. While orphanages were not uncommon during these years, by no means did the community treat the children as lowlifes as in big cities. Mothers came from all over to spread their nurturing love along with older children's mentoring. The Children's Home received a fair amount of philanthropic support.<sup>85</sup> From 1914 to 1946, the Children's Home accepted 145 applications and housed 285 children.<sup>86</sup> These applications revealed a more detailed picture of the Jewish family in the 1930s. They showed a changing trend in reasons for the children's admission. Children originally came because of poverty or parental death. When the Depression came, children came from broken families due to rising divorce rates. Regardless of the family situation, parents often lived nearby and visited their children frequently.<sup>87</sup> The Jewish community praised the Jewish Children's Home and its director, Jacob Hollander, for providing a sense of real home for the children. Fan Nusbaum gushed, "I never saw a warmer, a more decent, a more gracious style of children than that Jewish Home." She concluded, "And proof of the fact is that each one of those children grew up and established decent, fine family lives."<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Nusbaum, interview, 34-35.

<sup>84</sup> Howard Goldstein, *The Home on Gorham Street and the Voices of Its Children*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 1996), 194.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-63.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-78.

<sup>88</sup> Nusbaum, interview, 34.

The German Jews opened up a place for the new Eastern European immigrants in 1901 with Baden Street Settlement. They originally formed this to help the Eastern European Jews assimilate to American society by offering English, cooking, and sanitation lessons. Soon enough, it became a place for recreation and low-cost health services.<sup>89</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s, it functioned primarily as a place for meetings within the Jewish community, because Jews needed a neutral place to congregate other than synagogues and private homes.<sup>90</sup>

The Jewish Home of Rochester brought the entire community— both German and Eastern European Jews— together to aid the elderly in 1921. The founders had a vision: “It should be a real Home in every way, and that our attitude towards the aged should be one of sympathy.”<sup>91</sup> Aged Jews faced problems living in institutions because understaffed institutions elsewhere could not meet their needs, especially provisions for Shabbat and kosher meals and arrangements for married couples to live together. The Home filled the void and provided an atmosphere of community and respect that these Jews knew from their old countries. Once the Home became established with its first residents, local charities took interest and volunteered to help and support with musical entertainment and readings. They helped to buy a second house next door to the original house on St. Paul within seven months. In the 1920s, the community added programs and consequently its attention revolved around the Home to provide the residents with a sense of belonging in the community and Jewish traditions. The National Council of Jewish Women held Sunday schools. A committee facilitated the relationships between the residents and their families. Volunteers took the residents out on road trips to Lake

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<sup>89</sup> Kasdin, *The Future Begins with the Past*, 21.

<sup>90</sup> Shephard and Fan Nusbaum, interview, 10.

<sup>91</sup> Dobkowski and Lovenheim, *A Family Among Families*, 16.



Ontario and Corbett's Glen in Brighton when cars became available. For the resident, the community and other residents became their family where they could live, eat, pray, and party with. Businesses on Joseph Avenue thrived on aged Jews' enjoyment of eating, drinking, and reading. Some businesses donated newspapers and groceries.<sup>92</sup>

During the Depression, the Home suffered hard times as it heavily relied on donations and Jewish philanthropists cut back on their charity. The Board of Directors had an option to evict the mentally ill and crippled to save money, but they would not do so because "it was not the Jewish way." It also desperately needed another building to reduce the overcrowding and facilitate the medical care for increasing number of ill patients. By 1936, miraculously enough money came through for a new, fire-proof brick one story infirmary with medical rooms thanks to a generous \$45,000 donation.<sup>93</sup> In addition, the Social Security Act of 1935 lifted some of the financial burdens on the Home by providing guaranteed income for the elderly to cover their basic needs. There was also a growing number of sources such as the Community Chest and health insurance payments. The Board needed as much funding as possible because the Depression forced the elderly to find places to stay in order to receive their social security checks— they could not live in "poorhouses." This resulted in a greater number of applications and some of them only needed infirmary care for which the Home referred them to the local hospitals. The quality of life increased gradually again. Despite these hard times, the community continued to donate food, cleaning services, and dental care.<sup>94</sup> By 1937, people regularly included the Home in their wills and checks for bar mitzvah.<sup>95</sup> The

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 12, 19, 25, 36.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-45.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

Home had fulfilled its mission as Lester Nusbaum said in front of his peers on the Board, “This home has done a great deal to remove the terror of old age, prevent the separation of old couples, and remove the stigma of pauperism. It has made it possible for these old people to feel that this is their home...”<sup>96</sup>

The Jewish Home served more than a haven for the elderly; its cause rallied the Jewish community based upon the Jewish principle of caring for each other like family members. Thus, the elders felt as if they were truly part of the Joseph Avenue community. For them, the children in the orphanages, and the users of Baden Street settlement, these institutions were part of the community, not simply philanthropic cases.

For Jews, Joseph Avenue was a street for socialization and business, not a place to live. Joseph Avenue would be home for all Rochester Jews regardless of their ethnicity or economic status or social position. Wenger writes that such a scenario provided a sense of familiarity for the Jews, especially in uncertain times like the Great Depression. Jews could claim the streets, parks, and stores as their homes away from home. For Rochester Jews, they made Joseph Avenue as their home and the center of their community, and source of their Rochester American Jewish identity.<sup>97</sup>

The Jews’ identification with Joseph Avenue as their territory impacted their lives during the Depression. By 1930, Joseph Avenue had become a self-sufficient street because a Jew could find his butcher, grocer, and baker, and place of entertainment and worship. What Joseph Avenue offered allowed Rochester Jews to survive the hard times. Furthermore, the Jews’ personal obligation to care for each other came into major play because of their common roots. Jews supported each other through the Depression by

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>97</sup> Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 96.

patronizing each others' businesses and provided financial assistance when needed. This action allowed the larger Jewish businesses to continue thriving within the ethnic economy. The patronization of these businesses allowed them to become important aspects of Rochester Jewish community such as A&P, Cohen's restaurant, and the Hickey and Freeman store until their closing decades later.<sup>98</sup> This fostered the creation of an "ethnic economy" that would increase the economic mobility of the Jews during the Depression and in an era of antisemitism.<sup>99</sup> Sarna elaborates that this also "transform[ed] the faith and ancestry that antisemites considered a liability into productive asset."<sup>100</sup> The Nusbaums did not cut their staff's salary in their clothing store. They continued to pay them ten dollars a week. The tailors still made twenty-five dollars a week which was "comfortable."<sup>101</sup>

The relationship between the Jews demonstrated the strength of the network in Rochester Jewish community and opportunities for greater economic and communal stability and growth.<sup>102</sup> Even at personal level, Jews treated each other as family members through lending money and leaving anonymous items. For example, Elliott Landsman recalled receiving packages of meat from his boss to deliver to poor Jewish families and being told to "drop them off and run away."<sup>103</sup> Jews refused to go on relief. Jack Wolsky recalled how his father sold apples on a street corner throughout the Depression. He remembers that a Jewish family who had taken relief suddenly became the subject of malicious neighborhood gossip. "The Irish could do what they want," he

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>99</sup> Wenger, *Jewish Americans*, 200.

<sup>100</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, 220.

<sup>101</sup> Nusbaum, interview, 22.

<sup>102</sup> Wolsky, interview, 36.

<sup>103</sup> Elliott Landsman, interview with author, 17 February 2008.

said, ‘But for a Jewish family to take relief that was really a disgrace.’<sup>104</sup> Wenger explains this Jewish mentality during the Depression, “the distinction between complete destitution and simply being poor seemed to be the issue of hunger...Jews reported living in diminished circumstances but drew the line between themselves and others who lacked food, clothing, or housing.”<sup>105</sup> In addition, many of the Jews in Rochester worked in the garment industries, medical or law professions, and family businesses. Few went into blue collared jobs because these Jews had already found jobs through networking when they arrived in Rochester. To further elaborate the intricate network in Rochester Jewish community, Leon Sturman elucidates: “family life in the home was pretty neighborhood centered.”<sup>106</sup> Though it was a community of 30,000 Jews, the Jews managed such a community that that they could find their niche during the Depression.

The Rochester Jewish community evolved over decades to establish cohesiveness. Tensions had risen when the German Jews and Eastern European Jews encountered each other for the first time. Eventually, these groups leveled their class differences, especially when the Eastern European Jews began climbing the economic ladder. Yet, the differences prevailed in the neighborhoods. Most significantly, Joseph Avenue brought everyone together for the good of the Jewish people, including caring for the children and the elderly.

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<sup>104</sup> Wolsky, interview, 54.

<sup>105</sup> Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 17.

<sup>106</sup> Sturman, interview, 48.

## **Changing Face of American Judaism and Identity**

American Judaism, as a religious faith, began with the first settlement of the Sephardic Dutch Jews in 1654 but like America's social history, it continued to change with each new wave of immigration of Jews. Combined with each new immigrant group's cultural norms and plurality and religious freedom in American society, American Judaism would take on a different form. By 1940, the concept of American Judaism transformed from a simple faith in God and the Torah into a core belief system with three values: sociability, philanthropy, and individuality developed during the Great Depression in the United States. American Judaism stood as a unifying compromise for American Jews seeking to maintain connections to their past and with each other while disagreeing on the specifics of their family and community traditions and practices. Its development paralleled with America's progression in shaping its identity, only coming to stabilization just prior to World War II.

American Judaism's vicissitude was evolutionary although the innovative ideas to maintain its survival in a secular Protestant nation seemed revolutionary. The basic important values of Jewish religion remain unchanged through these trends such as social justice, education, and family. Yet, as the Talmud, a rabbinic text containing analytical interpretations of the Torah, suggests, Jews adhered to these particular traditions through the lens of their lifestyles. For example, German Jewry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century abandoned much of religion observance such as Shabbat and daily prayers in order to become part of secular German society. This resulted from the *hakalah* (Jewish enlightenment) movement that permitted the Jews to make individual choices in regards to their Jewish identity. In Eastern Europe, since the Jews were restricted to certain boundaries, away

from the larger society, they diligently and often pragmatically followed many of the commandments. In both places, how the Jews treated Judaism was a reflection of their own Jewish identity. In Germany, the German Jews saw themselves as Germans first, Jewish second. In the Eastern Europe, on the other hand, the Jews saw themselves as Jews, not Russians or Poles. In the United States with its religious tolerance and freedom, Jews truly had an opportunity to redesign Judaism to their imagination and within their personal comfort. Clearly, German Jews and Eastern European Jews brought over with them in this process their own customs and traditions, which resulted in a major cultural clash. The confrontation of a secular German Jew and a pious Eastern European Jew raised many issues. Slowly, these groups reconciled their differences to create the kind of Judaism that could only be found in America. Historians agree that the impact of America's values upon the Jewish religious communities left very little to debate: American Jews would come to terms with a symbiotic relationship of Judaism and America. Jews felt the difficulty of framing their religiosity in a secular Christian country. Synagogues had largely dominated their lives. They became more pragmatic in their programming and services to alleviate the American Jews' concerns, especially during the Great Depression which would give away new American Judaism that would last for years afterwards.

Prior to the Depression, the deep differences in the Jewish religious community led to fierce competition for congregants and Jews questioning the role of synagogues in their American lives. Synagogues failed to serve its congregations' actual needs for greater flexibility in their rabbis' instructions in order to adapt to the American society. Thus, American Jews either stayed in fear of losing their Jewish identity or became more

secular as they saw no other way to be a Jew.<sup>107</sup> By 1940, Rochester offered upwards of thirty synagogues, mostly Orthodox. This number sufficiently explains the heavy secular population—the demand was too low for every Jew to be affiliated with a synagogue. The German Jews had their own Reform synagogue, Temple B’rith Kodesh. TBK allowed mixed seating, conducted services in German and Hebrew and eventually English, and Jews did not always come to every service.<sup>108</sup> The Eastern European Jews built Orthodox *shuls* around Joseph Avenue, very close to their homes since the Torah permitted travel only by foot on Shabbat. There was not just one *shul* but many to replicate the customs of the towns that the Eastern European Jews came from. Orthodox rabbis often disagreed in their interpretations of the Torah and that resulted in synagogues that ran distinctive services and hired their own ritual slaughterers.<sup>109</sup> Finally, to meet the demand of Eastern European Jews’ desire for greater flexibility in their observance without abandoning their Orthodox roots, a conservative synagogue was born in 1917—Temple Beth El.<sup>110</sup> Each synagogue had its own mission that was so vastly different from others. With such strong individual characters, synagogues encountered difficulties in cooperating for the good of the whole community. By 1922 TBK had membership of 500, Temple Beth El had 360 members, and the ten Orthodox *shuls* had combined membership of 1260.<sup>111</sup>

To juggle the issues of disunity in religious community, growing secularization, and the impact of the Depression, synagogues had to create innovative ways to redefine American Judaism. Judaism needed to appeal to the American Jews by creating an

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<sup>107</sup> Rosenberg, *Jewish Community in Rochester*, 240.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 189-190.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>111</sup> Eisenstadt, *Affirming the Covenant*, 121.

emphasis onto American value of individualism. By 1940s, Rochester Jews would see Judaism in another perspective: The community became the foundation of the new American Judaism, not the authority of the rabbi and the Torah. Participating in the community and interacting with other Jews afforded the Jews freedom of individual expressions that contributed to the community's overall American Jewish character.

The German Jews founded TBK in 1848 in order to preserve Judaism in the United States.<sup>112</sup> Later, Rabbi Max Landsberg, who served from 1871 to 1915, attempted to revitalize Judaism through radical reforms.<sup>113</sup> He preached classical Reform Judaism which he represented as an antithesis to Eastern European Orthodoxy in order to appeal to the apathetic congregation. Reform Judaism offered greater flexibility to work around the Jews' busy American lives. For example, Rabbi Landsberg tried hosting Friday night and Sunday mornings services in order to allow Jews to work on Saturdays. That idea collapsed due to consistently low attendance.<sup>114</sup> Rochester Jews failed to pick up on this concept because of Rabbi Landsberg's cynical criticism and lack of enthusiasm in his presentation. Furthermore, he alienated Eastern European Jews in his rhetoric that their Orthodox views inhibited the progression of Judaism in America. On the flip side, Eastern Europeans rejected the liberal idea of Reform Judaism. Yet, as Rochester's Eastern European Jews adapted to America, they came to recognize TBK as a prominent, vocal synagogue of Rochester's Jewish community and Reform Judaism as a compromising alternative to the Orthodox *shuls*. On the contrary, these "Jews" would play an instrumental role for Judaism's survival in America.<sup>115</sup> The congregation

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<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>114</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, 194.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.



expressed their general dissatisfaction with Rabbi Landsberg and the Board of Trustees concluded that TBK needed a major change.<sup>116</sup>

In 1910, Rabbi Horace Wolf created a new vision for TBK and Rochester Jewish community. It included reconciliation of TBK's tense relationship with its congregants. His vision would come to full realization with his successor, Philip Bernstein. Wolf, noticing that TBK had a rich history of German Jews' community service involvement and its exclusion of Eastern European Jewry, decided to propose goals and solutions to the Board of Trustees. His bold ideas emphasized strengthening TBK's ties with Eastern European Jewry in hopes of unifying connections between them and the German Jews. First, TBK should welcome the newly arrived immigrants by extending services to them including civics classes and child-care during religious service on Saturdays. Second, he strengthened the Sunday school program by increasing enrollment from 100 students to 150 and pushed for more Hebrew instruction by 1920s. Furthermore, he worked tirelessly to welcome the Russian Jews to TBK because he believed that the pious Russians would reestablish stability in waning American Judaism. American Judaism needed a change to combat religion apathy and assimilation.<sup>117</sup> He created audacious dreams, but he died before they were fulfilled. Rosenberg reflects on Wolf's legacy, "It is fair to say, through his labors in his own congregation, by his ardent interest in the world of the "J.Y." [Jewish Young Men's and Women's Association] and as a result of his warmth, interest, and understanding, he was one of the fathers of Rochester's modern Jewish community."<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Eisenstadt, *Affirming the Covenant*, 98.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 115-116.

<sup>118</sup> Rosenberg, *Jewish Community in Rochester*, 194-196.

Rabbi Wolf's successor, Philip Bernstein, became the real architect of TBK's and the Rochester Jewish community's golden years in the 1930s. He built on Wolf's ideas and used his experience to establish authority and revive general interest in the synagogues. He grew up in a conventional Orthodox family but adopted Reform in his teenage years. His rabbi at Beth Israel had resigned from the *shul* to join the Conservative movement. Also the Reform movement's emphasis on tradition, not theology, appealed to young Philip Bernstein. In addition, during the year after his college graduation, he became involved in Young Judea and JY and taught at TBK's Sunday school. At that time, he started looking to Rabbi Wolf as a mentor. Yet, the year spent in Jewish Rochester after his college graduation convinced Rabbi Bernstein to become a Reform rabbi with goals of changing the synagogue and community. When TBK appointed him in 1926, he was only twenty five years old, a pacifist without any prior rabbinical experience. Within a year, he would be senior rabbi after Rabbi Wolf's death. From 1927 on, he became responsible for the community and synagogue activities.<sup>119</sup>

Rabbi Bernstein brought his visions of Reform Judaism and experiences to the community. Reform Judaism, he argued, should be based on "experience and reason," not God. Like Benedict Spinoza and Felix Alder, two Jewish philosophers who denounced theological Judaism, Rabbi Bernstein rejected the notion of transcending to God. Rabbi Bernstein believed that God had no role in the human and cosmological development.<sup>120</sup> For him, Reform Judaism had to be compatible with the reality of science and philosophy. This idea of altering classical Reform Judaism that Rabbi

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<sup>119</sup> Eisenstadt, *Affirming the Covenant*, 127-130.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 133-134.

Landsberg constructed became appropriate during an era of religious depression from 1925 to 1935. At that time, people wanted greater universalism and social justice.<sup>121</sup> Rabbi Bernstein sought to revise Reform Judaism on the basis of reason and teachings and establish Judaism's legitimacy in the context of American history and the Depression.

To serve his congregation's interests, Rabbi Bernstein extended his sermons to cover circumstances in the United States, Germany, and Palestine. The congregation had disliked Rabbi Landsberg's flat, theological sermons and wanted to hear more contemporary topics. Rochester Jews wanted to hear about Jewish politics and social justice more than Torah anecdotes. Rabbi Bernstein spoke about the issues of the day with themes in pacifism, socialism, and Zionism. Rabbi Bernstein gained a reputation as one of the leading American Jewish pacifists as he worked in many different forums. His pacifism rooted in his socialism. He believed that the solutions to the Depression should have basis in fixing the economy to improve morale and wealth and promote social justice.<sup>122</sup> Rabbi Bernstein's approach of reaching the masses was reflected in other synagogues around the country. Wenger discusses her observations of synagogues needing to adapt democratic values and destroy its old elitist image. TBK would adopt many of the resolutions of the congregation leaders in New York City at an assembly created in 1933. The New Deal's spirit of social democracy promoted the idea to the synagogues that they must abolish their social and financial status. Members had to pay dues. Wenger suspects that the Depression forced the elites to reevaluate their position in relation to the growing external pressures of the Depression and faith in America's

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<sup>121</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, pp. 226.

<sup>122</sup> Eisenstadt, *Affirming the Covenant*, pp. 140.

capitalist elites. They needed to reestablish democratic values within the synagogues. She concludes that “by calling for democracy in Jewish congregations and mimicking New Deal program, synagogues portrayed the essential harmony of Jewish and American pursuits.”<sup>123</sup> Peter Eisenstadt, historian for TBK, noted that although Reform Judaism in America had been around for a century, he saw a rebirth with a new core population.<sup>124</sup> That population would change the course of Reform Judaism in America. In TBK, the increasingly affluent Eastern European Jews would soon dominate the leadership with Rabbi Bernstein being its first rabbi of Eastern European descent. Rabbi Bernstein, noting the change in membership demographics, espoused social justice and pushed for strengthening the community’s relationship with TBK. Rabbi Landsberg and his elitist German Jews had marred TBK’s relationship with the community at large. Then Rabbi Bernstein and his new middle-class Eastern Europeans sought to fix TBK’s image in the 1930s. TBK needed its members to survive and to make it work it had to change its definition what synagogue would mean for the community.

Rabbi Bernstein’s efforts to transform TBK’s role attracted the attention of the community. The new programs would provide comfort and inspiration for the Jews in troubling times of the Depression. Often religious leaders in America during crisis hoped that the event would draw people to seek strength in religion.<sup>125</sup> Since the vast majority of Rochester Jewry possessed no synagogue affiliation, Rabbi Bernstein thought that his programs would not only draw new members to TBK but also to see Reform Judaism in different perspective than Rabbi Landsberg’s. Jews wanted to connect Judaism in more relevant terms including the issue of surviving the Great Depression. Sarna noted this

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<sup>123</sup> Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 181.

<sup>124</sup> Eisenstadt, *Affirming the Covenant*, 144.

<sup>125</sup> Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 182.

phenomenon of people accepting Reform Judaism as adherent of social justice.<sup>126</sup> Rabbi Bernstein took advantage of the Depression to emphasize social justice in his sermons and build on Wolf's dream of a more cohesive community. Such goals helped blur the cultural and economic differences between the Eastern European Jews and German Jews.

Rabbi Bernstein wore many hats as he implemented new or improved TBK programs. His experienced leadership and youth became assets in attracting a diverse crowd. In 1930, he started Sunday Night College Group for young Jews who then became his devoted followers. The speeches and dances afterwards lifted many bitter young people's spirits. He motivated the unemployed to remain optimistic and focus on Reform Judaism as a source of solace. These young people would be deeply involved later in other aspects of TBK.<sup>127</sup> TBK ran many other programs such as Sisterhood, the Temple Club, Post Graduate Class, and various Boy and Girl Scouts troops. Despite the excitement of these social opportunities, the community's apathetic attitude towards liturgy remained.

If Rabbi Bernstein could change the meaning of TBK's social organizations as providers of social comfort, the sanctuary needed to reflect the overhaul too. Gradual change would soon become part of TBK's routine for years. First, he successfully reinstated Friday night services (without sermons) after twenty years of absence by 1928. Second, by 1939, he lobbied to eliminate Sunday morning services because he thought people would be more pressed to come on Friday night if he would extend it with a sermon.<sup>128</sup> Furthermore, more Jews could now attend Saturday services due to the New Deal's NRA's symbolic push for five-day work week. Jews could now take off

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<sup>126</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, 224.

<sup>127</sup> Eisenstadt, *Affirming the Covenant*, 145.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

both Saturdays and Sundays.<sup>129</sup> Though he had been able to persuade many of the congregants and members of the Board of Trustees to approve this particular change, it was not until 1941 that it became firmly established. The third change came that would become a large cultural American Jewish tradition: the reinstatement of bar mitzvah. Hebrew also returned to Sunday schools.<sup>130</sup> With the massive changes in the sanctuary and organizations to welcome the greater community, TBK now became a new place for the Jews to congregate.

Although Rabbi Bernstein deserved the public credit for implementing reforms in TBK for the good of the synagogue and the community, he still faced dissent from his own congregation over his Zionist involvement.<sup>131</sup> The Board of Trustees and older members vehemently criticized him for his Zionist views. Unlike many Reform rabbis, Rabbi Bernstein strongly supported Zionism on the basis of his love for the Jewish people and Zionism's mission for a Jewish state.<sup>132</sup> Reform Judaism generally rejected Zionism for two reasons. One, America was Zion, not Palestine. Two, Sarna describes Zionism as "a negation of all that Jewish emancipation and enlightenment stood for."<sup>133</sup> Zionism defeated the purpose of Jewish emancipation in Europe; emancipation left little to desire for a big move to Palestine. Little did the German Jews know when they appointed Rabbi Bernstein that they would come to directly confront Zionism as it became part of the national Jewish political debate in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1937, the Reform leaders would officially support Zionism with Palestine as a center of Jewish culture.<sup>134</sup> Since

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<sup>129</sup> Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 179.

<sup>130</sup> Eisenstadt, *Affirming the Covenant*, 151.

<sup>131</sup> Rosenberg, *Jewish Community in Rochester*, 226.

<sup>132</sup> Eisenstadt, *Affirming the Covenant*, 141.

<sup>133</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, 202.

<sup>134</sup> Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 193.

Rabbi Bernstein already arrived with a Zionist view in 1926, he attracted many people interested in moving towards the left in Judaism but reluctant to abandon their Zionist support. His views attracted a new set of congregants: the Eastern European Jews who were most likely in process of abandoning their Orthodoxy. These Jews advocated Zionism on the basis of returning to Zion, the Jewish homeland, after centuries of exile and persecution in the Pale Settlement.<sup>135</sup> Once Rabbi Bernstein established his senior position, TBK would undergo a transition several years ahead of the national trend. Though classical Zionism, supported by dissident Eastern Europeans, advocated for emigration to Palestine, American Zionism took a more ideological perspective. Overall, it became what Wenger considered “a foundation for Jewish identity and ethnic survival in America.”<sup>136</sup> Sarna affirms Wenger’s position— Zionism had become the “primary leavening agent” for American Jewry.<sup>137</sup> It had found its roots in Rochester at the turn of the century but the issue had remained divisive between Orthodoxy/Conservative and Reform. Now Rabbi Bernstein became the local leader of the movement and that confronted the German Jews’ rejection of the issue. These German Jews’ opposition to Zionism derived from Rabbi Landsberg’s entrenched anti-Zionist views. In fact, these Jews’ adamant opposition to this movement continued until after the war despite Rabbi Bernstein’s attempts to pacify them.<sup>138</sup> Eastern European Jews would soon rally around Rabbi Bernstein and become his ardent supporters during Hitler’s years.

Rabbi Bernstein had to overcome obstacles that were largely rooted in the way the secular Jews dealt with their Jewish identity. These Jews felt uncomfortable negotiating

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<sup>135</sup> Diner, *Jews of the United States*, 89-91.

<sup>136</sup> Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 193.

<sup>137</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, 205.

<sup>138</sup> Eisenstadt, *Affirming the Covenant*, 148.

it with American norms and did not see Judaism beyond as a faith. They did not particularly want to be ostracized by the American public, particularly as antisemitism in America rose in the 1930s. First of all, many of these secular Jews grew up with limited understanding of alternative routes of expressing their Jewish identity in Orthodox households and highly assimilated German families. The shared dreams of Rabbis Bernstein and Wolf sought to expand and reform Judaism by varying ways of expressing Jewish identities. Rabbi Bernstein had to expand social programming, change services, and be involved in the community as a public figure. He wanted the Jews to start exploring and asking questions of how Jewish politics, America's role in Europe, and the future of Jewish people affected them and their children.<sup>139</sup> TBK hosted massive crowds in the 1930s during Rabbi Bernstein's sermons because TBK was the only synagogue in Rochester that allowed complete freedom of speech in the pulpit.<sup>140</sup> In essence, Rabbi Bernstein and the current national Jewish affairs scene provoked the way the Jews thought about their identity in context of the current situations in America and Europe. As with Zionism, this issue of redefining American Judaism extended beyond the realms of TBK to include the Conservative and Orthodox communities.

The major problem that the Jews faced in Orthodox congregations, particularly the children of immigrants, relates to stringent rules of Orthodoxy, incompatible with American public's values, customs, and culture. Yet, some of these Jews felt anxious about leaving their community behind because they desired more laxity for greater integration in American society. By 1910s, the Conservative movement swept across the nation offering just such an alternative to Reform and Orthodox Judaism. As a result,

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<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.



some wealthier and younger Orthodox moved out of Joseph Avenue towards eastern part of the city to build Temple Beth El. In fact, this move caused friction at Beth Israel, their old *shul*, because quite a few of its congregants also wanted to join the Conservative movement. As Sarna demonstrates in his focus on American Judaism as evolutionary process, the Conservative movement grew as a compromise between Reform and Orthodoxy. These former Beth Israel members laid out their goals for their new synagogue that would set it apart from Orthodoxy but not Reform: family pews for men and women, bilingual prayers in English and Hebrew, and Jewish choir and cantor singing without organs. Quickly enough, Temple Beth El saw a boom in its membership from 55 families in 1915 during its planning stage to over 300 members by 1921. The members bought the old Baptist Church on Park Avenue for \$45,000, half the amount of construction for a new building. However, its first few years faced difficulties such as no permanent rabbi and inconsistent services regardless of an increase its membership base beyond 300 families. Despite being drawn to Rabbi Wolf's hearty presence and welcoming arms. Temple Beth El continued to fight for self-sufficiency and independence in its ideas from TBK.<sup>141</sup> By 1925, it began enjoying its strong presence in the eastern part of Jewish Rochester as more families sought to move out of Orthodoxy and out of Joseph Avenue's tenements into homes in Park Avenue neighborhood. It also began to work with TBK on co-hosting social events and earned TBK's respect as an equal member of the community.<sup>142</sup> Many families sent their children to Temple Beth El's Sunday school because of its heavy emphasis on Hebrew and Jewish education and

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<sup>141</sup> Rosenberg, *Jewish Community in Rochester*, 173-176.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

felt that it would be a better place for them.<sup>143</sup> For many Jews seeking to become part of the American society while tentatively holding fast to their traditions, Temple Beth El provided a perfect solution.

The Orthodox community continued to face problems in the 1920s and 1930s after over 300 members left for Temple Beth El or the faith altogether. They lagged in progression and recognition of the increasingly acculturated American Jews. Disunity within this community impeded its movement to catch up with other denominations. Rosenberg identifies some early causes for this beyond different customs. First, the community's structure was neither deep nor broad as evident in its loose term of "chief rabbi." The "chief rabbi" had a role of providing basic guidance for the Orthodox community. Second, ritual slaughtering confronted major issues of legitimacy among the Orthodox. The kosher butchers in Rochester chose to identify with the laws of *Va'ad Hakashruth*, the Hebrew Dietary Association, and its rabbis rather than their own local rabbis.<sup>144</sup> Furthermore, earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there had been huge controversy over kosher meat fraud because butchers deceitfully sold non-kosher meat at lower prices as kosher meat was often more expensive than non-kosher.<sup>145</sup> Orthodox life demanded meticulous attention to its many commandments and America's pluralistic society by no means harmonized with them.

Rosenberg insists that the strength of Orthodox community should not be underestimated. He points out that Orthodoxy in Rochester persisted because of the large wave of earlier pious settlers who established tailor shops and garment businesses. Their work revolved around Jewish calendar, with Shabbat and holidays off. These Jews risked

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<sup>143</sup> Nusbaum, interview, 5.

<sup>144</sup> Rosenberg, *Jewish Community in Rochester*, 182.

<sup>145</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, 162.

their jobs in order to work on Sundays to make up for Shabbat rest because the community would physically attack them for disrupting the peace of Christian Sabbath.<sup>146</sup> Another reason for Orthodoxy's strength had its basis in its religious education providing a scholarly approach to Talmudic learning. However, the schools' enrollment would decline in the 1920s as families moved their children to Temple Beth El's Sunday school in search of broader curriculum.<sup>147</sup>

As families and young people shifted loyalties to synagogues with looser framework of Judaism, the Orthodox leaders began struggling to retain their congregants. These rabbis recognized the need for a singular senior and authoritative voice to represent their interests. In turn, their efforts would demonstrate that the structure had the ability to be unified within the Orthodox community. As Rabbi Bernstein and TBK gained influence over Rochester Jewish community, this shift in loyalty to the Reform congregation pressured the Orthodox rabbis to reform their ways. Membership began dwindling as people began migrating out of Joseph Avenue and bought homes closer to TBK and Temple Beth El.<sup>148</sup> Despite the efforts of the rabbis across the denominations, a larger threat of secularization loomed.

Synagogues were no match for growing secularization among the Jews in Rochester and the rest of America. As the data mentioned earlier revealed, the vast majority of Rochester Jewry possessed no affiliation with a synagogue. Sarna models his definition of secularism after Chaim Zhitlowsky, a Russian-born, Swiss-educated Jew. Zhitlowsky defined Jewish secularism— religion was a “private affair” and education and cultural should have no religious basis. Sarna describes the consideration of “radical

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<sup>146</sup> Rosenberg, *Jewish Community in Rochester*, 183.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>148</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, 183.

causes and the battle for social justice” as the purpose of Jewish secularism. Rabbi Bernstein had quickly attempted to incorporate this issue in TBK, but the issues went deeper than defining Judaism as a religion. The age-old question of “Who is a Jew?” dominated the Jewish community, particularly in the 1940s as Jews struggled to define their Jewish identity in American context during the war against Hitler. In the meantime, the Jews began defining *Yiddishkeit*, their Jewishness. Sarna asserts that *Yiddishkeit* became an ideological justification for the Jews’ attachment to secularism over their synagogues. To be “Jewish” in a general sense became culturally defined: speaking Yiddish, following kosher dietary laws, and adopting Jewish ethos, namely, humanistic values. For example, secular Jews identified mostly with the Passover story because of its underlying moral values of protecting and saving their own people and doing the right thing.<sup>149</sup> In other words, the Jews began identifying with Judaism in the sense of tradition rather than religion. Many of the Jews in Rochester kept a Jewish home, mostly through observance of dietary laws and lighting the Shabbat candles. Approximately seventy to eighty percent of the households kept kosher according to the kosher butchers’ orders in the 1930s.<sup>150</sup> Phyllis Kasdin recalled how her Clifford Avenue neighborhood, located away from Joseph Avenue, had many Jewish families in the late 1930s who still kept kosher. The children would often eat bacon elsewhere.<sup>151</sup> This reflects the uncertainty in the household between the immigrant generation and their rapidly assimilating children in maintaining a Jewish home. Moreover, many families retained the Yiddish language in their homes while the children usually spoke English with

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<sup>149</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, 223-224.

<sup>150</sup> Irving Goronskin, interviewed by Maurice Isserman, August 18, 1976, Rochester Jewish Oral History Project, University of Rochester, 9.

<sup>151</sup> Phyllis Kasdin, interview with author, March 7, 2008.

friends and at school.<sup>152</sup> This kind of lifestyle promoted difficulties for the synagogues. Rabbi Bernstein's TBK aggressively began to court these Jews with the focus of synagogue as a community center rather than religious center.

Rabbi Bernstein, as discussed, transformed the Jews' perspective of Judaism in Rochester and Jews responded willingly to refashion their Jewish identity within American context. Arthur Lowenthal reluctantly admitted that Rabbi Bernstein had "uncompromised integrity, power, and leadership" to gain respect from the community.<sup>153</sup> Norris Shapiro agreed that Rabbi Bernstein's influence and views shifted the tensions between the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform communities and only he could break down those barriers, thus leaving a legacy.<sup>154</sup> Rabbi Bernstein's provoking thinking of Judaism as a pinnacle for social justice and flexibility led to increased participation in the Jewish community as *Jews*, not members of the congregation. On the other hand, Norris Shapiro shrugged off Jews' nonchalant attitude towards their community's Jewish character, "it embraces everything. It's not only a religion, it's not only nationalism. It's a way of life. And as a way of life it's been inculcated over the years."<sup>155</sup> Irving Goronskin also demonstrated the same indifference, "...if I'm a Jew, I'm a Jew, and it doesn't make any difference how good or how bad or if I observe and I don't observe...I have never been a real conformist, except for my home. But, my home makes me understand that I'm Jewish."<sup>156</sup> Rabbi Bernstein worked diligently to reach across the denominational lines, including the children of Orthodox parents who initially

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<sup>152</sup> Irving and Eugenia Ruderman, interviewed by Dennis Klein, July 11, 1977, Rochester Jewish Oral History Project, University of Rochester, 2.

<sup>153</sup> Lowenthal, interview, 9.

<sup>154</sup> Norris Shapiro, interviewed by Brian Mitchell, June 10, 1976, Rochester Jewish Oral History Project, University of Rochester, 35.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> Goronskin, interview, 29.

saw no alternative to Orthodoxy. Jews across streams of Judaism would come to realize Rabbi Bernstein's point of making the community the focus of Judaism rather than the pulpit.

Jews routinely encountered the inside/outsider identity scheme in order to preserve Judaism in their private lives, while maintaining anonymity about their Jewish background in the public. In America, the separation of the religion institutions and the state facilitated this task. Diner emphasizes synagogues' challenge elsewhere to demonstrate how Jewishness could fit within the American lifestyle, particularly for the children of immigrants. She and Sarna observe that the era of consumer culture in the 1920s led to a different kind of perspective of what Judaism ought to be.<sup>157</sup> Diner adds, "Th[at] concern[s] with Jewish culture stemmed in large measure from the diversity of American society..."<sup>158</sup> Since the 1920s promoted public social venues beyond private affairs in America, the Jews desired to bring this trend into their community. But the stodgy synagogues had been reluctant in adapting to the community's needs. As discussed, Rabbi Bernstein followed the trend that Diner noted all over America, "Reform congregations tinkered with ways to enhance synagogue sociability." This meant exploiting the young people's love for socialization to help them connect with each other on the basis of Judaism.<sup>159</sup> For example, Rabbi Bernstein attacked the younger generation's apathy for their Jewish identity through promoting youth groups and encouraging attendance in Sunday schools. Furthermore, these young people needed stability in their vacillating American Jewish identity and Rabbi Bernstein made the efforts to provide that.

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<sup>157</sup> Diner, *Jews of the United States*, 247; Sarna, *American Judaism*, 226.

<sup>158</sup> Diner, *Jews of the United States*, 247.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

Likewise, the synagogues sought to revamp parts of their Sunday school education in order to attract children to Judaism and keep them interested. TBK and Temple Beth El opened their enrollment to non-members, particularly the Orthodox community. TBK and Temple Beth El offered stronger Hebrew education because these provided a refreshed perspective on Judaism.<sup>160</sup> Not only did these schools attract families but also Orthodox teachers, particularly women, seeking greater understanding of Judaism. Orthodoxy forbade women from learning Hebrew and studying the Torah. They attended services but possessed little understanding of the meaning behind Torah commandments and passages. For example, Elizabeth Schwartz grew up in an Eastern European Orthodox household and began attending services at TBK due to Rabbi Wolf and Bernstein's warmth and openness. She knew that moving to TBK had been worthwhile when she and her sister attended its services instead of going with their mother to a *shul* and they walked home in the rain anyway.<sup>161</sup> She began as one of TBK's veteran teachers. For her and other women, teaching at TBK provided them ample opportunities to learn about Judaism with their students and support from each other as Orthodox women. Their students had an additional bonus of learning about the Orthodox world from their teachers.<sup>162</sup> The lack of a broad Jewish education in Orthodox shuls pushed their members to attend the Reform and Conservative synagogues for Jewish education and that contributed to the diversity of Sunday school teachers. Rabbi Bernstein succeeded in giving young children background in Judaism but the conversation of defining Judaism had been left to the public community discussion. The diversity in Sunday schools in both TBK and Temple Beth El allowed the Jews to reach

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<sup>160</sup> Schwartz, interview, 19.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>162</sup> Eisenstadt, *Affirming the Covenant*, 154.

out and help each other and with that atmosphere, it contributed to the growing strength of Jewish Rochester.

As Jews began interacting with each other through interfaith events, they discussed what Judaism should mean to them in the 1920s and 1930s. The *Jewish Ledger* provided written evidence of public discourse about the age old question of “What is a Jew?” The diverse responses reflected the Jews’ reaction to the emerging trends in America Judaism and concerns about departing from Judaism that they knew as immigrants. Furthermore, they acknowledged the dangers of American freedom entrenching their daily customs. Rabbis from all over America contributed to the *Jewish Ledger* during the High Holidays asking for Jews to reflect upon their past year and how they displayed their identity during that period. They also offered advice of “What would Rabbi do?” For example, Rabbi Samuel Glasner of Baltimore wrote that a Jew could find personal security within himself if he maintained his identity as a Jew through self-cultivation or with family, but his rabbi could not take the full responsibility of shaping it. Everyone was responsible for defining his or her Jewish identity in order to remain standing when the outside negative attitude threatened to bring down his or her livelihood.<sup>163</sup> In another article, U.S. Chaplain Samuel Blinder encouraged Jews to step up and be proud of their Jewish identity. He affirmed that this identity and the American identity could coexist.<sup>164</sup> Diner emphasizes this in her argument that Jews had to negotiate their American and Jewish identities and once achieved, they would ultimately feel a sense of empowerment.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Samuel Glasner, “Building for Tomorrow,” *The Jewish Ledger* (October 1, 1943), 1, 6.

<sup>164</sup> Samuel Blinder, “I Was a Jew,” *The Jewish Ledger* (March 15, 1940), 7.

<sup>165</sup> Diner, *Jews of the United States*, 1.



The readers responded with mixed reactions to the changing landscape of American Judaism. The Eastern European immigrants and their children greatly transformed the perspective of what American Jewish identity would become. They brought diversity that led to divisions within the community and yet, expanded a variety of ways of expressing the Jewish identity.<sup>166</sup> Columnist Alfred Segal wrote, “It seems to me the matter boils down to the question: What is a Jew? The trouble is that there are so many ways of being a Jew that there is a lot of confusion as Jews run in all the directions of being Jewish...”<sup>167</sup> He charted his own journey of defining his life as a Jew. He always connected his Jewish identity with his Hebrew school education until he discovered other avenues for Jewish expression. More importantly in the discussion of Jewish identity, Jews questioned the role of assimilation in forming the new American Jewish identity. The paper printed vehement editorials encouraging Jews to ignore their doubts and embrace their parents’ legacy. Assimilation could not be evident in the Jews’ acceptance of their identity. One such piece listed three different kinds of assimilationists: loss of faith on Judaism’s survival, fear of inability to commit both to their Jewish and American identities, and positive self-hate. It slammed the self-haters as “divorced themselves from their people, estranged themselves from their religion, alienated themselves from everything that is markedly and characteristically Jewish.” It disclosed fears of self-hating Jews spreading negativity to other Jews in search of reconciliation with their American Jewish identity. It went as far to blame them for Judaism’s extinction if that day ever came.<sup>168</sup> Such disapproval actually decreased over time in the *Jewish Ledger* articles. Instead, the editors at the *Jewish Ledger* published

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<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>167</sup> Alfred Segal, “Plain Talk: What is a Jew?” *The Jewish Ledger* (March 6, 1942), 1.

<sup>168</sup> “Assimilation,” *The Jewish Ledger* (November 24, 1944), 8.

articles targeting constructive suggestions and arguments to encourage Jews to continue synthesizing their American and Jewish identities.

On top of secularization, the religious structure faced major challenges during the 1920s and 1930s as the idea of religion became a sham for some Jews and the Great Depression set in, distracting the Jews from the synagogue. In addition, the Great Depression forced some Jews to end their synagogue affiliation because of the membership dues being too high and it became viewed as luxury.<sup>169</sup> To offset the financial worries and miseries, the synagogues had to reshape their role. Instead of directing the dues to the services which many Jews rarely attended throughout the year, the synagogues attempted to expand their services beyond the pulpit by offering social opportunities. TBK and Temple Beth El embraced their new role as the social centers of the community at large. They reframed their focus on Judaism as a positive force necessary to survive the Depression and eventually, the Holocaust. With increased strength in Jew-to-Jew connections, Rochester Jews found a new way to connect Judaism with the community at large, as something already part of their lives. Rabbi Bernstein sought to expand this broader perspective of Judaism by emphasizing Joseph Avenue as the basis for Jewish identity. Unlike Christianity where it revolved around the church Judaism centered in the home. In other words, Joseph Avenue's atmosphere and energy defined American Judaism in Rochester in an inclusive sense.<sup>170</sup> Furthermore, Judaism no longer had to be restricted to theology but extended to philanthropy and sociability in which would be part of American Judaism for years to come.

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<sup>169</sup> Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 174.

<sup>170</sup> Nusbaum, interview, 103.

## Patchwork Quilt of Organizations

Joseph Avenue provided more than a street of gatherings; it housed many Jewish social and philanthropic organizations. The increasingly intricacy of life on Joseph Avenue thus far revealed the gradual overhaul of American Judaism for the sake of its survival against Jewish assimilation and society's antisemitism. Consequently, many Jews found social niches that promoted interactions with other Jews and developed their sense of Jewish identity. Rabbis in the synagogues aided the process by seeking to reform their services to focus on the community as part of new American Jewish trends during the 1930s; they partly influenced the Jews' attitudes toward their community activities. More than often than not, participating in these activities altered the definition of American Jewish identity.

American Jewish identity reflected the impact of American traditions upon Judaism. Diner points out the differences between "traditional Judaism" and "American Judaism" that "traditional Judaism" made no distinction between religion and culture. Religion, she defines, represented "a set of public ritual practices connected to divine worship." Culture in Judaism meant education, charity, kosher meat, and other provisions that reflected communal life. She argues that American Jews became the forerunners of this particular division, separating the Torah and the community.<sup>171</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s, Rochester Jewry sought to make that distinction clearer to save American Judaism from splintering or worse, vanishing due to assimilation. No longer should American Jewish identity for Rochester Jews be associated with greenhorns or any other labels of their immigrant days. It reminded the Jews of their old ethnic and

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<sup>171</sup> Diner, *Jews of the United States*, 65-66.

class conflicts. Diner observes this transformation of perspective in the 1920s as “the beginnings of Jewish ‘normalcy’ in America.” She continues to suggest that the growing urbanization by Americans and other immigrant groups diminished the Jews’ overwhelming presence. The “Jewish normalcy” that Diner refers to was the changing demographic landscape in America by the 1920s; increased urbanization and number of immigrants meant that the Jews no longer stood out.<sup>172</sup> Jews still had to contend with the white Protestant Americans’ narcissist attitude of being “true” Americans. They had to battle antisemitism and demonstrate that they too could be part of elite American society, without sacrificing their *Yiddishkeit*. Furthermore, Moore agrees that Protestant America had significant impact on the Jews’ attitudes towards American Judaism. She concludes that American Jews, particularly second generation, fostered deeper connections with Judaism through *experience* and *actions*. Jews valued America’s individualist approach which emphasizes the person’s personal choices. For them, exploring the meaning of Judaism with others meant discovering different ways to express one’s own Jewish identity.<sup>173</sup> Rochester Jewry clearly reflected these broader trends with its proactive efforts to change pragmatically its system of social organizations. And Rochester Jews quickly discovered, in the 1920s, a time where Americans became less private in their affairs, that socialization had its values. Thus, sociability permitted the Jews to negotiate their American and Jewish identities while participating in similar community activities with each other for mutual ethnic support in becoming Americans.<sup>174</sup>

To become Americans together, Jews had to confront antisemitism that underestimated their community’s chemistry. White Protestant Americans had

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<sup>172</sup> Diner, *Jews of the United States*, 115.

<sup>173</sup> Moore, *To the Golden Cities*, 270.

<sup>174</sup> Landsman, Kasdin, interviews.

stereotypical notions of Jews, and Jews had to disprove them. First, in theory, Jewish philanthropy would reduce negative attention to “poor *kikes*” by providing for its own. This mentality dated back to 1654 when the American Jews made the so-called Stuyvesant Promise. When the Jews arrived in the United States with the Dutch, they vowed that they would not be a burden to the new colony or the Dutch West India Company. Jews made it part of the American Jewish tradition to uphold this pledge and oppose any government intervention in its charities.<sup>175</sup> The Jews needed to demonstrate positive traits of their people to thwart antisemitism.<sup>176</sup> For example, as discussed, the Jews’ refusal to go on relief during the Depression and preferred to turn to his co-religionists for assistance in Rochester and elsewhere. Second, Jewish social clubs such as Irondequoit Country Club grew out of exclusion by Rochester’s social clubs such as Oak Hill Country Club and the Country Club of Rochester.<sup>177</sup> Thus, antisemitism strengthened the American Jews’ desire to be full-fledged Americans by creating innovative parallel organizations in the Jewish community where the mainstream society excluded them. This particular formation of “parallel universe” led to “shar[ing] many of the trappings of the larger society while standing apart from it.”<sup>178</sup> The Jews already had their own economy and neighborhoods that reflected their old communities in Europe. Nevertheless when they came to America, they realize that they had to develop new organizations in their communities that did not exist in Europe in the same fashion as in America. By doing so, American Jews strengthened their community ties through compromises and cooperation within different Jewish immigrant groups.

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<sup>175</sup> Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 139.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>177</sup> Landsman, interview; Cohen, interview, 42.

<sup>178</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, 222.

The Rochester Jewish community had a multitude of organizations designed to give the Jews a sense of purpose of being Jewish in America and a place to interact where American social opportunities were limited. Many of them were chapters of national organizations such as B'rith B'nai, Hadassah, and American Jewish Committee. For some, participating in them meant affirming their identity as Jews in Protestant America while expanding their social opportunities.<sup>179</sup> By 1930s, a number of organizations held large social events where Jews could congregate and meet others who shared their experiences as American Jews. In fact, the Communist Party in the 1930s noticed the Jews' enthusiasm for social gatherings and exploited that with its recruitment schemes.<sup>180</sup> Some, like Elizabeth Schwartz, belonged to Hadassah because, not only did she want to interact with other Jews, but she also appreciated the work Hadassah coordinated for its members and the community at large. Her participation at TBK as an Orthodox woman also reflected her and other Jewish women's desire to connect with each other, an emotional need for such friendships. For Schwartz, as a teacher in a largely gentile school, Hadassah's Jewish identity attracted her because at work she stood out as the only Jew in her group of non-Jewish colleagues.<sup>181</sup> Regardless of his political apathy, Elliott Landsman joined a Zionist group out of his love for Palestine and wanted to learn more about this land in the 1930s. The knowledge that he gained enabled him to strengthen his Jewish identity and support for Palestine as a Jewish state.<sup>182</sup> Different organizations had their own mission statements but the basic purpose of their existence encouraged the development of intricate social Jewish networks in Rochester and the United States. In

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<sup>179</sup> Ruderman, interview, 4.

<sup>180</sup> Henry Feingold, *A Time for Searching: Entering the Mainstream 1920-1945* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1992), 196.

<sup>181</sup> Schwartz, interview, 70.

<sup>182</sup> Landsman, interview.

particular, the chapters of national organizations strengthened the community and promoted Rochester's status among Jewish communities. These organizations also served to connect American Jewry with their brethren in Europe through philanthropy.<sup>183</sup>

Philanthropy played as a powerful tool in affirming the American Jewish identity for two reasons. First, the Jews could negotiate their positions in Protestant America by providing excellent, admirable examples of "charity" in an organizational sense and attitude. Diner emphasizes, "Unlike the Christian notion of charity, given out of the goodness of one's heart when one feels so inspired, these practices fell into the category of *tzedakah*, profound responsibilities."<sup>184</sup> Second, the Jews' dollars towards Jewish aid strengthened their personal connection with each other as Jews. Native born American Jews had already helped and worked with the Jewish immigrants in settling in America. This was initially difficult because of cultural clashes. The pious, poor Eastern European Jews had little concept of the middle-class, secular life that the German Jews had taken up in America. After helping the new immigrants for decades, individual philanthropies sent aid abroad. The immigration quota in 1924 further decreased the number of newcomers.<sup>185</sup> World War I brought in an additional need for overseas aid despite the growing disparities over what kind of aid European Jewry necessitated. Sarna calls the Jews' approach towards philanthropy a "new civil religion." The collective mission to aid world Jewry attracted American Jews seeking other ways to connect with other Jews and their Jewish identity.<sup>186</sup> If philanthropy would become a communal effort among the

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<sup>183</sup> Irving Ruderman, interview with author, March 7, 2008.

<sup>184</sup> Diner, *Jews of the United States*, 135; Feingold, *A Time for Searching*, 163.

<sup>185</sup> Feingold, *A Time for Searching*, 163.

<sup>186</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, 196.

American Jews, it would demand that they settle their differences and come to a greater mutual understanding.

In divided Jewish Rochester, philanthropy quickly became one of the driving forces for German Jews and Eastern European Jews to connect at a more personal level. The German Jews had initially helped the new Eastern European Jewish immigrants to settle in America with their Baden Street settlement in 1901.<sup>187</sup> The Germans felt that their money would be best based to “Americanize” the Eastern European Jew through teaching of American customs and the English language.<sup>188</sup> Yet, after World War I, the Eastern European Jews felt a strong urge to “take care of their own” and disliked the German Jews’ “scientific” charities of teaching them how to be “Americans.” They felt that they “understood” the European Jews’ needs better through greater sensitivity. The post WWI European refugees could not face the shock of being forced to Americanize after what they had gone through during the war. Despite starting up their “own” charities, Eastern European charities mimicked the German Jews’ United Jewish Charities, an umbrella organization seeking to provide needs and loans for the new immigrants.<sup>189</sup> Rosenberg attributes this mimicry to the Eastern Europeans’ desire to become independent of the German Jewish control. They would instead develop their own Yiddish-speaking Orthodox community.<sup>190</sup>

Soon enough in the 1920s, the children of the immigrants remedied this conflict of interest with the slow formation of Jewish Welfare Council. The Jewish Welfare Council, made up of young former Orthodox members of Temple Beth El and TBK,

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<sup>187</sup> Rosenberg, *Jewish Community in Rochester*, 220.

<sup>188</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, 196.

<sup>189</sup> Rosenberg, *Jewish Community in Rochester*, 136.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.



combined the budgets from the Germans' United Jewish Charities and the Eastern Europeans' Associated Hebrew Charities. While this Council served its purpose as one large budget for the entire community, social divisions remained. For example, it sponsored different Hebrew schools in the Orthodox community while giving out college tuition scholarships for the German Jews.<sup>191</sup> Rosenberg argued that in 1925 the two communities had yet to accept each other as co-equals and willingly compromise on their needs. He strongly felt that "a comprehensive and organic community, on the institutional and interpersonal levels could not be achieved unless and until the German and the Russian segments regarded each other as coequals."<sup>192</sup> In order to make philanthropy much more of a united effort in Rochester and America as a whole, both groups had to first settle their own personal conflicts before caring for the rest of the community. After all, these Jews' dollars would send a message to the Jews in Europe and Palestine about American Jewry collaboration. Could America be a true promised land of unity and opportunities?

Through the slow process of consolidation of philanthropic organizations in the 1920s and 1930s, Rochester Jews began discovering that they had only one true purpose for cooperation and stronger unity. A Yiddish writer described the American Jews' attitude, "Prove ourselves as Jews, prove ourselves their brothers and postpone the end."<sup>193</sup> Diner accentuates the philanthropy's role as self-defense to preserve Jewish peoplehood and Judaism.<sup>194</sup> The Jewish Homes for the Aged and Children strongly demonstrated the Jews' commitment to preserve its culture and people. A distinction

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<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>193</sup> *Jewish Communal Register*, 1480; Rosenfelt, *This Thing of Giving* in Sarna, *American Judaism*, 209-210.

<sup>194</sup> Diner, *Jews of the United States*, 136.

must be clear that the Jews donated to help the elderly and the children out of *obligation* and desire to strengthen the *peoplehood*. Unlike Christians, Jews unconditionally accept all Jews into their community regardless of their actual need. Rochester Jews also became involved with national campaigns such as B'nai B'rith, Hadassah, and the Jewish Agency. As the saying would go during World War II, "Money is no object." For the Jews, the social justice in the community was the first and foremost priority for Jewish survival in the United States and Europe. Furthermore, these organizations demonstrated the importance of an unified Jewish community over splintering differences in religious practice. Their shared experience, history, and values allowed them to concentrate on the welfare of all Jews.<sup>195</sup> Building their own Jewish charities and organizations would be the first step to connect the Jews in small groups before consolidating into larger ones which would then bring greater numbers of Jews together.

In the beginning, two major organizations, B'nai B'rith and Hadassah, played similar roles for social networking and philanthropy in Rochester. B'nai B'rith, founded in 1841, was the oldest and one of the largest fraternal organizations in America. By 1870s, several lodges existed representing different economic levels of the members. For the more affluent Jews, B'nai B'rith added to their long list of "exclusive" social clubs that barred Eastern Europeans. Diner describes the organization's role in shaping the American Jewish identity, "The Jewishness of B'nai B'rith, the first powerful secular male alternative to the synagogue, manifested itself in the organization's activities."<sup>196</sup> Nevertheless all of the B'nai B'rith made commitments to lobbying for and providing

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<sup>195</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, 165.

<sup>196</sup> Diner, *Jews of the United States*, 141.

donations to the United Jewish Charities.<sup>197</sup> They would become one of the political voices of the world Jewry as they endeavored in assisting newly arrived immigrants and sending aid to Europe through World War I.<sup>198</sup>

Hadassah held a different role for Jewish women than B'nai B'rith for Jewish men in terms of its purpose. Hadassah provided greater opportunities for women in self-education and volunteerism. Beyond giving aid for Palestine and promoting Jewish ideals, it gained popularity among women because of its sociability and community service.<sup>199</sup> Women could become directly involved with their philanthropic work rather than only writing out checks. As Elizabeth Schwartz already explained, Hadassah's social nature allowed Jewish women to strengthen their friendships and thus supported each other's expression of their Jewish identities.

B'nai B'rith, Hadassah, and other philanthropic organizations would soon come under a new major umbrella by mid-1930s, the Jewish Community Council. The JCC grew out of the Federation movement in the 1930s seeking to consolidate the overwhelming numbers of small organizations competing for same funds with similar mission of helping other Jews. It also absorbed the United Way (formerly the Community Chest), the largest Rochester Jewish charity.<sup>200</sup> Arthur Lowenthal recalls that the whole purpose of forming the JCC in Rochester was a realization that conflicts would ease if Jews pooled their interests and resources.<sup>201</sup> Additionally, Elliott Landsman notes, organizations' small size led to overlapping donations and feeding off

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<sup>197</sup> Rosenberg, *Jewish Community in Rochester*, 139-140.

<sup>198</sup> Diner, *Jews of the United States*, 191.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>200</sup> Shapiro, interview, 34.

<sup>201</sup> Lowenthal, interview, 4.

each other prior to the JCC.<sup>202</sup> Furthermore, the economic and labor relations had improved in the 1920s and would soon close the gap between German and Eastern European Jews. Now they could feel comfortable cooperating over sensitive matters such as finances. Rochester Jews enjoyed a wealth of communal institutions available only to a very small number of communities.

As elsewhere, the Depression in Rochester had forced many of the charities to cope with difficulties in retaining its funds and donors. Wenger argues the significance of the growing Jewish Federation movement during the 1930s as part of Americanization of voluntary organizations. The Federation avoided any ideological platform through the American model of nonsectarian philanthropy.<sup>203</sup> It would function as a solution to the growing needs of the community. It served as the voice for all of the Jewish organizations in the community and allocated funds to each group as necessary. Rochester Jewry accepted the need for a Federation without major deliberations. Its formation came quietly to Rochester. Hardly anyone noticed any major impact because the Jews knew that Rochester needed it.<sup>204</sup> Yet, the JCC played a major role in straightening out the community budgets, redistributing the money, and setting up priorities for the Jewish community. Its major concern lay in the proper supervision of the elderly in the Jewish Home and the youth bouncing about freely on Joseph Avenue without care for Sunday school. The existing, successful evidence of Jewish Home and the Jewish Community Center (grew out of JY) in Rochester today demonstrates what the Jews believed deemed necessary in the 1930s.

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<sup>202</sup> Landsman, interview.

<sup>203</sup> Wenger, *New York Jews in the Great Depression*, 139.

<sup>204</sup> Nusbaum, interview, 83.

JY embraced everything to develop the new, future American Jewish identity for Rochester's community and the youth. The brainchild, JY, began in the 1910s and grew slowly over time. In 1907, the older Jews became concerned with their children's safety against the Irish gangs on the streets and decided to set up the JY, a recreational center. Through the German Jews' eyes, it also served as a place to Americanize the Eastern European youth.<sup>205</sup> The earlier mission disappeared as the JY became the center of Jewish social life for the youth. The adults also met there, after the Board bought its building on corner of Andrews and North streets, at the end of Joseph Avenue, in 1926.<sup>206</sup> Once the site had been built, many organizations congregated there as it promoted a neutral atmosphere in terms of class and religious differences. Jews could be just Jews and see each other as Jews. Eastern European and German, rich and poor, and young and old all met, socialized, and played under one roof. The JY increased opportunities for secular Jews as "not every Jew was a synagogue-goer."<sup>207</sup> Many Jews clearly ended up meeting their future marriage partners through social events and dances. Rabbi Bernstein played an instrumental role in shaping the JY's youth program and appearance by promoting it as an alternative social space for the increasingly secular young Jews in the early 1930s. His vision and energy earned him a directorship position afterwards.<sup>208</sup> The JY attracted more young Jews than any other youth organizations, which were largely unsupervised, unorganized, and not directed by any professionals.<sup>209</sup> Because of the JY's underlying mission to provide a safe space for all Jews, Jews enthusiastically supported the center.

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<sup>205</sup> Kasdin, interview.

<sup>206</sup> Dobkowski and Lovenheim, *A Family Among Families*, 35.

<sup>207</sup> Nusbaum, interview, 15.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12; Ruderman, interview, 6.

<sup>209</sup> Ruderman, interview, 5.

The role of social organizations and centers and philanthropy greatly impacted Rochester Jews' new perspective on their American Jewish identity. They replicated American institutions that had excluded or disregarded them because of their Jewishness. Secular Jews now had opportunities to interact with other Jewish people, beyond the synagogue. The formation of American Judaism extending beyond the synagogue allowed the Jewish community to become more cohesive through socialization and for the sake of Jewish people. Some Jews like Elliott Landsman argue that the number of Jewish friends a Jew had reflected his connection with his *Yiddishkeit*.<sup>210</sup> He and Phyllis Kasdin emphasizes that the growing trend of secularization pushed the Jews to identify their Jewish identity more through socialization than synagogue affiliation.<sup>211</sup> Antisemitism also produced greater cohesion in the community even as it promoted parallel institutions. Jews refused to allow discrimination to weaken and assimilate them into the mainstream as “just” Americans.

An important example that demonstrates Rochester Jews' willingness to combat antisemitism and exclusivity in American society was the creation of Irondequoit Country Club, the equivalent of Rochester Country Club and Oak Hill Country Club in 1916. ICC possessed no Jewish character other than the fact all of its members were Jewish! ICC grew out of the old Eureka Club, led by old elite German Jewish families, to become the *Jewish* Country Club of Rochester. Rosenberg vehemently criticizes the hypocrisy of the German Jews' approach to creating a *Jewish* club, “They had organized special Jewish philanthropic and welfare agencies distinct from other elements in the general community. What is more, the very pillars of that Jewish segment, the captains

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<sup>210</sup> Landsman, interview.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*; Kasdin, interview.

of local industry, the leading lights in the business world, felt it necessary to organize a country club which was virtually Jewish.” ICC reflected the German Jews’ self-consciousness and need to distance themselves away from the Eastern Europeans while being excluded by other Americans.<sup>212</sup> The struggle over membership continued. ICC’s ethnic discrimination permitted the German Jews to hold fast to their own Rochester Jewish culture. Rochester Jewish culture had fallen in the hands of the Eastern Europeans through cultural negotiations by 1920s. Jewish Rochester had become “Jewish” instead of more “American” as the Germans envisioned. Thus, ICC offered the German Jews a place of belonging to the American mainstream with the protection of comfortable environment, even if it meant socializing with other Jews.<sup>213</sup> The gay atmosphere reflected the New York City Jews’ vacations in the Catskills: If the *goyim* can have fun, so can we! ICC remains as a social status as of Rochester’s Jewish community.

Any form of sociability within Jewish Rochester set the stage for new American Jewish identity in this city. Leaders sought to attract Jews through redefining Judaism as means of strengthening the community and personal and cultural interactions. Synagogues drew attention towards the notion of peoplehood in Judaism. Social organizations functioned as alternative means of Jew to Jew interactions for more secular Jews. The ICC provided Jews a sense of belonging to the elite American society. Most important of all, philanthropy and money gave the Jews a sense of common attachment to Judaism in America. Philanthropy connected Jews at different levels of society with their belief in “caring for one’s own.” The Jewish Homes for the Aged and the Children

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<sup>212</sup> Rosenberg, *Jewish Community in Rochester*, 203-204.

<sup>213</sup> Diner, *Jews of the United States*, 226.

certainly represented charity efforts but the idea of community transcended charity. Jews had very little reason for throwing a nickel in a poor man's can. They took a step further to invite him to become part of the community to dissuade negative stereotypical images.



## **Don't Worry Kid, Be Jewish in America?**

Straddling between the brunt of the Great Depression and the dark clouds looming over Europe, young American Jews underwent a different experience than their predecessors. Their second generation status led to identity conflicts as they strived to fit in American society while remaining loyal to their immigrant parents' culture. The Great Depression changed their lives like any other American. However, being children of Jewish immigrants meant experiencing the Depression in a different way because of standards and expectations that came with it. The 1930s presented one of the most challenging times to be a Jew because of the Depression and growing fascism abroad leading to increase in antisemitism in America, and a new kind of threat to the Jews in Europe, a more menacing one. These people had only begun to start their lives. During this decade, they had to assess the situation around them and develop ways to make steps forward. They struggled to answer the question of what it meant to be an American Jew while confronting the obstacles. Then America's entry in the war and the annihilation of the European Jewry tested this generation's perspective on their own identity that they somehow created by 1940. For Rochester's young people, they had asserted their Jewish identity just prior to 1941 because many of them felt that the Holocaust had done little to change their identity. The changes on Joseph Avenue, economically and socially, had much more profound impact because these affected them directly.

Growing up in an enclave striving to negotiate changes and create stability for the future, these young Jews took the cue for adaptation. The new social opportunities defined their lives as Americans and as Jews. They first met each other on Joseph Avenue. Then they stepped out of the Jewish bubble into public schools and universities

where they saw the realities of America beyond it. Some still attended Talmud Torah (Orthodox Hebrew School) and Sunday schools at TBK and Temple Beth El. For many of these Jews, their peers and social groups influenced their decisions and perspectives of their American Jewish identity. Finally, the Jews became more assertive of their American Jewish identity while in college and in the military. Joseph Avenue had done much more than providing a safe haven for them.

Jewish historians characterize this generation in different viewpoints. Henry Feingold argues that this generation of Jews should be called the “lost” generation because they lacked vision for their future and perspective of who they were. He fears that without strong Jewish self-esteem, American Jews would not be able to accept the enormous responsibility that would fall upon them. Their preoccupation with the Depression blinded them to the larger Jewish communities’ needs, namely European Jewry.<sup>214</sup> Granted, the Great Depression had small negative impact but larger factors came in play. Wenger and Sarna consider them as the “cultural” generation because they negotiated a delicate balance between their parents’ immigrant world of Yiddish and chicken feet and increasingly familiar American culture of jazz and movies.<sup>215</sup> Wenger further explains the contrasting perspective of the young Jews to their parents, “Raised to believe in America as a land of opportunity and security, young Jews of the 1930s encountered instead a society of limited possibilities, growing anti-Semitism, and social and political turmoil.” Factors included, but were not limited to, university quotas, employment discrimination, and increased suspicions.<sup>216</sup> Dawidowicz poignantly summarizes the trials of establishing a Jewish identity in a non-Jewish world filled with

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<sup>214</sup> Feingold, *A Time for Searching*, 188.

<sup>215</sup> Wenger, *Jewish Americans*, 199; Sarna, *American Judaism*, 277-279, 284-88.

<sup>216</sup> Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 54-55.

opportunities, exploitations, and tempting limitations. Jews who developed strong self-esteem and ties with their families and the communities were far more likely to successfully combat personal discrimination.<sup>217</sup> Rochester Jews exactly fit in Dawidowicz's mold: Very few of them needed the Holocaust to assert their identity. They developed and strengthened their connections to confront the turmoil of the 1930s and ultimately rooted in their identities as Wenger advocates. Thus, this particular group of Jews was no means by "lost" as Feingold characterized the "general" American Jewry.

For young Rochester Jewry, they faced a mixture of cynicism and optimism in the 1930s. Outside of Joseph Avenue, they confronted challenges that their parents had so long dismissed because they wanted to become part of The American Society as propagandized by popular culture of the 1920s. For example, the kids wanted to ride their bikes on Shabbat or take the higher education route to become professionals. On the other hand, when the opportunities limited their mobility, they turned inward. With the community undergoing reconstruction, these young Jews found alternative possibilities to develop their identity and create their unforeseen future as leaders of the world Jewry. Their American Dream would take on a different meaning of the young Jews of the 1930s than their immigrant parents'.

Education remained the constant value for the Jews, children and parents, in their journey to the American Dream. Parents dreamt of sending their children from high school to Ivy League. As immigrants, parents saw as America more than economic opportunity but educational too. In Europe, Jews had to tackle the challenges of heavy quotas in the university and ever-changing school systems in their old countries, particularly in Russia. These school systems were highly competitive and these low

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<sup>217</sup> Dawidowicz, *Jewish Presence*, 6.

quotas were even more so for the Jews.<sup>218</sup> In America, public schools offered free and unlimited opportunities for quality education for the children and immigrant parents gladly accepted this. Parents and some Jewish leaders saw the public schools as the gateway to junior high school and beyond. Jews traditionally believed that education expanded their knowledge and understanding of the world around them. Through their studying of the Torah and the Talmud, they developed critical analytical and reading skills; the Jews took steps further by embracing secular, public schools. These schools, as evident in the young Jews' growing curiosity, expounded their knowledge beyond Judaism. Public schools in America taught them the history and literature of America, the science of evolution, and other subjects that rabbis could not teach them. These immigrant parents had none of this knowledge. Consequently, the public schools played a larger role in acculturating the young Jews and separating them from their parents. Yet, the parents had made the choice to send their children to them because they were free instead of to costly Hebrew schools.<sup>219</sup>

Public schools meant more than books for the young Jews it meant making new friends and seeing firsthand other ways to express their American identity. In Rochester, they mostly went to Public School No. 8 or 9 and few went to other schools closer to them if they did not live off Joseph Avenue. Many of them went to East High School together and some went to Ben Franklin High School when East became overcrowded in 1930.<sup>220</sup> These schools had a heavy Jewish majority, especially No. 9. Jews made up 50% of No. 8's student body and the other half were other children of immigrants—

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<sup>218</sup> John Doyle Klier, *Imperial Russia's Jewish Question 1855-1881* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1995), 15-17.

<sup>219</sup> Diner, *Jews of the United States*, 145-146.

<sup>220</sup> Ruderman, interview.

Germans, Poles, and Italians.<sup>221</sup> Several blacks also went. Children did not share the same prejudice of mentality as their parents. Elliott Landsman recalled facing no harassment when he dated a Polish girl while in high school. He shrugged, “Everyone got along. We played with each other.”<sup>222</sup> At the same time, being around other children made the Jews more acute of their own identity. They enjoyed being part of their parents’ immigrant culture and their form of assimilation. Yet, Phyllis Kasdin supposed that she and her friends “wanted to assimilate on a different level than of our parents.” She would blush and slide down in her bus seat as her mother spoke good-bye in Yiddish as she waved her daughter off to school.<sup>223</sup> Children felt disconnected with them on cultural level. Not only did the young Jews struggle to escape from marks of their *Yiddishkeit* including the accent, they had to turn to each other for mutual support through outside of school activities, mainly at JY.

JY became the mecca for these children in the ghetto. It offered basketball courts, swimming pools, dance halls, and playgrounds for them to dance and play. Many of the basketball players in high schools had their start in the JY’s basketball leagues. Children bought their junior membership fees for only three dollars. Phyllis Kasdin describes the JY as “the social thing for the kids.” Teens went to the dances and met their Jewish girlfriends or boyfriends on Sunday nights. The JY provided a safe haven where children could feel both American and Jewish. The financial and community support grew during the Federation movement and Rabbi Bernstein became the first director in 1935. Rabbi Bernstein brought in many speakers for the community. Already reforming programs at TBK, Rabbi Bernstein expanded his leadership role to use JY as a springboard to the

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<sup>221</sup> Schwartz, interview, 21.

<sup>222</sup> Landsman, interview.

<sup>223</sup> Kasdin, interview.

development of new American Jewish identity in Rochester. Elliot Landsman and his friends respected Rabbi Bernstein because he “understood” American culture— they viewed his programs as “Americanized.” Whatever he had done, he had attracted and gained respect from the young people for his innovation and sharp contrast to their parents.<sup>224</sup> Young Jews also joined Young Judea, fraternities and sororities in high school, and the Young Jewish Council to strengthen their friendships. The communal leaders had taken advantage of the Depression by offering cheap recreational and social options for the young Jews. They devoted their purpose to keeping the kids off the streets and away from crimes that came with economic hard times and as a way to bring them all together.<sup>225</sup> It was a win-win situation. These social opportunities truly fostered the new kind of American Judaism that this generation would come to establish after World War II: American Judaism thrived on sociability that stressed individuality.<sup>226</sup>

The world beyond the JY and public schools provided a very different kind of picture for the young Jews— a more sinister one. By coming of age during the Depression, they faced limited choices and psychological toll. Employment opportunities were far and few, especially for young, ambitious, highly educated, white-collared Jews. Many of these Jews had grown up on their parents’ dreams and hopes by pursuing the American Dream of achieving middle class status. Elliott Landsman spoke for his generation, “Education was our only way out of poverty.” Yet, the Depression forced him to find jobs rather than go to school in order to support himself.<sup>227</sup> Many other Jews had followed similar paths but had to support their own way through college. Through

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<sup>224</sup> Landsman, interview.

<sup>225</sup> Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 57-59.

<sup>226</sup> Ruderman, Landsman, Kasdin, interviews; Nusbaum, interview, 12-15

<sup>227</sup> Landsman, interview.

college and employment, Jews encountered antisemitism and discrimination. Their white collar status had done very little for them as they scoured over employment ads only to find many of the jobs listed advertised as “Christians Only” or “Seeking only Protestants.”<sup>228</sup> Jews found more obstacles to overcome after passing through the universities’ quota.

Most of Rochester Jewry applied to the University of Rochester because it offered economic benefits and excellent education in medicine and the sciences. Jews could commute from their home while the University would pay for their tuition through merit scholarships. The merit scholarships at the University of Rochester had been set up since the 1880s when President Martin Brewer Anderson wanted to expand opportunities to the incoming poor Russian Jewish immigrants. He wanted to help them satisfy “their craving for learning.”<sup>229</sup> Jewish families, like many other American families, could not support their children’s educational endeavors during the Depression and children had to pay their way through school. For example, Clifford Lovenheim attended Syracuse University on a football scholarship as a recruit. He and his other poor friends had counted on their semi-professional football abilities for recruitment by the universities and have their education paid for. Then they would earn their degrees for free. Not for Lovenheim. After his injury after one season that ended his football career, he had to return home to Rochester because he had no money to pay for the rest of his education.<sup>230</sup> Those who attended the University of Rochester in the 1920s and 1930s faced an emotional roller coaster as Americans and Jews. Similar to their public school days, the

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<sup>228</sup> Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 61.

<sup>229</sup> Arthur James May, “End of the Age,” *History of the University of Rochester*. University of Rochester. <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/index.cfm?PAGE=2316>

<sup>230</sup> Lovenheim, interview, 11.

Jews found greater acceptance and openness from their peers. College greatly influenced their Jews' perception of themselves as Americans, especially when Phi Epsilon Pi and Kappa Nu fraternities at the University of Rochester battled and won recognition on campus in spite of the President's protests.<sup>231</sup>

The Jewish fraternities at the University faced several challenges during its existence and under President Rush Rhees' tenure in the 1920s. Phi Epsilon Pi and Kappa Nu formed as social groups for the Jewish undergraduate and medical students. Six medical students formed Kappa Nu as a new fraternity organization while others created Kappa Alpha chapter of Phi Epsilon Pi.<sup>232</sup> These fraternities evolved out of response to discrimination by other fraternities on campus as common throughout other campuses in America. Jews in other universities had to change their names in order to be accepted by gentile fraternities if they did not possess any Semitic features.<sup>233</sup> Phi Epsilon Pi and Kappa Nu had different foci than two first Jewish fraternities in America, Zeta Beta Tau of City College of New York and Pi Lambda Phi of Yale University. Zeta Beta Tau promoted Zionism and Reform German Jewish culture and later Americanized the Jewish fraternity experience.<sup>234</sup> Pi Lambda Phi, which went dormant after its founders graduated in 1898, opened its doors to members of all races and religion. When Columbia University students reestablished the fraternity in 1912, it reestablished its original open-door mission though this was difficult to maintain it due to deep religious

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<sup>231</sup> Landsman, interview.

<sup>232</sup> Marianne R. Sauna, *Going Greek: Jewish College Fraternities in the United States 1895-1945*. (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2003), 289, 300, 320.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-45.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-55.



discrimination on campuses. It did later become one of the few fraternities to have a successful religiously diverse student body.<sup>235</sup>

Similar to Pi Lambda Phi, Phi Epsilon Pi focused on accepting members regardless of their religion identity but failed to achieve that goal because too many Jews joined it and gentiles deemed it “too Jewish.” Historian of Jewish Greek fraternities Marianne Sauna observes that these Jewish fraternities did not always connect *all* Jews but rather, they reflected the on-going German-Eastern European Jewish ethnic tensions.<sup>236</sup> At the University of Rochester, Phi Epsilon Pi drew members from upper-class Reform German Jewish background. Nevertheless, University student Garson Meyers recalled that the Jews felt the need to form their own fraternities on campus because they had been living at home and felt excluded from the campus life.<sup>237</sup> When Phi Epsilon Pi’s Kappa Alpha chapter formed in 1911, it faced challenges to uphold its nondiscrimination policy because the University administration suspected that the Jews were attempting to copy the gentile fraternities and would form their own society. No matter where Phi Epsilon Pi petitioned for recognition on campus in America, they could not simply fight these accusations. They failed to uphold the fraternity’s mission to accept men, regardless of their religion, who wanted to join it not just “‘men who merely wanted to come in to a fraternity for the sake of wearing a pin regardless of its significance’ – i.e. Jewish students who could not have been accepted anywhere else.”<sup>238</sup> Finally, the fraternity abandoned this idea at its convention in 1923. Sauna points out that the struggles of Phi Epsilon Pi to live up its ideals revealed the continuing deep

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<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-50.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>237</sup> Meyers, interview, 11.

<sup>238</sup> Sauna, *Going Greek*, 63.

religion prejudice in America.<sup>239</sup> Jewish men would become ridiculed for not realizing that they could never be “true” Americans only by forming parallel fraternities just as their parents and grandparents did with their country clubs. At the University of Rochester, a Baptist university, despite the mutual respect from gentile students, Jews would never be included in the membership of gentile fraternities.

Kappa Nu, created by premedical and medical students at the University of Rochester in 1911, sought a different agenda. They emphasized their Jewishness by using Hebrew letters— *kaf* and *nun*. They represented *keshet neurim* translated to “the ties of the youth.” Instead of Christian references in its secret rituals, the members used Hebrew and the Bible. Kappa Nu restricted its membership to Jews only. Following its founding, other chapters opened up at Columbia University and Cornell University a year later.<sup>240</sup> Though Phi Epsilon Pi would absorb Kappa Nu in 1961, the significance of this fraternity’s foundation reflected the Jews’ need for their own organization, especially in a medical school that greatly restricted its admissions to the Jews. For the University of Rochester students, Phi Epsilon Pi and Kappa Nu provided an atmosphere of self-defense and communal support against gentile fraternities and the University administration while negotiating their lives as American university students.

When they began petitioning for their fraternities’ recognition on campus, the Jews faced their biggest enemy, President Rush Rhees. His presidency, from 1900 to 1935, gave the Jews a bitter taste of antisemitism in education as he would ignore the Jewish students’ pleas and lightly ridicule them. His snide comments and attitude became unimportant compared to the widespread acceptance from the student body and

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<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-79.

the faculty. When the Jews decided to put their fraternities up for official recognition in order to participate in all social activities, dances, and competitions on campus, the Student Government Association approved its recognition. Though these same gentile students excluded their Jewish peers from their fraternity membership, general campus life mirrored the American society of tolerance. The faculty supported SGA's decision. President Rhees was astounded. He knew about the faculty's acceptance of their bright Jewish students but had counted on the student body to reject them and offer no financial assistance.<sup>241</sup>

The Jews' position at the University became precarious when they began competing for the Scholarship Cup, donated by the Class of 1908. The Class of 1908 sought to promote healthy academic competition and love for learning. Each fraternity competed each year on a scholarship basis and whoever had the highest average grade point average would possess that cup for the academic year. They stipulated that the permanent ownership would go to any fraternity who won the Cup for three successive years. Fraternities could not achieve that goal and at the same time there had been a regulation against the Jewish fraternity that they could not compete. Eventually, the faculty recognized this and not seeing anyone winning it in due time, they pushed for the Phi Epsilon Pi's participation. Phi Epsilon Pi did win the Cup in the early 1920s. Garson Meyers remembers the tension within the fraternity as they approached their third year with the Cup. Some members questioned whether some of them should deliberately bring down their grades for the sake of losing the Cup and avoiding backlash from other fraternities. They feared that other fraternities would resent their existence on campus because of their high scholarship achievements. No one stepped forward. Instead, the

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<sup>241</sup> Meyers, interview, 11-13

fraternity asked the Rochester alumni chapter to donate the Cup to the University.

“Rather than getting mad [at the anti-Semitic policies],” Garson said, “We were determined. I was determined and so were my associates to change the situation.”<sup>242</sup>

From there, the Jews had established a strong, reputable presence on campus. The Jews knew that the University of Rochester had quotas and a feeling of discrimination but it was only when they entered in the campus they realize that the negativity traced back to the University President’s office. President Rhees stood alone but his attitude pushed the Jewish students to be strong and unified which later would help to counter further antisemitism in the 1930s.

Earning a degree in the 1930s gave the Jews no immediate benefits until after the war. In the meantime, Jews returned home to their parents and helped with the family business or found employment somewhere. To be in that position could not be any more embarrassing for them as highly educated Jews with dashed hopes and dreams. They thought that by moving away from their ghettos into the university life would integrate them into The American Society that they dreamed of since childhood. Now, by the late 1930s, they sat on the curbs of Joseph Avenue, wondering what being an American meant if educated people like them could not get a job, not even a meager one. The American Dream bubble had bursted. They had relied on their parents’ encouragement and support to stay in school and achieve college degrees. The lack of opportunities and activities during the Depression had also pushed them to stay in school. To fend off the discouragements, doubts, and frustrations, Rochester Jews returned to their social lives at the JY and TBK until the war broke out.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>243</sup> Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 69-71.

The Depression greatly changed the Jewish youth in their perception of the American Dream and how their lives would go with the times. When they began in the 1920s, their world revolved around the immigrant culture on Joseph Avenue. Over time as Rochester Jewish community shifted gears in the synagogues, social organizations, and internal migrations, the young Jews followed along. They saw changes every day and week that by the time World War II ended, Joseph Avenue became a memory. It became more than a memory for these Jews— it provided a stable foundation that they could come to depend upon during difficult times in the 1930s. The vibrant community nurtured them to become strong American Jews through an increasingly heavy emphasis on personal interconnectedness. By doing so, Jews could learn more from each other's experiences and ideas rather than reading the "outdated" Talmud. They had become Americans on their own accord in their own world. For them, for the moment, the American Dream would not necessarily mean living like an American with a profession, a family, and a home. It meant growing self-esteem of *who* they were and having friends for support in sharing their "dashed" dreams. In the sense of American Jewish Dream for Rochester youth, they found that when they returned home in the arms of the community who sought to give them food, shelter, and maybe some job somewhere on Joseph Avenue.

## **Rochester Jewry Reacts: the 1940s**

The news of European Jewry and Nazi Germany trickled in slowly during the 1930s amid transitions and changes to the American Jewish experience. Ambivalent American Jews continued their lives in the midst of the Great Depression and heightened American politics. They encountered more antisemitism due to Americans' fear of socialism and the New Left. Though quite few prominent socialist leaning American Jews attracted that type of attention, many more were apathetic and dismissed it. Antisemitism in America was different; in America, it came largely in form of language rather than violence. For many, however, the Great Depression deflected their attention from the plight of European Jewry. The situation in Germany did raise identity questions for the American Jews but ultimately, the question for them revolved around priorities. Up until America's entry in the war in 1941, American Jews had been rebuilding communities in the new framework of American Judaism. The Jews' self-confidence and their communities' inner ties remained fragile. The wake of the Nazi persecution would test the strength of American Jews' connections with their identity and each other. In Rochester, the Jewish community attempted to remain unified politically and socially in order to exhaust its resources to aid the European Jews.

Historians ardently debate American Jewry's reaction to the Holocaust, beginning with the question of "could more have been done?" They recount the disunity of the larger, competing American Jewish organizations that each claimed of which to represent American Jewry as a whole. They also criticized President Roosevelt and his administration. From 1950s to 1980s, historians fault Roosevelt and American Jewry for

their inaction.<sup>244</sup> From 1990s to the present, they argue that much had been done given the tense conditions that American Jews and the President were in.<sup>245</sup>

One ought to say that they ignore the important concept of viewing American Jews as *Americans* too. Rabbi Haskel Lookstein acknowledges that the fearful antisemitic atmosphere contributed to the Jews' unwillingness to be defiant about their Jewish identity. He accused this "bystander" of being a "cowed figure, who was destined to remain in that state for most of the war years... American Jews were particularly sensitive in those days to the strident tones of hate because they could see what one unbalanced bigot had accomplished in Germany."<sup>246</sup> Furthermore, he concluded that "the Final Solution may have been *unstoppable* by American Jewry, but it should have been *unbearable* for them. And it wasn't." His research in *Are We Our Brothers' Keepers?* seriously lacks oral histories and memoirs which provide richer, more emotional insights than his exclusive focus on periodicals and newspapers. Without oral history, Lookstein and his peers of that period left large gaps that leave room for blatant accusations and without regard for the reality of living in the United States during World War II.<sup>247</sup>

More recent research and published memoirs in both the Holocaust and America's home front participation shed light on the lives of these "bystanders." They open up a broader perspective on how the Holocaust figured in the minds of Americans and

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<sup>244</sup> The earlier works on American Jewish response to the Holocaust is narrow in scope. They target the blame on American Jewry's inaction to pressure Roosevelt to respond more appropriately to the situation in Europe. The historians such as David Wyman and Henry Feingold concluded that American Jews, as Jews, were too "coward" to stand up as Jews and concentrated on their image as Americans.

<sup>245</sup> Diner and Sarna succinctly covered the Holocaust in their broad surveys with the suggestion that American Jews had limited framework to work with, including riled political tensions between national Jewish organizations that largely prevented strong unity from materializing.

<sup>246</sup> Haskel Lookstein, *Were We Our Brothers' Keepers? The Public Response of American Jews to the Holocaust 1938-1944* (New York: Hartmore, 1985), 206-207.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 214, 216.

American Jews. Their overall mindset in America as the war in Europe broke out focused on the on-going battles in the Pacific theater and Nazis' growing domination of Europe. Historian Peter Novick remarks that "there are many dimensions to the wartime marginality of the Holocaust in the American mind: what one knew and what one believed; how to frame what knew or believed; devising an appropriate response."<sup>248</sup> People overlooked the fact that small steps made a difference, he writes, but so many factors inhibited them from reaching those retrospective expectations.<sup>249</sup>

I argue here that American Jews lived as Americans, in the sense of sharing the problems with other Americans. The Great Depression brought social, political, and economic problems to the surface for all Americans, gentiles and Jews alike. The momentum of sharing experiences continued after the attack on Pearl Harbor. American Jews fought on the home front and in the battlefield with their American and Jewish friends. Yet the events in Europe tugged on their consciousness because of the looming threat to the Jews' survival everywhere, including America, as antisemitism continued to rise. American Jews had multiple tasks and had to prioritize daily, beginning with their own lives.

As Rochester Jewry thus far demonstrates, American Jews focused on stabilizing their vacillating American/Jewish lives before turning their attention to international issues. They knew of their contingent responsibility as leaders of world Jewry. They had to make a choice: abandon the goal of American Jewish unification in order to save the European Jewry through difficult, not if impossible, measures or continue to strengthen communal ties in order to develop a strong example as eventual leaders of world Jewry at

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<sup>248</sup> Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 20.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.



the cost of Jewish lives. The American Jewish organizations took the former route.

Rochester Jewry attempted the latter which helped save European Jewry as much as they could within a limited framework as Jews and Americans.

Beginning in the early 1930s, Rabbi Bernstein began telling the news of the frightening situation in German politics and feared that the National Socialist Party would come to power. His personal trip to Germany in 1933 just after Hitler became appointed as the Chancellor disturbed him. The acculturated German Jews in Germany and in America expressed little concern for the future of the German Jews. They had always been accepted in the national German society and saw little reason for discrimination. Rabbi Bernstein disagreed with the German Jews' views of their security and emphasized that Jews in Germany and rest of Europe, secular or not, would fall as victims of Hitler's persecution. The European Jews' future would be ambiguous. In his sermon in 1930, he explicitly stated that the American Jews needed to be prepared to become the leaders of world Jewry as it would have the largest Jewish population.<sup>250</sup>

Certainly Rabbi Bernstein could not have foreseen the absolute tragedy of European Jewry but his feelings encouraged him to start taking reasonable action and think rationally about American Jews' current position. Though the Atlantic Ocean created a large buffer zone for the American Jews against European persecution, they still needed to remember their historical ties. A Jew must see that "historical obligation to his people, must use whatever voice, whatever influence he has, [to see] that these things shall cease."<sup>251</sup> As Americans, despite the Depression, they still had greater economic

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<sup>250</sup> Eisenstadt, *Affirming the Covenant*, 158. Rabbi Bernstein also made the same sermon in 1944 to emphasize the importance of saving the European Jews at all costs, no matter how impossible it seemed in the face of politics as news reported higher number of those murdered.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*

influence than European Jewry, including those in France and England. America's wealth of opportunities, resources, and freedom put these American Jews in a unique place in history. Rabbi Bernstein reiterated that the belief in the good will of others unified American and Jewish values, and American Jews should take it personally to save their brethren in less fortunate circumstances. He pushed for the Jews to reconsider their position and take action quickly because freedom and money in America put them at a special advantage. His trip to Germany epitomized the importance of saving both American Jewry and European Jewry in order to preserve Judaism as a whole. He further describes his vision of the future for the German Jewry based on his observation during his trip to Germany, "the Nazi assault upon the German Jews moves on from segregation, to pauperization, to emigration, to annihilation... For the Jews of Germany the choice is between emigration or death."<sup>252</sup> For American Jews, the choice was between ignorance or action.

Rochester Jewry wasted no time to save some of the German Jews in the late 1930s. The news and the Jewish welfare organizations' donation collections connected the Jews a bit closer to the truth, that their hard saved dollars would actually save the European Jewry, not only giving them food and resources for day-to-day survival.<sup>253</sup> Speakers streamed through the Rochester community and spoke about the Nazis' discrimination leading to deteriorating conditions in Germany for the Jews.<sup>254</sup> Jews scoured over the newspapers, listened to the radio, and watched newsreels for any signs of news from Germany that the Jewish community was still surviving. They held their breath in hopes that the German Jews would somehow escape or fight against the

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<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-163.

<sup>253</sup> Nusbaum, interview, 15.

<sup>254</sup> Landsman, interview.

discriminatory Nuremberg Laws of 1936. Some Jews participated in nation-wide boycott of German goods, such as Drs. Isadore Mesinger and David Wolin of the Jewish Home who stopped buying German drugs for their patients.<sup>255</sup> Many remained uncertain of the Jews' fate. Ruth Lempert, only a child then, writes in her memoir, "World War II must have been of grave concern to my parents. They both had many family members still in Poland, but they didn't talk about it....also read the 'Daily Forward' and they must have discussed the war with their friends and our relatives." The media's tone in Rochester and America led to anxiety for the Jews all over Europe, not just in Germany and Poland.<sup>256</sup>

The increasingly tense atmosphere became unsettling for the German Jews in Rochester despite feeling comfortable in America as Americans. The large Reform German Jewish population had family ties in Germany and they began understanding the difference between being a Jew in America and in Germany. The presence of the persecuted Eastern European Jews at the turn of the century had raised acute questions of their Jewish identity and remained so in the 1930s. In Germany, on the other hand, being Jewish among other secular and highly assimilated Jews meant little. They viewed their Jewish identity as secondary. Therefore, German Jews in America had different kinds of concern for their families and friends in Germany—both innocence and gullibility about the Jews in Germany's ability to stand against the Nazis. The German Jews in Germany assured that things would remain unchanged. Their lives had been affected a bit but nothing serious. They viewed antisemitism as a foreign concept because they had been

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<sup>255</sup> Lookstein, *Were We Our Brothers' Keepers*, 75-76; Dobkowski and Lovenheim, *Families Among Families*, 45.

<sup>256</sup> Lempert, "Growing Up in the Old Neighborhood," 22-23.

treated as equal members of the German society since 1850s.<sup>257</sup> The German Jews in the United States did concur with their families in Germany until *Kristallnacht* in 1937. *Kristallnacht* shocked German Jews in America and in Germany because they had rarely faced direct violence against their Jewish background. The German Jews in Germany decided it was time to leave, and their families and friends in America offered their hand.<sup>258</sup>

Rochester's German Jewry took steps to bring over a group of German Jewish refugees after *Kristallnacht*. They appealed to the reluctant Department of State to accept more visas on the basis that these refugees would not demand financial support and pose no "social" danger.<sup>259</sup> The German Jews' pleas that they would assist these refugees themselves demonstrated their adherence to one of the pillars in American Judaism: philanthropy and community self-help. By doing so, they exhibited their acceptance of it. The JCC backed these Jews by insisting that the Depression had little effect on Rochester's economy compared to other large cities. Furthermore, Rochester's small, non-competitive industries suited the incoming German Jews' tailoring and entrepreneurial skills. This information convinced the Department of State to expedite its visa processing.<sup>260</sup> Approximately 700 refugees reached Joseph Avenue by 1939.<sup>261</sup>

Joseph Avenue continued its tradition of offering these new refugees resources and opportunities as it had for Eastern European Jews, a generation or two earlier. The

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<sup>257</sup> Ben Owerback, interviewed by Maurice Iaserman, July 22, 1976, Rochester Jewish Oral History Project, University of Rochester, 44-45.

<sup>258</sup> Moshe Gottlieb, "Boycott, Rescue, and Ransom," *American Jewish History: America, American Jews, and the Holocaust*, ed. Jeffery Gurock (New York: Routledge, 1998), 146-147; Lookstein, *Were We Our Brothers Keepers*, 95-98.

<sup>259</sup> David Brody, "American Jewry, the Refugees and Immigration Restriction (1932-1942)," *American Jewish History: America, American Jews, and the Holocaust*, ed. Jeffery Gurock (New York, Routledge, 1998), 185-187.

<sup>260</sup> Eisenstadt, *Affirming the Covenant*, 164.

<sup>261</sup> Dobkowski and Lovenheim, *Families Among Families*, 46.

refugees quickly found jobs through their new community. The Jewish Home employed some of them, including a doctor. Rabbi Bernstein played an instrumental role in bringing over Rabbi Martin Slomonsky, a well-known religious leader in Germany, to become director of religious programming at the Jewish Home.<sup>262</sup> The Rochester Refugee Service, with assistance from Jewish Social Services Bureau and Baden Street settlement, handled the refugees and taught them the American ways including learning English. They catered to these ambitious refugees' need for greater social and educational status by offering Regents examination preparation that would give them entrance to the universities. Additionally, many joined TBK, helping to raise TBK's funds during the Roosevelt recession.<sup>263</sup> The combination of the refugees' capital and the German Jews in Rochester contributed to the community's economy. German Jewish refugees eventually settled in the community and enjoyed cultural activities with other Jews.<sup>264</sup> Bringing in these refugees and acculturating them did little to disturb the fragile Jewish community. These refugees were quickly absorbed in the community, so largely supported by the German Jews that it later scarcely figured in the memories for many other Rochester Jews, mostly of Eastern European descent at this point, by 1940.

Eastern European Jews in Europe had far fewer resources for escape than the middle class German Jews and needed greater economic assistance from abroad. Although the Eastern European Jews in America consistently stayed involved with their *landsmanshaftns*, Hitler's invasion of Poland in September 1939 marked a critical point for them. At this point, the U.S. Department of State was processing visas far below the quota, causing more difficulties for Jewish refugees. Financial aid became the only

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<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>263</sup> Eisenstadt, *Affirming the Covenant*, 165.

<sup>264</sup> Nusbaum, interview, 21.

option for American Jews in helping Eastern European Jews. These European Jews needed food, shelter, and money, especially as their resources dwindled due the devastating war between the Germans and the Soviets from 1941 to 1943. The images and news from the Soviet front and Jewish Telegraphic Agency pressured American Jews to take care of their families in Europe through greater political and economic means.<sup>265</sup> In 1940, satirical columnist, Louis Siegler, appealed to the readers to consider their privileges as Jews living in America. He argued that America and Judaism both valued social justice and democracy. Hitler would seek to exploit their weakness—their fear of accusations of dual-loyalty by gentile Americans. Nevertheless, American Jews must stay vigilant in their efforts to help the European Jewry, he wrote, for the sake of the European Jewry's and Judaism's survival. Time, money, and fight for justice would bind the Jews together to ease the anxiety.<sup>266</sup> Fund-drives became the major solution for Rochester's Jewish community while leaving politics to Rabbi Bernstein.

The common denominator of philanthropy in Rochester's Jewish community, particularly strengthened in the past decade, kept the Jews united throughout the war. Jews poured in their resources through welfare drives every year. These welfare drives resulted in major successes each year meeting 90% of the Jewish Welfare Fund's national headquarters' quota for Rochester.<sup>267</sup> The community and philanthropy motto "What have you done today to support Jewish identity?" motivated secular American Jews to consider their connection to the Eastern European Jews through philanthropy. Donating to the cause with other Jews asserted their Jewish identity in America and became their

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<sup>265</sup> Gottlieb, "Boycott, Rescue, and Ransom," 178.

<sup>266</sup> Louis E. Spiegler, "Freedom of Jewry in Present Situation," *The Jewish Ledger* (December 27, 1940), 6.

<sup>267</sup> "United Jewish Fund Raises Record Amount," *The Jewish Ledger* (December 8, 1944), 4.

form of expressing it.<sup>268</sup> Secular Jews had far greater advantage than their Eastern European counterparts and needed to show their support as Americans and as Jews. Avowing their American economic status and new American Jewish identity, every Jew said, “Money was no object.”<sup>269</sup> Furthermore, Landsman points out that there was social pressure to empty their wallets; the drives published lists of people who gave and the amount that they donated, which played a role in the fund drives’ successes.<sup>270</sup>

Philanthropy came with sociability, another pillar of American Judaism. The emphasis on connecting with other Jews from the 1930s through social means led to various social events, including auctions and charity balls, resulting in more dollars in the 1940s.<sup>271</sup> For example, B’nai B’rith ran a U.S. Bonds Campaign in 1942, and raised over \$1,000,000 at a charity ball, to be used for the Oswego war refugees.<sup>272</sup> When advertising for this event, the *Jewish Ledger* strategically placed a war bonds advertisement underneath to push more reluctant readers to consider the good of supporting the war against the Axis powers, “Remember Pearl Harbor, Buy War Bonds.”<sup>273</sup>

Jewish leadership increased pressure with their annual local Jewish Welfare Fund drives. These occurred in late November and early December and lasted for ten days each year. The *Jewish Ledger* printed an article in 1940 that explained the plans and purposes of the major fund organizations such as United Jewish Aid, United Jewish Welfare, and the Joint Distribution Committee which aided the Jews in Europe and

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<sup>268</sup> Lookstein, *Were We Our Brothers’ Keepers*, 73.

<sup>269</sup> Landsman, interview.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*; Feingold, *A Time for Searching*, 163

<sup>271</sup> Feingold, *A Time for Searching*, 163

<sup>272</sup> Ruderman, interview, 6.

<sup>273</sup> “Over Million Raised by B’nai B’rith,” *The Jewish Ledger* (February 12, 1943), 4.

Palestine.<sup>274</sup> In 1940, United Jewish Welfare set a quota of \$145,675 and the Rochester Jewry gave \$134,545 in that short time period.<sup>275</sup> In 1942, the quota increased to \$173,167 with only 94% of it met.<sup>276</sup> The year 1943 surprised the community. The Jews initially raised 36% of the total quota within the first three days. Then, the community rallied to donate \$212,000 in the last seven days. It was the only year during the war that Rochester Jewish community surpassed the quota by raising a total of approximately \$285,000.<sup>277</sup> Finally, in 1944, the quota was set for \$272,000 and the Jews raised \$258,000.<sup>278</sup> The last drive before the end of the war exposes the Jews' diminishing hopes in saving the European Jewry. The reports of continuing atrocities in Jewish newspapers and endless devastating battles in the American media caused doubts and uncertainty among American Jews. They wondered how much more it would take to save a couple hundred thousands of Jews. Even by 1944, they greatly underestimated the extent of the Holocaust and the Eastern European Jews' desperate needs for far more political and economic actions.

As these reports came in, Jews began questioning the survival of Judaism in this menacing world by questioning their own Jewish identity and role. Some young Jews joined JY to prove that Judaism could still survive as evident in 100% increase in its membership in 1944.<sup>279</sup> Yet, the *Jewish Ledger* published commentaries and editorials pressuring American Jews to consider their American Jewish identity and values and reexamine the significance of the war for them as Jews, not just Americans fighting for

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<sup>274</sup> "Where Your Money is Going," *The Jewish Ledger* (March 15, 1940), 6.

<sup>275</sup> "Welfare Drive Reaches \$134,545," *The Jewish Ledger* (December 6, 1940), 3.

<sup>276</sup> "Jewish Fund Reports Sum of \$164, 267," *The Jewish Ledger* (December 11, 1942), 6.

<sup>277</sup> "Local UJW Drive Goes Over with \$212,000," *The Jewish Ledger* (December 10, 1943), 2.

<sup>278</sup> "United Jewish Fund Raises Record Amount," *The Jewish Ledger* (December 8, 1944), 4.

<sup>279</sup> "JYM & WA Member Drive Exceeds Goal With 102.5 Per Cent of Quota at Windup," *The Jewish Ledger* (September 15, 1944), 6.



democracy and freedom. In 1942, regular columnist, Pat Frank, wrote a satirical letter to “Herr Hitler” describing his Jewish identity. He implied that Jews historically always survived pogroms, expulsions, and persecutions, and they continue to rise and thrive with renewed strength. In his perspective, “I have seen this comedy over and over and I have laughed by not with the laughter of the vengeful. I, the Jew, have laughed with the deep laughter of one who has been the everlasting witness to the comic art of God’s ironic justice...” He pointed out that “Jews always prevailed over their enemies because of their power of faith in God, law, and justice.”<sup>280</sup> He attempted to appease American Jews’ doubts about Judaism’s survival and, based on historical evidence, American Jews had nothing to lose by fighting the war as Jews.

Some American Jews remained unconvinced of going into the war as Jews, not Americans. In 1943, someone wrote that American Jews should view America’s participation in the war as means of defeating Hitler, not only to preserve democracy. Going to the frontlines for Roosevelt should also be viewed as an opportunity to save European Jewry.<sup>281</sup> This would become the young Jewish soldiers’ perspective of their duty as they later toured the concentration camps.<sup>282</sup>

American Jews unified to fight for Roosevelt as Americans, not as Jews, because they shared support for Roosevelt and American values with other Americans. Evidently, even in 1943, American Judaism remained ambivalent on this point because of increasingly divisive politics from the national American Jewish organizations. Furthermore, antisemitism in the United States continued to rise, with a majority of

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<sup>280</sup> Pat Frank, “Plain Talk,” *The Jewish Ledger* (November 20, 1942), 1, 4.

<sup>281</sup> “Responsibility,” *The Jewish Ledger* (October 1, 1943), 6.

<sup>282</sup> Landsman, Ruderman, interviews; Deborah Dash Moore, *GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 231-234.

Americans polled reporting that they viewed Jews negatively.<sup>283</sup>

At the community level, an editorial in 1943 encouraged Jews to focus on each other and what power they had to save European Jewry. As atrocities began building up and the time began expiring, it wrote “Jews have too many evils to fight together to waste time on fighting each other.”<sup>284</sup> At this point, Jews began realizing that the war created a greater number of enemies than they expected. Hitler found allies in Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary. These countries, especially Hungary, possessed significant Jewish populations. The State Department in Washington remained mute on its visa issue. The editorial suggested that in their communities, Jews might be able to achieve more than the national organizations if they could cooperate with each other. In Rochester, the Jews assisted the German Jewish refugees in the late 1930s and gave thousands of dollars to the charities. Yet, their dollars and community support could only go so far as the situation continued to crumble in Europe. At this point, political action needed to be taken to create leverage for the Allied powers to end the war as quickly as possible.

Community action resulted quite soon. Rochester Jews expressed their dissatisfaction by the national, influential Jewish leaders’ progress in pressuring Roosevelt to address the issue. Two major rival organizations, American Jewish Committee and American Jewish Congress, splintered on many strategies to save the European Jewry. Pro-Zionist American Jewish Congress proposed to save the European Jewry through large demonstrations and emigration to Palestine. On the other hand, American Jewish Committee advocated increased political pressure on Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill to abandon visa quotas in America and Britain. This

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<sup>283</sup> Feingold, *Entering in the Mainstream*, 259.

<sup>284</sup> Jacob B. Minkin, “Jews Must Unite or Perish,” *The Jewish Ledger* (Rochester, 9 April 1943): 2

German Jewish organization used “quiet diplomacy” to avoid attention to their Jewish heritage.<sup>285</sup> Both had close relationships with Washington and visited Roosevelt with ideas and proposals. Yet, things in Washington remained slow and thus increased frustration both at the national organizations and in the communities. Rochester Jews wasted no time airing their complaints that they had done what they could within their power but, by 1943, their abortive efforts and the scale of Hitler’s war demanded greater diplomatic actions. One complained that Jews had reached “the most critical period in [the Jewish] history and the constant internal bickering and conflicts must cease.”<sup>286</sup> The failure to save the Jews would fall upon the national organizations in addition to Washington. Despite having European contacts and strong Washington connections, they had neither a real agenda nor the unabashed confidence to propel the issue forward. They also each claimed to be the representative of American Jewry as a whole.<sup>287</sup> Furthermore, the image of conflict-ridden Jewish America worried and upset American Jews including those in Rochester for two reasons. First, it did not embody an American spirit of unity and tolerance for each other. Second, they feared for the future and what the post-war world would hold for them.<sup>288</sup>

The organizations’ lack of strong unity in diplomatic relations raised concerns for Rochester Jews in post-war planning. Some felt that the Allies fought the war and sacrificed its military and economic resources to save the Jews rather than to win an arms

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<sup>285</sup> Monty Noam Penkower, “American Jewry and the Holocaust: From Biltmore to the American Jewish Conference,” *American Jewish History: America, American Jews, and the Holocaust*, ed. Jeffery Gurock (New York: Routledge, 1998), 359, 362.

<sup>286</sup> “For Jewish Unity,” *The Jewish Ledger* (Rochester: 22 January 1943), 12.

<sup>287</sup> Penkower, “American Jewry and the Holocaust,” 367.

<sup>288</sup> Novick, *Holocaust in American Life*, 40-41; Lookstein, *Were We Our Brothers Keepers*, 118-119; Feingold, *Entering in the Mainstream*, 237-239.

race.<sup>289</sup> Therefore, they felt that Jews should be involved in post-war planning with the Allies. Another concurred that American Jews should determine the fate of the European Jews, punishment for Germany, and possibility of legitimizing Palestine as a country, not a mandate. One editorial in the *Jewish Ledger* emphasized that Jews should be involved because they believed in justice for all, not because the negotiations concerned their ethnic group. It was suggested that the future could be met with justice for the Jews by resolving the centuries old Jewish question through the creation of a Jewish state. It argued that Jews had always been a nation as people and one of the oldest in the world but unfairly possessed no territory for official recognition.<sup>290</sup> Another editorial emphasized the Jews' strong bonds, reinforced by the common desire to return to Jerusalem "next year." In addition, it condemned the Allies' lack of acknowledgement and the antisemitic propaganda in America that underestimated the Jews' ancient bonds.<sup>291</sup> As the war drew closer to its end, communities like Rochester were heavily pressed for a strong motive to maintain unity.

Broadly, it was Zionism that emerged as a catalyst for American Jewish unity for various reasons. First, the United States government had little political interest in the Jews nor in the need to facilitate visa processing and immigration quotas. Second, the Allies' and the American Jewish organizations' conferences concluded that aside from Shanghai, China, no legitimate place would accept Jews. Third, Jewish victims of the war needed a safe haven from devastated Europe. Lastly and most importantly, Jews felt a powerful need for a Jewish state as a solution to the Jewish question. Eastern

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<sup>289</sup> "The War and After For the Jews," *The Jewish Ledger* (Rochester, 22 April 1943), 12.

<sup>290</sup> Jacob S. Minkin, "Tampering with Justice," *The Jewish Ledger* (October 27, 1944), 6.

<sup>291</sup> Louis E. Spiegler, "Freedom of Jewry in Present Situation," *The Jewish Ledger* (December 27, 1940), 1.

European Jews in America and Europe strongly supported Zionism and a move to Palestine, as answers to the Jewish question: the Jews were strangers in nationalistic European countries; they encountered persecution and discriminatory laws that threatened Judaism's survival. Palestine meant peace for the exiled Jews.<sup>292</sup> German Jews in America did not abandon their fears and memories of earlier ethnic and class conflicts when the first Eastern European Jews came several decades earlier. However, these German Jews who considered assimilation as an answer to the Jewish Question found it to be an increasingly ineffective solution as the war continued. Eventually, they acquiesced to the idea of a Jewish state. American Jews agreed to support Palestine as a safe haven for the Jewish refugees, largely due to the State Department's inflexible quotas and heightened antisemitism in the United States. They also had given up hopes of saving the "exiled" Jews. The circumstances had gone beyond their control by 1943 that they felt the need to focus on the *future* of Jews rather than the *present*. The wartime laid groundwork for strong Zionist support for a "different kind of final solution to the Jewish question."<sup>293</sup>

In Rochester, as we have noted, Zionism already took root in the community in its Hadassah and Poale Zion (Labor Zionists) groups along with Rabbi Bernstein's rhetoric. In the early stages of the war, Rochester Jewry supported Palestine as a haven for the European Jews but remained torn over the notion of establishing an actual Jewish state.<sup>294</sup> Britain's immigration quota and heavy Arab presence in Palestine concerned many Jews. Yet, the situation in Europe supported the idea that Palestine was needed as a land of

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<sup>292</sup> Feingold, *A Time for Searching*, 235.

<sup>293</sup> Novick, *Holocaust in American Life*, 43-45.

<sup>294</sup> "Responsibility Their Own," *The Jewish Ledger* (December 25, 1942), 4.

refuge.<sup>295</sup> Hundreds of Jews had illegally already crossed the Mediterranean into Haifa's port. The process would and could not be stopped—the situation in Europe exacerbated the Jews' desperation to leave. To push for greater unity in the issue of Palestine as a Jewish state, Rabbi Bernstein reminded his congregations about the spirit of Judaism, especially in America. He said that “the Jews have a great faith to live by, because they have a message for healing, hope for unhappy mankind- that is not to merely make a virtue of our necessity but to give our people dignity, courage, self-respect.”<sup>296</sup> As privileged American Jews, they must sustain their connections beyond economic aid in order to create similar opportunities for their brethren. One Rochester Jew concurred that she identified with Palestine as a safe haven from persecution and as a place of opportunities for these poor European Jews who had rarely experienced them before. Palestine offered a parallel alternative to America in terms of freedom, liberty, and opportunities.<sup>297</sup> . Overall, regardless of the differences in opinion, Rochester Jewry provided some form of communal support for Palestine by offering youth rallies on Jewish National Fund's Flag Days and more fund drives.<sup>298</sup> The JCC in Rochester redirected its efforts on this issue by pressuring for an end to Britain's White Paper's restrictions on the right of the Palestinian Jews to fight in their own army in Europe.<sup>299</sup> Rochester Jewry gave as much political support as it could within its already limited framework to secure European Jewry's future.

The meaning of Palestine and Zionism became much more integral to Rochester

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<sup>295</sup> “The National Conference,” *The Jewish Ledger* (January 5, 1940), 6.

<sup>296</sup> Eisenstadt, *Affirming the Covenant*, 166.

<sup>297</sup> Schwartz, interview, 73.

<sup>298</sup> “Youth Rally Ushers in JNF Flag Day,” *Jewish Ledger* (January 6, 1940), 3.

<sup>299</sup> Eisenstadt, *Affirming the Covenant*, 166.

Jews' American Jewish identity.<sup>300</sup> While in the late stages of the war, American Jews lost their power for further rescue efforts, Zionism provided hope and redemption for them. By shifting their political and economic focus to establish a Jewish state in Palestine, American Jews could adopt Palestine with strong consensus that it would be their new responsibility.<sup>301</sup> Accepting a Jewish state became the last pillar of new American Judaism— responsibility. Prior to the devastation of European Jewry, American Jews remained loyal and philanthropic to their hometowns in various places in Europe through the means of *landsmanshaftns*. Now with the European system destroyed, Palestine, the eventual home of the European Jewish refugees, would demand full economic and political support from the American Jews. The responsibility of supporting Palestine would embody other values of American Judaism: philanthropy, sociability, and individuality.

The concept of the Jews' American identity never abated during these years of fighting the “Jewish” war. Many initially rejected support for America's entry in the war because they feared increased antisemitism and accusations of dual-loyalty and treason. The bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941 changed American Jews' rhetoric and tone. They could now inconspicuously fight the war as Americans and as Jews. America's entry became the right time and place to fulfill their duties as Americans too. Fighting on the American home front and in the military enhanced the Jews' awareness of their precarious position in the American society. World War II motivated the American Jews, as Diner remarked, “[it] transformed the status of Jews in the United States. They participated enthusiastically in the war effort because of their special stake

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<sup>300</sup> Landsman, interview.

<sup>301</sup> Novick, *Holocaust in American Life*, 44.

in the war—Hitler’s destruction of the European Jews—and their growing sense of themselves as Americans.” In addition to frenzied fund drives for the European Jewry, American Jews had to open their wallets even more to buy U.S. war bonds. For many young American Jews, perhaps for some Rochester Jews, World War II provided them an opportunity to rectify their ambivalent Jewish identity in America while maintaining their status quo as Americans.<sup>302</sup>

American Jewish children’s war experience greatly differed from their parents in their sense of innocence and pride. Phyllis Kasdin recalled the strong level of American patriotism on Joseph Avenue among the Jews through involvement in war efforts such as scrap drives and rolling bandages for the armed forces.<sup>303</sup> Ruth Lempert adds that war movies played a major role on her consciousness as a child. American films glorified strong, brave soldiers and beautiful women that attracted her and many other children to the idea that the war meant something good. The children attended war bonds assemblies and begged their parents to buy more war bonds. They participated in knitting and craft projects for the soldiers overseas.<sup>304</sup> American propaganda in public schools had greater influence on the children’s development of their identity than in their Jewish homes. Beyond this, the war hardly impacted their lives.

War propaganda and America’s involvement enticed older Jewish teenagers and young Jewish men and women to participate in the war through military service. The Great Depression had left them with little sense of personal accomplishment. Roosevelt’s call for draft prompted thousands of Jews to sign up for the military. They had heard the news of the European Jewry but most did not reflect on a possible direct

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<sup>302</sup> Diner, *A New Land*, 89.

<sup>303</sup> Kasdin, interview.

<sup>304</sup> Lempert, “Growing Up in the Old Neighborhood,” 22-24.



encounter with the concentration camp prisoners. Still, in 1942, fighting in Europe meant an opportunity to save European Jewry firsthand beyond raising funds and assisting German Jewish refugees in settling in America.<sup>305</sup> In 1945, two conclusions came out from their experience in Europe. First, after experiencing the war with other Jewish soldiers in the American armed forces, they realized that “standing up for oneself as a Jew turned out to be an American thing to do.” Jewish soldiers often fought in pairs but, for many, fighting in gentile combat units was a solitary experience of personal reflection. Moore noted that, among Jewish soldiers, Judaism “had relatively little to do with faith and observance and a lot to do with dignity, fellowship, and humanity.”<sup>306</sup> Elliott Landsman insists that he possessed a strong sense of his Jewish identity before going to Europe and the war did not have the profound impact as historians suggested. Yet, his encounter at Dachau and through his conversation in Yiddish with the camp prisoners struck him with the absolute importance of preserving and ensuring Judaism’s survival. Individual soldiers had their own moments of epiphany across Europe as they met with their European brethren.<sup>307</sup> Connecting with these European Jews from across the ocean would become the hallmark of their activism in Jewish communities upon their return to the U.S. The opportunity to serve in the American armed forces as Americans became a true privilege for Jewish soldiers, not a duty. That would further define American Judaism in the sense of responsibility for others.

The reality of the Holocaust came as a great shock to many American Jews at the end of the war. The news of the Allies’ camp visits and photographs of the victims sickened and appalled many Americans, not just the Jews. They insisted that they had

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<sup>305</sup> Irving Wilner, “Analysis of Jewish Education,” *The Jewish Ledger* (December 20, 1940), 13, 19.

<sup>306</sup> Moore, *GI Jews*, 11.

<sup>307</sup> Landsman, interview.

guessed that only thousands of Jews had been gassed, not millions.<sup>308</sup> American Jews realized that the scope of the Holocaust and European Jews' needs were far beyond their own resources. It would take much more than 3,000,000 people, however unified, to rescue over 6,000,000 European Jews. The shock led to exponentially increased support for Palestine as a Jewish state. Compared to the turbulent thirties, American Jews, as a whole, stood ready and united to ensure a safer future for the European Jews in displaced persons camps in 1945.<sup>309</sup>

In Rochester, the devastation of the European Jewry astounded the community but did very little to affect the structure that had been developed before the war. Irving Ruderman, who served during the war and encountered the camps, believes that the Great Depression strengthened his Jewish identity more than his military experience and interaction with the victims.<sup>310</sup> Elliott Landsman concurs that the formation of the JCC and JY had greater impact on Rochester Jews' identity rather than the affairs in Europe by the way of the Holocaust or *landsmanshaftns*.<sup>311</sup> Rochester had a strong community framework that withstood American Jewish tensions during the Holocaust. It turned into a more cohesive support for the State of Israel, whereas American Jewry overall scrambled to get organized in rallying for Israel that resulted in a repeat of chaotic leadership in the 1930s and early 1940s. Rochester had the resources including employment, quality of life and education, and supportive communal network that permitted it to rescue 700 German Jewish refugees and to launch successful fund drives within already limited framework.

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<sup>308</sup> Novick, *Holocaust in American Life*, 24.

<sup>309</sup> Diner, *Jews of the United States*, 221-222.

<sup>310</sup> Ruderman, interview.

<sup>311</sup> Landsman, interview.

## Conclusion

Rochester Jews' grassroots campaign during the Holocaust could not have been orchestrated without the earlier reconciliation efforts between Jewish ethnic groups. Though they could not have foreseen the complex actions necessary to assist the European Jews, cultivating common values served in the long run. Rochester's Jewish community contrasted the general picture of American Jewry during World War II, but reflected many other communities during the Great Depression.

Rochester Jews had advantages that other communities did not have that propelled strong community ties with surprisingly uniform American Jewish values. The city of Rochester and its social and economic history laid the foundation for Jews to create small industries of their own in a town with many other small industries and to develop community networks in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Then, Rochester's emphasis on social justice played a role in unionization, which in turn led to Jew to Jew confrontations. These dialogues extended to the community development of Jewish social services, including the Jewish Home for the Aged and Children's Home. These advantageous provisions increased the existing high quality of life for many Jews in Rochester.

The emergence of Rabbi Bernstein's leadership and Temple Beth El further reduced the ethnic socio-economic differences. Rabbi Bernstein advocated for greater unity in the name of Judaism and concept of peoplehood. He appealed to both German and Eastern European groups that Judaism should mean more than divinity and that being Jewish in America offered many compromise solutions in keeping Judaism alive. Complete divorced from Judaism became less of an option as Jews discovered other ways

to express their Jewish identity comfortably. Temple Beth El gave Eastern European Jews an opportunity to move to the left without abandoning the tradition they knew, allowing them greater flexibility in their new American lives. The meaning of American Jewish identity began changing.

The Great Depression and World War II experiences further contributed to creating the pillars of American Judaism in Rochester. The experiences themselves and the changing relations within the community watered down what being Jewish meant in the 1930s and 1940s: individuality, sociability, philanthropy, and responsibility. Individuality came through Rabbi Bernstein's guidance and freedom of speech and religion; each Jew gained the ability to shape an identity fitting to his or her personal values and lifestyle. Sociability from the popular culture of the 1920s and hardships of the 1930s increased the Jews' need for cohesiveness and personal interactions. The creation of the Jewish Home for the Aged and intense welfare fund raising drives reminded the Jews of the continuing American Jewish tradition of private philanthropy. Finally, responsibility bore down on the Jews as they dealt, passively or actively, with the Holocaust and the growing need for a Jewish state to end Jewish persecution forever. With these values, the Jews in Rochester could largely and pragmatically accept this basic form of American Jewish identity.

The meaning of doing "enough" to save the European Jewry during the Holocaust must be reevaluated with broader considerations of American Jews' personal lives, using Rochester's large Jewish population as an example. Rochester Jews have had to juggle their responsibilities in their comfortable homes with their close knit families while facing the turmoil of the social, economic, and political changes during the Great

Depression and America's participation in World War II. Concurrently, in the community, Rochester Jews built institutions and programmed social events that promoted inclusiveness in the world of exclusivity in American society. The community building laid the foundation for proactive efforts to save European Jewry by way of obtaining visas and providing aid to German Jewish refugees and running successful welfare fund drives. The Jews of Rochester deflected harsh retrospective criticism that American Jews did not do enough because they knew what they had done during Hitler's regime. They understood the power of community building through finding common values in developing their American Jewish identity. Thus, Rochester Jews could then focus on continuing the momentum of strengthening their identity and community after the Holocaust. At the same time, many other communities continued to struggle to resolve ethnic and religious differences, or worse, deteriorate in favor of national internal migration in search for new, fresh start in places like Miami and Los Angeles. The American Jewish principles that Rochester Jews formed allowed the community to survive uncertainty and threats, from the Great Depression to Jewish assimilation.

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