

The Jewish Community of Hartford, Connecticut, 1880-1929

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The image of the thrifty, God-fearing New England Yankee¹ has long obscured the fact that in the nineteenth century and first three decades of the twentieth, New England cities and towns became home for tens of thousands of immigrants from Ireland² and later from southern and eastern Europe.³ Their destination was usually one of the towns or cities with opportunities for employment in local industries or factories, and that meant concentration in Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island. In fact, Samuel Koenig concluded in his late 1930's study of Connecticut immigrants that "with the exception of Rhode Island and Massachusetts, Connecticut has a larger proportion of foreign stock in its population than any State of the Union."⁴

¹ See, for example, John Darnton, "Charges of Racism Tarnish Waterbury's Yankee Image," *New York Times*, March 24, 1969, p. 47.

² A pioneer in remedying this neglect has been Oscar Handlin. See, for example, Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants, 1790-1880: A Study in Acculturation* (rev. ed., Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1959).

³ Stephan Thernstrom documented clearly the immigrant's socio-economic adjustment to Boston in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in his book *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880-1970* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1973).

⁴ Samuel Koenig, *Immigrant Settlements in Connecticut: Their Growth and Character-*

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With the exception of Oscar Handlin's pioneering study of the Irish in Boston, historians are only now beginning to examine the important role of immigrant groups in the life of New England towns and cities over the past century and one-half. That interest reflects new methodological tools being used to understand the emergence of urban America, as well as the recognition that immigrant groups have had a significant impact upon the continuing evolution of American culture.

Our paper responds to the awareness that America's cultural mainstream is created by many small rivulets, and that each is altered by interaction with others. We feel, too, that our understanding of America in general, and New England in particular, will increase as we understand the life of the individual groups who have contributed their culture to the total community. We chose, therefore, to study carefully one ethnic group, in one particular New England city, in one particular time period: the Jewish community of Hartford, Connecticut, from 1880-1929.⁵

Most studies of urban New England and its immigrant popula-

istics, Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers' Project for the State of Connecticut (Hartford, Connecticut, 1938), p. 12.

⁵ Of all the urban Jewish communities, New York City Jews have been studied most extensively. See, for example, Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1962); Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York, 1976); and Arthur Goren, *New York Jews and the Quest for Community: The Kehillah Experiment, 1908-1922* (New York, 1970). Among the studies of New England Jewish communities are S. Broches, *Jews in New England: Historical Study of Jews in Massachusetts, 1650-1750* (New York, 1942); S. Broches, *Jews in New England: Jewish Merchants in Colonial Rhode Island* (New York, 1942); Leon Hühner, *The Jews of New England (Other Than Rhode Island) Prior to 1800*, reprint of 1903 publication of the American Jewish Historical Society (West Cornwall, Connecticut, 1973); Morris Axelrod, et al., *A Community Survey for Long Range Planning: A Study of the Jewish Population of Greater Boston* (Boston, 1967); Sidney Goldstein, *The Greater Providence Jewish Community: A Population Survey* (Providence, Rhode Island, 1964); Albert H. Belsky, *The Jewish Community of Holyoke, Massachusetts, 1920-1940*, Senior thesis, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1968; Benjamin Band, *Portland Jewry: Its Growth and Development* (Portland, Maine, 1955); Myron Samuelson, *The Story of the Jewish Community of Burlington, Vermont* (Burlington, Vermont, 1976); Esther Sulman and Leonard J. Goldstein, *A Goodly Heritage: The Story of the Jewish Community in New London, 1860-1955* (New London, 1955).

Rudolf Glanz wrote an interesting essay in the 1940's which examined changing perceptions of the characteristics of Yankees and Jews in the 18th and 19th centuries. Rudolf Glanz, "Jew and Yankee: A Historic Comparison," *Jewish Social Studies*, 6 (1944), 3-30.

tion have focused upon Massachusetts, with particular emphasis upon Boston. We shift attention to a Connecticut city which, though not as large or as renowned nationally as Boston, is, perhaps, historically a more accurate paradigm of other New England cities than is Boston. This is certainly true of the Connecticut cities of Bridgeport, New Haven and Waterbury, all of which share a similar demographic profile with Hartford during the past century.⁶ All experienced large in-migrations from southern and eastern Europe during the decades between 1880 and 1929. With few exceptions, the four Connecticut cities received their largest share of immigrants from the same countries. The 1920 census provides the following picture:

Country of Birth of Foreign Stock

<i>Bridgeport</i>	<i>Hartford</i>
Italy, 17,586	Ireland, 20,930
Ireland, 16,124	Russia, 20,776
Hungary, 15,875	Italy, 14,307
Russia, 14,630	
<i>New Haven</i>	<i>Waterbury</i>
Italy, 34,558	Italy, 18,756
Ireland, 24,862	Ireland, 16,522
Russia, 20,470	Russia, 13,496

Of the four cities, Hartford had the largest Jewish community during the four decades of the most intense European immigration to the United States, 1880–1929. Beginning with about 1,000 in 1890, the Jewish population grew to over 16,000 by the 1920's. It is difficult to provide exact decennial demographic data for the Hartford Jewish community during this period because, as Samuel Koenig observed, “. . . they are not classified separately in the United States Censuses.” As a result, “in recording their growth,

⁶ Note, for example, the similar growth patterns of the four cities between 1880 and 1920:

	<i>Bridgeport</i>	<i>Hartford</i>	<i>New Haven</i>	<i>Waterbury</i>
1880	27,643	42,015	62,883	17,806
1890	48,866	53,520	86,045	28,646
1900	70,996	79,850	108,027	45,859
1910	102,054	98,815	133,605	73,146
1920	143,555	138,036	162,537	91,715

we are forced to rely on unofficial estimates in which the figures given include all those who profess to belong to that people, regardless of nativity and country of origin."⁷ With that problem in mind, we studied a number of sources and developed the following profile for the five-decade period:

1880 ⁸	800
1890 ⁹	1,158
1900 ¹⁰	2,000
1910 ¹¹	6,687
1920 ¹²	16,000
1930 ¹³	27,000

By 1970 the Jewish population of Greater Hartford reached 30,000, retaining its position as the largest Jewish community in Connecticut and the fifteenth largest in the nation.¹⁴ Why Eastern European Jews selected Hartford, and their adjustment to their new home are the questions which provide the framework of our inquiry. Of special interest is the way immigrant Jews responded to the tensions created by the impulse both to assimilate and to retain their cultural identity.

⁷ Koenig, p. 20.

⁸ This is an estimate based upon data given by Silverman, p. 97, and our own analysis of the 1880 census reports.

⁹ "A Religious Census: Hartford Churches and Denominations and Their Work," *New York Times*, February 2, 1890, p. 12.

¹⁰ Koenig, p. 34.

¹¹ This is probably a conservative estimate, based upon data reported under the classification "Russia and Finland" for "Foreign-born Population By Country of Birth in Cities Having from 25,000 to 250,000 inhabitants." Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States: Abstract of the Census* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), p. 211.

¹² *Eleventh Annual Report of the United Jewish Charities of Hartford, 1923* (Hartford, 1923), p. 17.

¹³ A figure based upon the 1927 report in Harry Schneiderman, ed., *The American Jewish Yearbook, September 23, 1930, to September 11, 1931* (Philadelphia, 1931), p. 223.

¹⁴ Rabbi Morris Silverman, *Hartford Jews, 1659-1970* (Hartford, Connecticut, 1970), pp. 9, 31, 100. Rabbi Silverman's book is the most complete study we have of the 300 years of Jewish life in Hartford. Our essay not only supplements the information he provides about the period 1880-1929, but also suggests interpretations of the Jewish experience in Hartford which Rabbi Silverman does not include in his work. See also Rabbi Morris Silverman, "The History of the Jews in Hartford," *Hartford Courant*, January 2, 1955, Section 1.

We believe our study reveals a successful response by Hartford Jews to the pull of assimilation and separatism. On a more general level, it provides further evidence that the recent cultural life of New England, far from being the product only of Yankee ingenuity, reflects the pluralistic influences characteristic of much of the cultural life of the rest of the nation.

Early Hartford Jewry

Although the records of colonial Connecticut document the presence of Jews in Hartford as early as 1659, the Jewish community did not establish continuously functioning institutions in the city until the 1840's. In 1843, Beth Israel was founded as the first Jewish congregation in Hartford.¹⁵ Meeting in a private home, the handful of members of Beth Israel underscored their commitment to the congregation by assessing themselves for support of a rabbi and a "shocket" or Kosher butcher. By 1851 the congregation had grown to fifty members, with twenty-five pupils in its religious school. In 1856 the former First Baptist Church, located at 400 Main Street, was purchased, renamed Touro Hall, and became the center of Jewish civic, religious and cultural life in mid-nineteenth century Hartford.¹⁶

Two suggestions, in addition to the growth of the American Jewish community as a result of the German immigration, can be put forth to explain why the Hartford Jewish community began not only to increase in population in the 1840's, but also to establish permanent institutions. Rabbi Abraham J. Feldman, author of a history of Congregation Beth Israel, argues that Central European Jewish farmers who settled in Connecticut sent not only their eggs and chickens to the city for marketing, but also their sons for an education. The sons, he theorizes, subsequently established homes in Hartford.¹⁷

¹⁵ Abraham J. Feldman, *Remember the Days of Old: The Centennial Volume of Congregation Beth Israel, Hartford, Connecticut* (Hartford, 1943), p. 49. Silverman argues that a more accurate date for the founding of Congregation Beth Israel is 1847. Silverman, pp. 9-10.

¹⁶ Feldman, p. 49. See also Albert E. Van Dusen, *Connecticut* (New York, 1961), p. 345.

¹⁷ Interview with Rabbi Abraham J. Feldman, Congregation Beth Israel, West Hartford, Connecticut, n.d., quoted in Robert Pawloski and the Northwest Catholic Urban Studies

Another hypothesis is that the primary impetus to permanent Jewish settlement in Hartford was a special act of the Connecticut Legislature which gave Jews the religious freedom extended previously to all Christians by the 1818 Constitution. The 1843 law provided "That Jews who may desire to unite and form religious societies, shall have the same rights, powers, and privileges which are given Christians of every denomination by the Act to which this is in addition. . . ." ¹⁸

These two explanations of the origins of a permanent Jewish community are not contradictory. Indeed, the passage of the 1843 law may have convinced Jews living in rural Connecticut and other states that the state and city now welcomed their participation in the community. Certainly the law made Connecticut and Hartford a more attractive place to reside for those German Jews who, upon entering the United States through the New York port, either chose or felt compelled to settle in communities other than Manhattan. ¹⁹

This is not to argue that all traces of ethnic or religious preference were eradicated by the passage of the 1843 law. Responding to a letter which complained that Governor Buckingham had invited only Christians to give thanks on Thanksgiving Day, an editorial in the November 2, 1860, *Courant* observed, "We are confident that Governor Buckingham did not intend to wound the religious susceptibilities of our Jewish fellow citizens, whose equal rights to the full and perfect practice of their religion we cheerfully concede." But then the editor admonished Hartford's Jews,

Our Jewish friends should remember, that while the constitution of our State recognized the rights of all men to worship in the mode most consistent with the dictates of their conscience, it also specially recognizes the rights of Christians, and makes no special provision for the Pagans of China, the Brahminists of Hindostan, the Mohammedans, or the Israelites. ²⁰

Class, *How the Other Half Lived: An Ethnic History of the Old East Side and South End of Hartford* (Hartford, 1973), p. 61.

¹⁸ *Public Acts Passed by the General Assembly of the State of Connecticut* (May session, 1843), p. 41.

¹⁹ The question of motivation for settlement in Hartford is considered in further detail below.

²⁰ *Hartford Courant*, November 2, 1860. For another instance when Jewish citizens felt the lash of bigotry in later nineteenth-century Hartford see a letter written by Rabbi Isaac Mayer of Beth Israel Congregation to the *Courant* on July 19, 1865.

Indeed, until the adoption of a new State Constitution in 1965, special references were made in Article First, Section 4, and Article Seventh, Sections 1 and 2, to relationships between the State and the Christian religion (Article First, Section 4, "No preference shall be given by law to any Christian sect or mode of worship.") and state citizens and "the society or denomination of Christians to which he may belong" (Article Seventh, Sections 1 and 2).²¹ Article First, Section 3, of the 1965 Constitution simply states that "The exercise and enjoyment of religious profession and worship, without discrimination, shall forever be free to all persons in the state"; while Article Seventh states, "No preference shall be given by law to any religious society or denomination in the state."²²

As was characteristic of so many ethnic enclaves in American cities, Hartford Jews quickly established organizations to meet the social and economic needs of their small, but growing, community. Ararat Lodge of B'nai B'rith, established in 1851 as a social and benevolent association for men, offered loans to meet expenses of illness, death benefits, and was, Rabbi Morris Silverman wrote, "the prototype of later Blue Cross, unemployment compensation, sick benefits and life insurance companies in the United States."²³ We find in the minutes of Ararat Lodge that it responded not only to the wants of Hartford Jews, but also to those of fellow Jews in other parts of the United States and Europe:

The Jewish women of Hartford confronted the needs of their ethnic community by organizing in 1852 the Deborah Society. While providing sickness and death benefits for its members, the women of the Deborah Society engaged in work which led Rabbi Feldman to characterize them as "the original case workers of the Jewish Community."²⁴

This small Jewish community quickly assumed a role in the city's commercial life far beyond what might be expected of a community its size. Drawing upon their experiences in the German *Dorf*, German Jews offered their services to Hartford citizens as

²¹ "The Constitution of Connecticut," adopted 1818; as amended on June 22, 1953, reprinted in Van Dusen, pp. 403, 409-10.

²² "Constitution of the State of Connecticut," adopted 1965, in State of Connecticut, *Register and Manual*, 1977 (Hartford, 1977), pp. 30, 41.

²³ Silverman, p. 19.

²⁴ Feldman, p. 78.

grocers, butchers, merchants, jewelers, tailors, tobacconists, opticians, horse dealers and boarding house owners. By 1855 Jews owned thirteen of the twenty-seven retail clothing stores in Hartford and all eight of the fancy goods stores.²⁵ In 1874, Gerson Fox opened a fancy goods store which was to grow into one of Connecticut's leading department stores in the twentieth century.²⁶

Entrepreneurial activities provided opportunities for Hartford Jews and Gentiles to interact not only as seller and buyer, but also as partners in business. Rabbi Silverman compiled the following list of Jews in partnership with non-Jews in the late nineteenth century: Essman and Haas, tobacco; Ballenstein and Hydel (later Ballenstein and Dillon), millinery; Cohen and Spear, jewelry manufacturing; Rothschild and Horsfall, manufacturers of hats and dealers in clothing; Moses and Fogarty, spectacles; Leavitt and Ford, auctioneers.²⁷

Not surprisingly, the recent arrivals established their homes and businesses within a relatively confined geographical area. Most Jewish businesses were located on Main and Front Streets, while most Jews lived on Congress, Buckingham, Governor, and Kilbourn streets, Wethersfield, Charter Oak and Retreat avenues, streets generally contiguous with one another in and near downtown Hartford.²⁸ This concentration did not inhibit Jewish participation in certain activities of the larger community beyond its borders, for even the earliest settlers felt the impulse for limited assimilation. In addition to joining such patriotic activities as marching in an Independence Day parade as early as 1852,²⁹ two Jews, Alexander Rothschild and Marcus Herlitchcheck, were elected to city council in 1860.³⁰ Reflecting upon the relationship of the German Jews and their neighbors, Rabbi Silverman argues that

²⁵ Silverman, p. 26.

²⁶ In his 1961 history of Connecticut, Albert Van Dusen observed about Fox's offspring, "Descendants have further expanded the store until today G. Fox and Company is the largest independently owned department store in the world" (p. 345). Beatrice Fox Auerbach sold the family store to the May Company in 1965 for 40 million dollars. After the sale she remained president of the Fox store and became a director of the May Company.

²⁷ Silverman, p. 27.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30. Copies of maps of 1859, 1896, 1902, 1917 and 1927 identifying Jewish neighborhoods in Hartford and thus the mobility of the Jewish Community are available from Ralph Pearson.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³⁰ Pawloski, p. 61.

Far from being 'a separate' people these early Jewish immigrants and settlers soon demonstrated that, although they remained true to their heritage and displayed a vigor and ability to care for their own, they rapidly became adjusted to their new environment, and as citizens were soon contributing to the general life of Hartford.³¹

One reflection of the adjustment of the small Jewish community and the rest of the city was the response to invitations to join members of the Beth Israel synagogue at the cornerstone laying ceremony for the new temple on Charter Oak Avenue. Whether motivated by curiosity, politics or genuine interest, a front page story in the September 28, 1875, *Hartford Courant* tells us that ten to twelve thousand people attended, including Mayor Sprague, the lieutenant governor, several judges and ministers, the police chief with a platoon of patrolmen, three bands and an array of local benevolent societies.³² Ten to twelve thousand people celebrated the achievements of a particular group which, while taking care of its own through mutual aid societies and preserving a sense of cultural identity, was making significant contributions to the larger community, particularly to that community's economic life. Whether that relationship could continue as the Jewish community grew from 1,000 in 1890 to 16,000 in 1920, an increase not only of numbers but also of ethnic diversity, challenged both the established Jewish community and the community at large.

A Pattern Not Unlike Others

From interviews conducted by the West Hartford Jewish Historical Society with Eastern European immigrants who arrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries one learns that persecution at home, as well as lack of economic and educational opportunities convinced them to leave Europe.³³ Dr. Alex Perlstein, twelve years old when he arrived in Hartford in 1906, recalled hiding from the Cossacks with his family in an Odessa, Russia, base-

³¹ Silverman, p. 28.

³² *Hartford Courant*, September 28, 1875, p. 1.

³³ Scholars of the immigrant experience have more than amply documented these reasons as the primary factors in the large East European migration to the United States between 1880 and 1929. See, for example, Howe, pp. 5-25.



Courtesy of "Jewish Historical Society, Hartford"
Hirshberg Family and Grocery, Windsor St.
Hartford, Conn. (1910)

ment for two days before their departure for America.³⁴ A Russian immigrant described for a *Courant* reporter how his people had been denied political rights, barred from professions, forced to serve in the military, condemned to live in poverty and, suddenly, notified that they had to get out of the country. With hundreds of others, he walked for four weeks until reaching Vienna where agents for the Baron de Hirsch Fund gave them food, money and boat tickets to America.³⁵ Jews from the Russian provinces of Lithuania, the Ukraine and Galicia told of similar experiences, as did those from the Austro-Hungarian empire.

The majority who disembarked at New York City remained there, frequently unable to move because of a lack of funds, but also attracted by potential educational, economic and communal opportunities.³⁶ Indeed, as Thomas Kessner found in his study of Italian and Jewish immigrant mobility in New York City, "The downtown slums met many of the immigrants needs so directly that many felt little urge to go beyond their ethnic enclaves for anything. . . . This village-mindedness grew out of many antecedents but in part reflected the wide range of functions served by the community."³⁷

There are several reasons why immigrants who landed in New York City might eventually move to communities such as Hartford. A few might be attracted by the "presence of relatives or former townsmen," as was the case in Portland, Maine,³⁸ while others were helped to move elsewhere by Jewish philanthropic organizations such as the Baron de Hirsch Foundation.³⁹ Some were undoubtedly part of that unskilled, blue-collar group which historians Stephan Thernstrom, Clyde Griffin and Thomas Kessner identified as the "floating proletariat" which "roamed American cities in search of jobs."⁴⁰ Evidence that work opportunities at-

³⁴ Transcript of interview with Dr. Alex Perlstein, Jewish Historical Society, West Hartford, Connecticut, June 10, 1969, p. 10.

³⁵ *Hartford Courant*, August 30, 1900, p. 4.

³⁶ See, for example, Rischin, p. 54.

³⁷ Thomas Kessner, *The Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City, 1880-1915* (N.Y., 1977), pp. 138-139.

³⁸ Band, p. 16.

³⁹ Samuelson, p. 49.

⁴⁰ Kessner, p. 158. Stephan Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a*

tracted some recent arrivals to the Connecticut city comes from Mrs. Nettie Goldman who recalled that "We came here because my folks at that time heard about Hartford, that it was a good place to make a living. So we decided to try it out."⁴¹

Traveling by steamboat up the Connecticut River to Hartford, many arrived in their new home penniless, with neither a job nor a home, and with little knowledge of English. Recollections of both press and participants reveal a willingness on the part of the resident Jewish community to help the newcomers. Miss Gertrude Levy recalled that a Mrs. Litwack of Deerfield Avenue took in unfortunates and "taught them to read, to sew, and to make things."⁴² The August 30, 1900, *Hartford Courant* reported that Jacob Divinsky, a grocer, gave five Rumanian refugees food, and that Mrs. Ekstein secured the use of a vacant tenement as temporary quarters for newly arrived men. Even those who were emotionally scarred by the migration to America received care from the Jewish community:

On Monday, a Hebrew, also an exile from Rumania, came in from New Britain and found the Hebrew Locale in this city. He appeared a little 'ratty' for he asked for a certain street in Rumania where he had lived. . . . He is being taken care of by the community.⁴³

As with the German Jews, the newcomers quickly formed community organizations to help one another adjust to the new environment. Among the most important associations were the *landsmanschaften*, the *Arbeiterringe*, the *Gemilles Hesed* and the *Actztes*. *Landsmanschaften*, organized along hometown, village, city and provincial lines, sought to provide aid for friends and relatives in Europe, as well as loans, life and health insurance, and cemetery rights for local members. The *Arbeiterringe* offered similar bene-

Nineteenth Century City (Cambridge, 1964), 85, 198-99; Clyde Griffin, "Workers Divided: Craft and Ethnic Differences in Poughkeepsie," in Stephan Thernstrom and Richard Sennet, eds., *Nineteenth Century Cities* (New Haven, 1969), 59-61.

⁴¹ Transcript of interview with Mrs. Nettie Goldman, Jewish Historical Society, July 15, 1971, p. 14.

⁴² Transcript of interview with Miss Gertrude Levy, Jewish Historical Society, August 28, 1968, p. 2.

⁴³ *Hartford Courant*, August 30, 1900, p. 4.

fits, but were formed on the basis of occupation, not geographical identification.⁴⁴

Organized in 1892 as a branch of the Hebrew Free Loan Association of America, the *Gemilles Hesed*, upon the recommendation of an established merchant, made interest free loans to immigrants who wanted to start a business,⁴⁵ while the *Act-tzes* served the community as a unique form of savings and loan association that evolved in the twentieth century into what we know as the credit union.⁴⁶ This pattern of association building not only provided the immigrant with a sense of security, but also facilitated development of a sense of community among the recent arrivals.

To the larger community the association could be both reassuring and disquieting. Reassuring because the newcomers were meeting their own needs and not becoming burdens for the community; disquieting because the total community was fragmented further into smaller units by the new arrivals. As the newcomers settled in, both they and the established community felt the tensions created by the pull of, and desire for, integration, and the impulse to retain cultural identity.

If the proliferation of social and charitable organizations was one sign of the growth of the Jewish community between 1880 and 1929, another was the precipitous growth of Jewish congregations in the city. Each national group sought to establish its own synagogue, where its members could worship and enjoy fellowship with those of similar background. Most began in private homes, later rented a hall or store, and, finally, when finances permitted, they purchased and remodeled a Christian church.⁴⁷ A check of the Hartford city directories during the period 1880-1929 revealed fifteen different organized congregations, 13 Orthodox, 1 Reform and 1 Conservative. We are sure those listed do not represent all the congregations in the city during the period, many being too small to list. In fact, when Rabbi Silverman surveyed Jewish cemeteries in the early 1960's, he located forty-seven congrega-

⁴⁴ Silverman, pp. 31, 33-34.

⁴⁵ Transcript of interview with Mrs. Nettie Goldman, p. 10.

⁴⁶ WTIC, "About People," April 19, 1968. Laura Vlock, "The Jews of Hartford, 1900-1925." Silverman, p. 34.

⁴⁷ Silverman, pp. 9-17.

tional cemeteries, the majority dating from the period of heaviest Eastern European immigration.⁴⁸ Our effort to understand the growth and adaptation of the Hartford Jewish community by measuring the proliferation of its congregations is best summarized by Oscar Handlin's remark about the herculean task of calculating the number of congregations in New York City: "Who could count them, tucked away as they were in unexpected corners. . .?"⁴⁹

Crowding into Hartford's East Side, recently arrived Eastern European Jews settled with their countrymen on Front, Windsor, Morgan, Pleasant, Market, State, Temple, Bellevue, Wooster and Barbour streets.⁵⁰ One resident of the area in the early twentieth century, Attorney Samuel Hoffenburg, estimated that in 1900 about 2,000 Jewish families lived on those streets.⁵¹ As the original settlers achieved economic success in small businesses such as drugstores, hardware stores, kosher and non-kosher meat markets, tailoring and dry goods stores, they moved to the northern and western sections of the city,⁵² some maintaining their shops in the East Side, others moving them to the South End.⁵³ Another reason for the move from the East side was the influx of Black

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴⁹ Oscar Handlin, *Adventure in Freedom: Three Hundred Years of Jewish Life in America* (New York, 1954), p. 114.

⁵⁰ Tape recordings of interview with Attorney Samuel Hoffenburg, September 9, 1968, and interview with Dr. Morris Cohen, September 15, 1973, Jewish Historical Society.

⁵¹ Interview with Attorney Samuel Hoffenburg.

⁵² Silverman, p. 30.

⁵³ Pawloski, p. 62. Robert Dahl's analysis of how New Haven immigrant groups such as the Irish, Italian and Russian Jews achieved social and economic mobility parallels the experiences of Hartford's immigrants. He wrote, "Irish domination of government jobs made it difficult . . . for later immigrants, particularly Italians and East Europeans, to climb the socio-economic ladder by pulling themselves up with the help of white collar patronage. In addition to this, however, distinctive cultural backgrounds probably promoted a stronger tendency among Jews and Italians to go into small business. The Irish had brought with them no tradition of business enterprise or the learned professions. By contrast, immigrants of Russian origin were mainly Jews . . .; they were more accustomed to the world of business, particularly as small shopkeepers. The Italians, too, were evidently more inclined than the Irish to become peddlers and shopkeepers. In fact, the Russians and Italians together made up almost two-thirds of the shopkeepers in the 1933 family survey. Where the Irish used politics to surmount obstacles to their advance in the socio-economic world, Italians and Jews more frequently used gains in the socioeconomic world to attain elective positions in politics." Robert Dahl, *Who Governs?* (New Haven, 1961), p. 42.

workers responding to the need of Hartford industries for employees during World War I.⁵⁴ Former residents of the East Side recalled that as its ethnic composition changed, as crowding and poverty increased, Jews left the area as quickly as possible.⁵⁵

As Peter I. Rose has described so well, this movement from the downtown ghetto environment to the suburbs did not mean the dispersal and disappearance of the Jewish community, merely its relocation to the newer northwestern part of the city:

As individuals became more successful they moved farther and farther away from the old ghetto area; but, as they went out from the Lower East Side of New York or the South Side of Chicago and moved uptown. . . , they settled in what came to be labeled 'Jewish neighborhoods.' This pattern of sticking together continued right out into the suburbs where homogeneous ethnic enclaves became countrified versions of the American ghetto—now adorned with million dollar synagogues.⁵⁶

Residents of the East Side remember vividly life there in the early twentieth century. Rows of two and three story tenement houses, packed tightly together, provided homes for the newly arrived. Many used the front of the first floor as a place of business. Wind-sor Street, Dr. Morris Cohen remembered, was alive with people coming and going from these businesses in their homes. The street reverberated, too, with the voices of peddlers hawking their wares from pushcarts and wagons.⁵⁷

As in the immigrant quarters of other American cities, crowded living conditions were the norm in many Hartford tenement buildings. Most tenements had five or six apartments, with some plumbing, including closets converted to bathrooms, and no electricity. One small coal stove provided the heat for each family, with coin operated meters regulating the supply of cooking gas. Every few days the children were sent to freight cars on North Front Street to purchase ice for preserving food.⁵⁸

Not surprisingly, remembrances of the East Side differ as former

⁵⁴ In 1910 the black population was 1,745 or 1.8 percent of the population; by 1920 that population had more than doubled to 4,199 or 3 per cent of the city's residents.

⁵⁵ Pawloski, p. 64.

⁵⁶ Peter I. Rose, "The Ghetto and Beyond," in Peter I. Rose, *The Ghetto and Beyond: Essays on Jewish Life in America* (New York, 1969), p. 9.

⁵⁷ Interview with Dr. Morris Cohen.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

residents recalled their impressions of life there. "We were happy," Dr. Cohen recalled, "[because] we didn't know how the rest of the people lived." There were many good times for an East Side boy during those years. He could play baseball or football on the side streets, ride down Windsor Street in a boat every Spring during the annual floods, roast potatoes in the back yard in the Fall, enjoy a salami on rye sandwich with mustard for five cents, and go to the Goodwill recreation club on Winthrop Street in the evening. Summer brought pleasures that came with trips to Riverside Park for a band concert, fireworks displays or just sitting among grass and trees.⁵⁹

Other immigrants recalled much less happy times. Judge Joseph Klau remembered the grinding poverty of many East side residents and a mother debilitated by tuberculosis.⁶⁰ In the home of Dr. Alex Perlstein twelve boarders slept all over the apartment floor because their support was needed to pay the monthly rent.⁶¹ Agudas Achim Congregation reported in 1906 that of its eighty-seven members, eighty were *blut orem*, extremely poor.⁶² Reports of Jewish charity organizations describing living conditions refer frequently to the filth, squalor and disease which caused moral and intellectual deterioration.

The sustaining hope of the East Side immigrant was that he or his children would achieve the economic success required to improve their quality of life. Parents impressed upon their children the need to do well in school, as well as to contribute to the financial support of the family. Financial exigencies occasionally required, however reluctantly, a young man to leave school.⁶³ If one completed high school, dreams of college were frustrated frequently by high tuition charges. Nevertheless, a surprisingly large number of doctors, lawyers, dentists, accountants and other professionals came from the East side during the 1880-1929 period.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Tape recording of interview with Judge Joseph Klau, April 17, 1974, Jewish Historical Society.

⁶¹ Interview with Dr. Alex Perlstein, p. 12.

⁶² Silverman, p. 35.

⁶³ Transcript of interview with Samuel Goldman, Jewish Historical Society, July 15, 1971, p. 4.

⁶⁴ Interview with Dr. Morris Cohen; interview with Attorney Samuel Hoffenburg; and Silverman, pp. 85-87.



Courtesy of "Jewish Historical Society, Hartford, Conn."

Good Will Club for immigrant boys, Hartford, Conn. (ca. 1900)

Stephan Thernstrom contends that the disproportionately large number, in comparison with Irish and Italians, of second-generation Jews who entered professions reflects the emphasis upon education which characterized most Jewish communities:

The educational and occupational achievement of second-generation Jews and the lack of achievement of Catholics . . . cannot be explained away by holding the educational and occupational attainments of their parents roughly constant. There were very large group differences in the characteristics of the immigrating generation, to be sure, and these left a clear imprint upon the record of their children in school and at work. But a residue of unexplained variation remains when this is taken into account, a residue which suggests that Jews placed an especially high value on education and the careers it was the key to, whereas Catholics were somewhat less dedicated to educational and occupational achievement of their sons than Protestants from the same class and educational background.⁶⁵

A dilemma which East Side Jews shared with most immigrant groups in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was how to preserve their religious and cultural identity while becoming part of American society. One response of the Hartford Jewish community was the establishment in 1901 of the Hebrew Institute, or Talmud Torah, to provide religious instruction to its sons and daughters after public school hours. The Institute was located in the home of Herman Goldschmidt until 1910, when a three story building was rented on Pleasant Street.⁶⁶ In addition to two hour classes in Hebrew and Scripture each weekday, the Institute taught English to many, and assisted them in locating their first jobs.⁶⁷ By 1915 enrollment had grown to over three hundred students, an increase made possible by the offering of free tuition to those who could not pay.⁶⁸

Three other Talmud Torahs were established in other sections of Hartford to serve immigrant children who could not get to the Pleasant Street school: one on Garden Street, one on Nelson Street and another in the South End. In the early twentieth century these Talmud Torahs, particularly the one on Pleasant Street, became "veritable centers of the educational, philanthropic, and social life

⁶⁵ Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians*, p. 174.

⁶⁶ Silverman, pp. 35-36.

⁶⁷ Pawloski, p. 64.

⁶⁸ Silverman, p. 36.

of the Eastern European Jews of Hartford.”⁶⁹ The Talmud Torahs served the community not only as education centers, but also as social centers where youths gathered for recreation, merchants met to discuss business problems and the entire community gathered to react to proposals such as those being considered by Congress to restrict immigration.⁷⁰

Successful adjustment to the total Hartford community included relating to other immigrant groups who settled there in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Living in or near the East Side ghetto were large numbers of Irish and Italians. In fact, in both the 1910 and 1920 censuses, Ireland ranked first as the chief country of origin of Hartford's foreign stock, Russia was second and Italy third. The testimony of Jews who lived with Irish and Italian immigrants reveals occasional conflicts among the children, but no insurmountable ethnic animosity. Mr. Perlstein recalled getting along well with Irish lads, until he made a mistake in English, when they would “clobber him.” “It helped me improve though,” he concluded.⁷¹ Mr. Allan Mellamed remembered some gang fights between Italian and Jewish boys, but nothing serious.⁷² As a teacher in the East side Chauncey Harris Primary School between 1912 and 1915, Miss Gertrude Levy was impressed by the way Jewish children were accepted by others in her school. They played and spoke together and “seemed to have companionship.”⁷³

Relations with Hartford police, many of whom were Irish, required the development of “understandings,” too, particularly over the issues of Sunday store openings and the hawking of wares by Jewish peddlers. Apparently some non-Jewish East Side residents complained about Jewish merchants keeping their stores open on a Sunday, with the result that patrolmen began enforcing Connecticut's Blue Laws by closing down Jewish businesses on the Christian sabbath.⁷⁴ Enforcement of the Blue Laws posed a real threat to the economic survival of the Eastside Jewish mer-

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Interview with Dr. Alex Perlstein, p. 3.

⁷² Pawloski, p. 62.

⁷³ Interview with Miss Gertrude Levy, p. 4.

⁷⁴ Interview with Mr. Allan Mellamed, quoted in Pawloski, p. 63.

chant who already closed on Saturday, the Hebrew sabbath. Economic survival was threatened not only by the loss of another business day, but also by the loss of Sunday business in particular, since business was usually quite brisk on this day when most other Hartford stores were closed. Eventually the police and merchants negotiated an agreement under which the patrolmen agreed to look the other way.⁷⁵ Agreements of this sort between interest groups and law enforcement officers have been quite useful urban peace-keeping tactics. Nevertheless, Connecticut Blue Laws prohibiting the opening of businesses remained as statutes during this period, and so reminded Jewish merchants that they were both a cultural and ethnic minority in the community.

The livelihood of Jewish peddlers was endangered when police began arresting them for making excessive noise as they went up and down the streets advertising their wares. Peddling provided an immediate occupation for many immigrants, as well as the first step to a successful business career for some.⁷⁶ An immigrant with no commercial training, little English and little money could become a peddler. He picked up merchandise in the morning from a wholesaler, sold it throughout the city, suburban neighborhood and East Side, paid the wholesaler and pocketed the profits. If he worked hard and was thrifty he might save enough to purchase a horse and wagon, or even a store. Consequently, peddling was an important avenue of economic mobility.

Yet, Irving Howe reminds us, be wary of the

tendency among American Jews to endow peddling with a certain glamour. Sometimes, perhaps, with reason: as in the stories that have come down to us of Jews wandering into small southern towns and being treated as if they had just stepped out of the Old Testament. But in the cities of the North, during the years of industrial expansion, peddling was back-breaking and soul-searching work. There was only one reason to become a peddler: you had no skill and wanted to stay out of the shops.⁷⁷

In response to this threat to their livelihood, Hartford Jewish peddlers organized in 1909 the Hebrew Peddlers Association for the

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ See Rudolf Glanz, "Notes on Early Jewish Peddling in America," *Jewish Social Studies*, 7 (1945).

⁷⁷ Howe, p. 78.

purpose of testing in court the legality of arresting peddlers for hawking their wares. The name of the Association was changed later to the Hebrew Merchants Association. Peddlers were eventually able to convince police that hawking did not disturb the peace unduly and it should be permitted to continue.⁷⁸

Perhaps one reason accommodations were reached relatively easily between East Side Jews and the police on controversial issues was the early entry of Jewish citizens into active political life. Rabbi Silverman cites an 1890 editorial as evidence that as Hartford Jews increased in numbers in a geographically contiguous area so that they formed a bloc of voters in the city's political structure, they entered the political arena:

Religious bigotry does not play much of a part at Hartford, capital of Connecticut. The handful of Israelites who live there are held in high esteem by their Christian neighbors. This was proven by the last municipal election, when four co-religionists were successful candidates for representation in the City Council. . . . Resident Israelites hope some day to see one of these popular Gentlemen, Mayor of the city, or even Governor of the State.⁷⁹

As we shall document below, there are numerous examples to support the contention that religious bigotry did not preclude Jewish participation in the city's political life. Of course, as with most first and second generation ethnic politicians, Jewish politicians built a base of support in their home district which elected them to the city council. In turn, they used that base and office to secure positions in a much broader political arena.

Robert Dahl's analysis of the process of ethnic integration into New Haven politics helps us understand the process Hartford Jews went through to become an effective force in the city's political life. For practically the entire five decade period, 1880-1929, Jewish political activity is accurately described by Dahl's "First Stage" on the way to political assimilation. During this stage ethnic

⁷⁸ WTIC, "The Jews of Hartford"; and "Hebrew Peddlers United," *Hartford Courant*, May 28, 1909, p. 10. Yet, the following letter, signed by "Old Hartford Resident," appeared in the September 25, 1915, edition of the *New York Times*: "I would like to know in what part of Connecticut the peddlers whistle. I have lived most of my life in Hartford, and if 'Anti-Noise' could hear the bedlam in our streets from early morning until late at night, he never would call it a pleasant little whistle. We do have a law regarding noise, but no one pays any attention to the law. We would like the whistle; it would be a pleasant change."

⁷⁹ Silverman, pp. 29-30.

groups tend to be politically homogeneous, and that homogeneity is a function of socio-economic homogeneity. What is especially important for us at this point is how political leadership begins to develop in the new immigrant group. "Members of the new group serve sometimes as intermediaries between the group and older leaders," Dahl argues, "acquiring in the process moderate influence and experience as sub-leaders. Some of the ethnic sub-leaders eventually received nominations for minor offices, such as alderman, where the constituency is drawn predominately from the sub-leader's ethnic group."⁸⁰

An examination of Hartford city councilmen between 1860 and 1929 reveals that 59 Jewish citizens served varying terms on the city's Common Council, until it was dissolved in 1915, and the Board of Aldermen. During the 1860's and 1870's representatives came only from Wards 5 and 6. As both the city and its Jewish population grew in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jewish representation in city governing councils not only increased numerically, but also came from more wards. Since electoral victory for a minority group candidate at this stage of political integration depended in most cases upon an ethnic base, the pattern of ward representation reveals the residential mobility of the Jewish population, which, as noted previously, was particularly strong to the city's north, with a noticeable movement to the west, as well.⁸¹

During this fifty-year period, Hartford Jews tended to favor Democrats, although Republicans such as Isidore Wise (Ward 7, Common Council, 1894-1895, and Alderman, Ward 3, 1896), Nathan A. Schatz (Ward 2, Alderman, 1919-1921) and Jacob Schwolsky (Ward 3, Alderman, 1916-1918) and Maxwell Lerner (Ward 12, Alderman, 1927-1930) were able to overcome party label and secure voter support. Nathan Schatz, in fact, is representative of the ethnic leaders who built political power upon an ethnic base and from it moved into citywide office. Elected alderman in 1919, he went on to become prosecutor of the Hartford Police Court and later a probate judge.⁸²

⁸⁰ Dahl, pp. 34-35.

⁸¹ A decade by decade analysis of representatives per ward and the years during which each served is available from Ralph Pearson.

⁸² Silverman, p. 258.

The prototype for all Hartford Jewish politicians who aspired to move from the local neighborhood political arena to citywide, and indeed national, office was Democrat Herman P. Kopplemann. Kopplemann served the East Side so well during his eight years (1904–1912, President, 1910) as an Alderman from the Second Ward that he was acclaimed the “Father of the East Side.” Elected to the State House of Representatives in 1912 and the State Senate in 1919, he went to the U.S. House in 1933 as the Congressman from the First District, the first Jewish Congressman from Hartford. Re-elected to additional terms in 1935, 1937, 1941 and 1945, Kopplemann was such a persistent supporter of the New Deal that he became known as a “Roosevelt Democrat.”⁸³

Each of these men represented the interests of the Jewish community in the city’s political life. They helped resolve conflicts between particular cultural or ethnic practices, such as Sunday sales, and the norms of the community’s majority. By serving the community in positions which transcended the boundaries of the ethnic village, of course, they forged a link which brought together the ethnic enclave and other interest groups in the city.

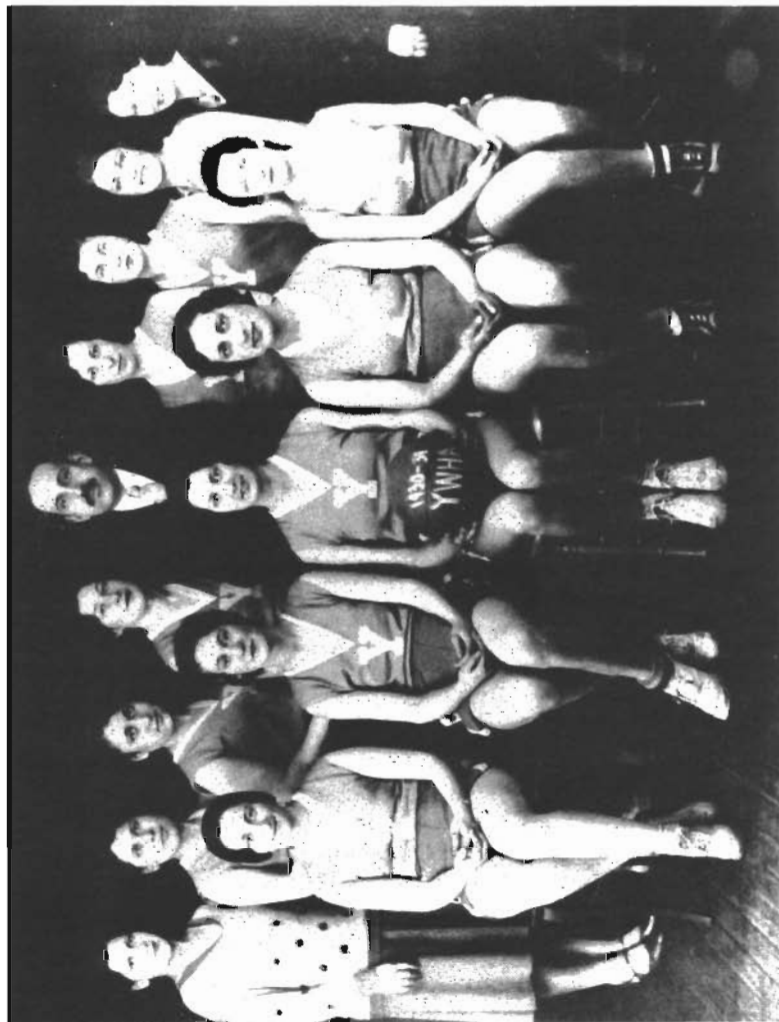
By 1910, East European Jews in Hartford outnumbered German Jews by five to one. As in other cities where the pattern held, German Jews resented the newcomers and looked down upon them. They tried to keep the new arrivals out of their synagogues, clubs, schools and, above all, from marrying their sons and daughters.⁸⁴ For example, membership in the Touro Club, founded in 1901, was restricted initially to Jews of German background.

In reaction, newcomers accused the Germans of becoming too much like Christians in their worship and life styles. The Reform Judaism of Congregation Beth Israel, for example, seemed to many newcomers an abandonment of thousands of years of Jewish tradition. The new residents responded to the exclusiveness of the German Jews by organizing their own social clubs, such as the Hartford Hebrew Association (1891), which operated until 1906, when it disbanded and most of its members joined the John Hay Lodge, Knights of Pythias, and the Aaron Club (1910).

This conflict with the established Jewish community did not

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

⁸⁴ Silverman, p. 37. See also Rischin, pp. 95–96.



Courtesy of "Jewish Historical Society, Hartford"
YWHA Basketball Team, Hartford, Conn (1930-31)

mean that the recent arrivals welcomed one another. Quite the opposite was true as the Russians frowned upon the Lithuanians, the Lithuanians upon the Rumanians and all of them upon the Galicians.⁸⁵ Thus each group established its own synagogues and benevolent societies, and each opposed intermarriage with other national groups as fervently as Germans opposed intermarriage with them.

Gradually the hostility between the old and new members of Hartford's Jewish community broke down. As the newcomers became more educated, achieved economic success and appeared to be more American, they found acceptance as members of Ararat Lodge, where once they were excluded, or at the YMHA and YWHA which opened in 1915. Important, too, in shattering the barriers which divided old and new was the emergence in most communities of a sense of obligation to help all Jews, regardless of national origin.⁸⁶ This acceptance of one another involved, Moses Rischin wrote of New York City Jews, "... a complex transformation wrought on both groups [German and Russians] by the American and world experience over more than half a century. . . ."⁸⁷

Hartford Jews were brought together, too, by the need to join hands with fellow Jews in Europe who were being persecuted for their religious and ethnic heritage. We know, for example, that the John Hay Lodge, Knights of Pythias, was named after the American Secretary of State because of his vigorous protests against the discrimination and persecution of Jews in Rumania. Responses to the call for aid to the victims of the Kishineff pogrom came in the form of financial assistance, as well as protest meetings, and it served to create a sense of identity across the nationality divisions which Europe's boundaries had created.

Another international movement which promoted the cohesiveness of the city's Jewish community in the twentieth century has been widespread support for a Jewish state in Palestine. Soon after the 1897 meeting of the first Jewish Congress in Basel, Switzerland, a group of Hartford Jews organized the B'nai Zion Society

⁸⁵ Silverman, p. 37.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Rischin, p. 111.

to work for the cause of Zionism. Another Zionist group formed at the turn of the century to attract young people was the Zion Guard, a military group whose program included social and athletic activities. In 1903, as well, the Sisters of Zion brought together the cause of Zionism with protests against the Kishineff pogrom by leading protest meetings and soliciting funds for Russian Jewish relief. Perhaps the highpoint of the Zionist movement in Hartford during the 1880-1929 period was the May, 1921, mass meeting attended by Albert Einstein and Chaim Weizmann at which \$75,000 was raised.⁸⁸

The sense of obligation felt by the established Jewish community to assist newcomers in their city expressed itself most visibly, as with earlier immigrants, in the formation of charitable associations which responded to the needs of recent arrivals. Two Hartford groups which played a notable role in aiding immigrant adjustment were the Hartford chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women and the United Jewish Charities.

Organized in February, 1910, the Hartford chapter of NCJW worked closely with the New York branch to protect those young women and children who, upon debarkation in New York, identified Hartford as their destiny.⁸⁹ The New York chapter forwarded the names and "salient facts" about those bound for the city to the local chapter which, in turn, sent its Immigrant Aid Committee to visit the recent arrivals. This Committee "offered friendly aid and advice and put them in touch with social, recreational and religious opportunities."⁹⁰ Nettie Goldman recalled the organization's special concern for immigrant women: "In those days, white slavery was very imminent in this city and we wanted to make sure that none of them got into it. So we used to follow them up and ask them to report to us."⁹¹

The Chapter served, too, as an employment agency for immigrants. In November, 1912, the chairman of the Immigrant Aid Committee reported that "twenty-eight cases had been investi-

⁸⁸ Silverman, pp. 40-44; Van Dusen, p. 346.

⁸⁹ Hartford Chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women, "Proceedings, February 18, 1910, to January 1, 1914" (Hartford, 1914), p. 1.

⁹⁰ Florina Lasker and Etta Laske Rosensohn, *Report of Immigrant Aid by the National Council of Jewish Women* (New York, 1922), p. 19.

⁹¹ Interview with Mrs. Nettie Goldman, p. 9.

gated in the last six months and all found jobs."⁹² Gradually the role of the employment agency became onerous, as the following entry in the 1924-1925 *Yearbook* laments:

We have been called upon to act as an employment agency and this is one of our most difficult duties. That there is a place for everyone in this world, we know, but we have been faced with the difficult problem of finding places for many unfortunates who have appealed to us.⁹³

Of particular concern, the *Yearbook* noted, was the absence of a vocational school where the mentally and physically handicapped could be trained for useful activities.

Americanization classes were an important part of the chapter's program. Beginning in April, 1913, with an enrollment of 30 women, the classes in English and American history grew to 98 by 1924-1925.⁹⁴ To encourage widespread participation by immigrant women, classes were held in the evening, and a baby sitting service was provided. It is important to remember that the goal for which the chapter and the immigrants worked was full participation in the political and economic life of their adopted homeland, without the loss of cultural identity.⁹⁵ Americanization did not have to involve the destruction of self-respect, nor of cultural and family ties, results not uncommon for immigrants who went through the process of becoming one hundred percent Americans.

Concern with the physical and social health of the immigrants compelled the Hartford chapter to sponsor a number of special projects to improve the living environment. For example, in November, 1912, a special "Visiting Committee" was formed

. . . to go into the homes and tenements . . . and establish personal relations with the families living in congested quarters with a view to bringing them more wholesome influence and suggestions for improvement in individual and household conditions. . . . All efforts in this regard shall [,] however, be directed toward promoting and preserving the self respect of the poor and protecting them from undesirable and unnecessary intrusions.⁹⁶

⁹² Hartford Chapter, "Proceedings," p. 115.

⁹³ Hartford Chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women, *Yearbook: 1924-1925* (Hartford, 1925), p. 37.

⁹⁴ Hartford Chapter, "Proceedings," p. 116; and *Yearbook*, p. 37.

⁹⁵ Interview with Mrs. Nettie Goldman, pp. 18-19.

⁹⁶ Hartford Chapter, "Proceedings," p. 115.

Infants and children of all faiths were of concern to the Hartford chapter. In 1911 it established the Babies' Milk Station on Wooster Street. Babies brought to the station were weighed and examined by a nurse.⁹⁷ In 1913 the chapter began a campaign to get newsgirls off Hartford streets, fearing that they would be exposed to unhealthy influences. A report from the Child Labor Committee describes one strategy used to discourage newsgirls:

We visited Mrs. Wisemann and finding her a very worthy woman, provided her with proper shoes of a very special kind and if she agrees to keep her daughter from selling papers on the street, to provide her with one dollar a week for one year.

These tactics proved too expensive, and so the group lobbied City Council, which responded in 1914 with an ordinance banning newsgirls. By January, 1915, the chapter noted "... the absence of newsgirls from the center of the city. . . ."⁹⁸ The Hartford chapter provided numerous other services to the Jewish community, including the establishment of a home for Jewish working girls on Wooster Street, discontinued in 1912 because of the financial drain, and the distribution of clothing and household goods to the poor.

In 1912 a second very active group committed to serving the needs of the entire Jewish community was organized when thirty Hartford eleemosynary organizations merged to form the United Jewish Charities. Taking as its slogan the commitment to provide "The greatest good for the largest number with the least waste,"⁹⁹ United Jewish Charities sought to promote greater efficiency in the distribution of charity and services, as well as provide a focal point for increased fellowship within the Jewish community.

A careful reading of the *Annual Reports* convinces one that while the organization wanted to record its accomplishments of the past year, it also felt the need to convince the more affluent members of the Jewish community that the need was great. The 1919 *Annual Report* listed the causes of distress among poorer Jews in descending order of importance: illness—with tuberculosis posing the greatest threat; widowhood; orphaned children; old

⁹⁷ Interview with Mrs. Nettie Goldman, p. 10.

⁹⁸ Hartford Chapter, "Proceedings," pp. 127, 190.

⁹⁹ United Jewish Charities of Hartford, *Eighth Annual Report: 1920* (Hartford, 1920), p. 1.

age; insufficient earning or temporary unemployment; desertion and non-support; juvenile delinquency; adult delinquency.¹⁰⁰ Nineteen-twenty brought no change in the catalogue of causes of distress: "Our greatest single cause of dependence and distress is sickness . . ."; and again, ". . . Hard times are here, and are here to stay for a while, new cases of distress on account of unemployment are coming more frequently with each day that passes. . . ."¹⁰¹

Hartford's immigrant community shared the urban ills of those immigrants who came with them but remained in larger cities. United Jewish Charities challenged the apparent indifference of prosperous Jews to the sickness, poverty and unemployment among recent arrivals with the reminder that "As long as there are Slums in Your City, We will need your Help!"¹⁰² And that help was apparently forthcoming. Analyses of services rendered in 1924 and 1927 document the involvement of United Jewish Charities in all phases of urban life, the physical and emotional, as well as the economic. Assistance in the form of milk, glasses, coal and shoes, loans, scholarships and transportation funds was funneled by United Jewish Charities from the successful Jewish citizens to those who had come to America to escape persecution and/or to achieve similar success.¹⁰³

Who Leads and Why?

When we began our portrait of the Hartford Jewish community, 1880-1929, our intent was to provide insight into both the adjustment of Jewish immigrants to their new city and the cultural pluralism of New England society. Aside from the Irish, Italians and to a lesser extent the French Canadians, little attention had been given to other ethnic and cultural groups which settled in the factory towns and larger cities of New England.

Scholarly studies of a number of Jewish communities provide us with several models for interpreting the experiences of the Jewish community in Hartford, 1880-1929. Particularly helpful is an es-

¹⁰⁰ United Jewish Charities, *Seventh Annual Report: 1919*, p. 10.

¹⁰¹ United Jewish Charities, *Eighth Annual Report: 1920*, pp. 2, 17.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁰³ United Jewish Charities, *Twelfth Annual Report: 1924*, pp. 12-13; and *Fifteenth Annual Report: 1927*, pp. 15-16.

say written in 1969 by Rabbi Kenneth D. Roseman, "Power in a Midwestern Jewish Community," in which, early in the essay, he wrestles with the problem of defining "'Jewish community' in terms of any agreed-upon or shared values," and concludes that "there are two generally-shared convictions which form the basis for a concept of the 'Jewish community' in any ideological sense."

On these two points there exists, as it were, a consensus. In the first place, nearly all Jews share the conviction that Jews must survive as a distinct group. Some may place greater emphasis on the religious aspects of Jewish survival; others may stress cultural forms; still others may hold that the philanthropic aspects of Judaism are important. Regardless of their differences, however, they will, with few exceptions, agree that Jews must survive. A second area of wide, if not quite unanimous, agreement relates to the need for communal survival—that, given the necessity of Jewish survival, Jews must be provided with certain social, health, recreational, and religious services by their own 'sectarian' organizations.¹⁰⁴

From the initial settlement of German Jews in Hartford in the mid-nineteenth century there has been no question about the commitment to survival of a distinctive ethnic identity, even as Jews became a part of the political and economic structure of Hartford. As in Roseman's model, that survival of identity has been defined in terms of specific sectarian organizations such as synagogues, Mt. Sinai Hospital, YMHA, and YWHA, the Tumble Brook Country Club, and United Jewish Charities.

Leadership of the Jewish community during the five decades was provided largely by politicians, who built a power base upon

¹⁰⁴ Kenneth D. Roseman, "Power in a Midwestern Jewish Community," *American Jewish Archives*, 21 (April, 1969), 58. Studies of the Jewish communities in large cities, as noted above, are numerous. In his essay, "Strangers in Their Midst: Small-Town Jews and Their Neighbors," in Rose, *The Ghetto and Beyond*, pp. 335-56, Peter I. Rose analyzes the experiences of Jews in small towns and concludes that they may be more in touch with their own and the "alien" culture than Jews in cities with larger Jewish populations, such as Hartford. Rose writes, "Yet, rather than being on the periphery of two cultures, the ex-urban Jew seems to have internalized the best of each. He is more a part of his community than he is apart from it. He is far more assimilated to the Gentile milieu than his urban cousin. But . . . he remains a Jew.

"While he strongly identifies with fellow Jews . . . and in many ways expresses a feeling of kinship with his people, he has adapted himself to the folkways of the small town in a variety of ways. He enjoys the advantages of sharing two 'ways of life' and, in a word, is bi-cultural" (p. 346).

the ethnic enclave, religious leaders, for recent immigrants continued to find security and identity in the synagogues, professionals such as lawyers, and successful businessmen. The latter exercised power not only by virtue of their economic success, which resulted largely because they were able to work with and sell to the larger Gentile community, but also because that success opened opportunities for leadership in the sectarian organizations which were so essential to the continued separate identity of Hartford Jews.

If one takes a random sample of individuals active in sectarian Jewish organizations at selected dates during the fifty-year period, one finds not only an overlap from organization to organization of individuals who are active as leaders, but also an obvious dependence upon the merchant-small manufacturer for that leadership. Associates of large firms such as G. Fox and Company were part of most important Jewish organizations, but the preponderance of support came from the smaller merchant-manufacturing group.¹⁰⁵ At least for the period 1880-1929, then, it appears as though one secured a leadership role in the Hartford Jewish community via what Roseman calls "vertical mobility" rather than "horizontal mobility." That is, admission at the top of the community leadership structure occurred only on rare occasions for "high prestige persons who can be used for publicity." The usual pattern of access to community leadership was built upon economic success, either as a small merchant-manufacturer or attorney, as the result of which one participated in fund raising, assumed some assignment on a board or committee and eventually might move to the presidency of an agency.¹⁰⁶

This leadership profile, and the path of accessibility to leadership, is not surprising since many of the sectarian organizations created from 1880-1929 were founded initially to meet the needs of the new arrivals from Eastern Europe. In many cases, the merchants responding to the needs of recent arrivals had been born in Eastern Europe and were themselves relatively new to the United

¹⁰⁵ Our conclusion is based upon analysis of the officers and board members of the following organizations: Mt. Sinai Hospital, 1924; Hebrew Ladies Old Peoples' Home Association, 1911; United Hebrew Charities, 1913; YMHA, 1895 and 1896; YMHA and YWHA, 1928; Tumble Brook Country Club, 1922-1923.

¹⁰⁶ Roseman, pp. 64-68.

States. As tobacco, fruit and produce merchants, grocers and barbers, they had established a foothold in the American economy and were responding to the needs of their community, the Jewish community, by serving as officers and board members of social, health and recreational organizations.

The analysis of individuals active in Jewish community organizations provides a significant clue, too, to a characteristic of Jewish economic activity in Hartford and Connecticut not only in the 50 years of this study but also in subsequent decades. In a study published in 1943, Samuel Koenig argued that while British Americans represented only 14 per cent of Connecticut's population, that group controlled the State's large factories and powerful commercial houses.¹⁰⁷ Jewish economic activity dominated the clothing and dry goods business, "constituting over 64 per cent of the individuals of all groups" in the State, and with Italians played a leading role "in firms employing less than ten workers."¹⁰⁸ The foundation for this economic profile was laid in the period we have studied, and Rabbi Silverman found in 1969 that it continued to hold in contemporary Hartford.¹⁰⁹

The most accurate analysis of the Jewish experience in Hartford, 1880-1929, occurs within a framework which juxtaposes the impulse to integrate into the community's institutional and cultural life with the equally strong commitment to retain a separate identity. The resolution of that tension during the five decades, complicated by the ambivalent attitudes of the larger community towards the Jews themselves, was cautious integration of economic and political activities where possible with the non-Jewish community, and continued separation of social, charitable, and educational/religious institutions.

Because they provided needed goods and services, and at times when other merchants were frequently closed, Jewish merchants assumed a dominant role in Hartford's clothing and dry goods business, as well as in the food trade. Their businesses, however, were small, usually employing fewer than ten employees, the larger factories and manufacturing firms remaining in the hands of

¹⁰⁷ Samuel Koenig, "Ethnic Factors in the Economic Life of Urban Connecticut," *American Sociological Review*, 8 (April, 1943), p. 193.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 195, 197.

¹⁰⁹ Silverman, pp. 83, 105-6.

earlier settlers in the city and state. Similarly, Jews played a minor role in the city's banking establishment, control of which remained primarily with the British-Americans.¹¹⁰

Economic success determined who became leaders in the Jewish community internally and in its relations with the rest of Hartford. Many of the successful politicians were initially successful small businessmen. Because Jews represented an important bloc of voters, Hartford's political organizations recognized the need to include them in their slate of candidates, and so another avenue of integration was opened, though cautiously, for in our five-decade period only a few Jewish politicians achieved positions not dependent primarily upon the ethnic voting bloc. Nevertheless, by the end of the period individuals like Congressman Kopplemann demonstrated that politicians with an ethnic base could attract enough support from the rest of the community to win elections.

If economic and political success were avenues of interaction with and assimilation into non-Jewish society, they provided access, too, to leadership of the Jewish community's commitment to retain a separate cultural identity. That commitment was articulated most clearly in the organization of separate social, charitable and educational/religious institutions. Separate social/recreational organizations such as the YMHA and Tumble Brook Country Club; separate charitable agencies such as the Hebrew Home for the Aged, the Hebrew Sheltering Home and Mt. Sinai Hospital; separate educational and religious institutions, as well as

¹¹⁰ See Koenig, "Ethnic Factors . . .," 193. In his study of Hartford Jews, Rabbi Silverman makes the following comments on Jews in banking:

"One of the most shopworn stereotypes of sensational journalism and racist propaganda is that of the 'wealthy Jewish banker' who 'controls the finances of the nation.' Sheer ignorance and superstition have kept this myth alive. All the facts and statistics of the actual financial structure, banking system and economy of this country eloquently refute this fallacy. For instance, a 1967 survey of Connecticut banks completely contradicts this impression. In Hartford there was, for a brief period in the early 1920's, one Jewish banking institution, the Merchants Bank and Trust Co., founded by some Jewish businessmen, among whom were Ellik Nirenstein, George B. Schwartz, and Barney Rapaport. But this short-lived small bank was absorbed by the non-Jewish Riverside Trust Co.

"According to this survey in 1967, out of a total of 307 officers of the six large commercial banks in Hartford, only four were Jews. Out of 112 directors, 18 were Jews. In 1967, four of the six banks had no Jewish officers. Excluding the Constitution National Bank, whose officers and directors are almost 50 per cent Jewish, we find that only 7/10th of one per cent of Hartford bank officers are Jews" (pp. 85-86).

extremely strong support of the Zionist movement, kept Hartford Jews a group apart.

There is no doubt that the decision to form separate ethnic organizations reflects a conscious decision of the group itself. At least for our five-decade period, the correctness of that decision was underscored by the willingness of the non-Jewish community to retain exclusiveness in some of its institutions. Hartford Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, in addition to the conflict of national loyalties among themselves, confronted not only the tension of integration and separatism within their own community, but also that of the larger society which demanded Americanization while it accepted them only reluctantly, if at all, as equal members of the community.

The American Jewish Archives is making a comprehensive search for correspondence and other papers of Isaac Mayer Wise, pioneer of Reform Judaism and founder of Hebrew Union College, to be included in a microfilm edition of his writings. Persons or repositories holding original items or copies are requested to contact Doris C. Sturzenberger, Project Coordinator, Papers of Isaac Mayer Wise, Microfilm Edition, American Jewish Archives, 3101 Clifton Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio 45220.