

2016

A Review of The Conference on "Bath Jewish-Christian Relations, c. 1920-1970

Nathan Cogan

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/jud_cogan

Recommended Citation

Cogan, Nathan, "A Review of The Conference on "Bath Jewish-Christian Relations, c. 1920-1970" (2016).
Cogan, Nathan Collection. 4.
https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/jud_cogan/4

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Judaica Collection at USM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Cogan, Nathan Collection by an authorized administrator of USM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu.

A Review of The Conference on “Bath Jewish-Christian Relations, c. 1920-1970, “
August 12, 2016.

Submitted by Nathan Cogan

While our *ad hoc* group discussed what roles members of the Jewish community played in Bath from about 1910 to 1970, we did not attempt to draw conclusions. Rather we offered a series of questions and comments in order to better understand what barriers and bridges existed between a majority, white Protestant community and a tiny Eastern European Jewish community. If we were to hold a future discussion in the summer of 2017, I would hope that some of these notes and observations might provide direction for that.

At the outset, my personal sense of “growing up” Jewish in Bath was conditioned by both my family and the roles various Jews played, though for me my teachers Bernice Colby, Ray Farnham, Moody Flint, and Bob Farson were so valuable to my view of the world. Equally valuable was watching movies all Saturday afternoon, or hanging out at the Y in the Forties, where both basketball and chess were significant. I would surreptitiously buy Italian sandwiches or get one of Mike Zoome’s non-kosher hotdogs as a teenager. I also think of Bessie Greenblatt Singer in Sunday school and her enormous enthusiasm and songs when Israel won its war of independence in 1948. While books and movies in an age before television were important, there was always a level of excitement when I delivered the Bath Times and the Portland Press Herald from 1949 to 1955. The local Episcopalian priest wanted to talk Hemingway with me, and Rev. David Wilson’s German daughter-in-law, nee Heidelbauer, talked about the New York Times.

For me, Jewish identity had meaning re Hollywood characters like Al Jolson and Groucho Marx. It was flavored by the film Exodus, and the roles Einstein, Jonas Salk, Felix Frankfurter, Louis Brandeis, Ben Gurion, and Golda Meier, among others, played in post-Holocaust Bath. Franklin Roosevelt had been a hero to the Bath Jews too. Locally, there were my Mother’s occasional visits with the Brown sisters, where I ate chocolate; or when I joked with Jay Povich I captured funny stories; or I would hang out with Mo Zibblatt, father to my pal David (Morse ‘53). Mo was the only Bath merchant who did not own his own business nor his own home. He would have been very proud of his son who earned his doctorate at Oregon in the 1960’s.

Paradoxically the Jewish community was barely 1% of the local population. We rarely, if ever, ate out; and I suppose one difference I felt as a Jewish kid was getting our kosher meat out of Lewiston, 1946-1955--before I took off for Bowdoin—and delivered at Hallet’s bus stop on Front Street. Bath rarely hosted rabbis, except Rabbi Einhorn who was around for two or three years in the late 1940’s, and who used me as a chess partner at the Y. The Patten Free Library, an upstairs Front Street stamp [philatelic] shop, and the used bookstores near the Y and the Uptown Theater were often huge refuges for my curiosity, and for my escape from an erratic home.

In part I saw our August 12 discourse playing on *difference* (as a sociological phenomenon). We asserted ideas about the shop keepers and “seemingly” separate community concerned, in part, with Jewish rituals, such as eating kosher at home, the boys learning Hebrew and going through Bar Mitzvah, and families implicitly demanding that their children--the 2nd generation--“marry Jewish.” Yiddish had long faded from the scene. The fact that none of the shop keepers wore skull caps, nearly all worked on the Jewish Sabbath, and none hung their laundry out to dry on Sundays testifies both to their separateness and the need for acceptance within the “new” world, radically different, of course, from the shtetls (small Eastern European Jewish towns) and the fear of pogroms or conscription into the Russian army. Only Solomon Greenblatt ever served in the Russian Army. True, many of the elders spoke broken English, but that in no way was embarrassing. Indeed I automatically accepted my Jewishness like a pocket watch, out of sight. I nostalgically identified with the shul on Washington street where my late Father (died '46) had served as *hazan* or cantor for three decades.

In our discussion, I mentioned that Irving Howe’s classic 1976 study “World of Our Fathers” might be useful for both Jews and non-Jews to think about the Jews as a distinct “ethnic” rather than simply a “religious” group. Howe’s notion of “achievement” as a spoken and unspoken force in the social code seems relevant to understanding how Bath’s families encouraged their children, especially the English speaking 2nd generation who emerged in the Forties, to get good grades, the passport to Maine or Bowdoin. That is, beyond the puritanism of Bath—thrift, cleanliness and hard work—many ascribed, unconsciously or not, to a *philosophy of achievement* as evidenced by a few students who moved up and on in America after their Bath experience. The honors graduates at Morse—three Greenblatt sisters, or my elder sister Ruth, my cousin Ruth—provide some insight into getting ahead, possibly “moving up.” Come hell or high water, the boys would get a post-secondary education. The girls by and large were directed toward finding a husband, not unlike most of the young women at Morse High. Still the drive toward college was a significant social phenomenon, especially when many, but not all, of the mothers had a high school education or less. Indeed Boston, 120 miles away, became a real setting for these women to find eligible indeed prospective husbands. (Three of my sisters did!) The Weinberg archives which have led to amazing “little” historical notes and discoveries, reveal that four Bath young ladies attended Lesley College: Frieda Mikelsky [mother of Robert Smith, Bowdoin '62]; her niece Sarah Silverman (Morse '46), my cousin Sylvia Petlock (Morse 1943), and my sister Sylvia (Morse 1949).

Freedom also characterizes so many of the 2nd generation beginning in the mid-Forties or after WWII. We failed to mention that nearly every family in Bath had sent a son or two to fight in WWII. (Sam Povich served as a sailor in WWI.) Yet the second generation—especially by the late 1940’s--reflected the social split regarding “taking over” the family business versus pursuing a profession beyond their parents’ shops. While Don Povich, Alvin Gediman, Larry Katz [Max Kutz’s son-in-law], and the Praver boys assumed ownership of their fathers’ stores, many 2nd

generation men pursued professional goals: Richard Smith became a lawyer, James Smith [his cousin] a doctor, Peter Rubin a lawyer [in Portland], Albert Povich a lawyer in D.C. The three Levin sons became dentists; only Jesse stayed in Bath. David Zibblatt, Adele Rubin, and I became university professors; Stephen Singer a teacher in the Bath schools. Owen Greenblatt pursued a military officer career. The exceptional Donald Povich, though a shopkeeper, spent four decades working diligently on Bath history at the library. Much earlier, David Brown (class of '25), via Yale, became a news correspondent, parenthetically, a role and status generally reserved for the middle and upper class.

As a general observation: *Moving into the professions was very much part of the code of the Eastern European immigrant Jews and their family expectation, especially the generation born after 1920.*

I make this last observation primarily to distinguish how Bath's Jews are quite similar to the vast numbers of Eastern European Jews who came to Boston and New York, 1900-1920. The implicit gauge for success was that the sons move into the professions of law, medicine, dentistry, etc. One example: my distant Portland, Maine male "cousins" by marriage—the Chandlers—who universally became doctors in the period 1940-1965 suggests a familial drive toward medicine--despite the "business" focus of the first generation. The Chandler story highlights the "progression" in America from storefront to medicine. In Providence my Uncle Irving (born in the Ukraine in 1892) and his Portland, Maine brothers all succeeded in business. (One Bath story runs parallel to this: the several Mikelsky sons, c. 1910, who went to Bowdoin's medical college long before the creation of Beth Israel synagogue.) The careers of Doctors Joe and Jack Smith also illustrate the phenomenon of how the Smiths moved from humble beginnings since Benjamin Smith their father was a Brunswick junk man, and, interestingly, tagged in one pre-1910 directory as a "rag picker."

From a female perspective, two of my cousins had unusual post-Bath careers. My cousin Ann Chandler's journey illustrates the shift from the small shop into the professions. Born in Bath in 1941--her mother a Petlock, her father a kosher butcher originally from Portland, Ann translated her BA in biology (1963 at UNH) into an MPH and became director of the Berkeley [CA] Alameda County Health Lab, an achievement consistent with her two half-brothers and brother-in law becoming M.D.'s, as well as their numerous Portland, Maine doctor cousins who "gave" a building to Bowdoin in the '90s. (Parenthetically Robert Smith [Bowdoin 62], son of Frieda Mikelsky, also gave a building to Bowdoin.) My other first cousin, Ruth Cogan (Morse '42), left Boston University with a BA, taught high school English, and later earned her Ph.D. in Berkeley where she taught for decades.

At our conference we briefly sketched the matter of anti-Semitism. How prevalent was it, in fact? After WWII, Jewish-Christian relations remained friendly, despite one isolated, vicious anti-Semitic attack in Bath in 1940, a story I knew nothing about until Fred Weinberg produced it as part of his immense newspaper archive on

Bath's Jews. On a public scale, few Jews worked in the BIW—yes, there was a fear in right wing quarters in 1941 that Jews were members of a fifth column in the U.S. Yet Arthur Brown and Isadore Arik both worked there in administrative roles. In 1956 BIW's President Newell attacked William Zorach's statue in the Patten Free Library garden might. This might have been simply an anti-communist sentiment, but most Bath Jews sensed a McCarthy-like antagonism in his statements that equated Jews with communists. Arthur Gediman boasted that his left hand upper cut caused one foul-mouthed Bath lout never to say, "Dirty Jew." Some of the clubs like Sebasco Estates refused to hire Jews per se into the 1960's, but then often these discriminatory practices were throwbacks to the Thirties when Catholics also felt discrimination.

I should mention in the 1950's an elderly Catholic lady on Pearl Street remarked that not until 1938 were Catholic students in Bath eligible to apply for "public" scholarships. Equally significant, my statewide Jewish cohort, 1950 onward and certainly earlier-- were severely restricted in medical school admissions, assuredly blatant anti-Semitic policy. In 1955 when I attended Bowdoin for a year, its admissions policy was based on an 8% *Jewish quota*, a fact not lost on Bath's 100 Jews, but simply accepted as part of the larger social code.

At the local level it was not uncommon for antagonistic individuals to make comments about Jews being "wealthy" because "you own all the shops." Some lower class kids occasionally tossed out anti-Semitic digs, but by and large by the Fifties petty anti-Semitic slights had disappeared. By the way, some French Catholics felt some of these slights too. (My sister Ruth (Morse 1935) who lived in the Boston area for 75 years after disliked Bath because, as she used to say, it was "too anti-Semitic." Her emphasis.)

In contrast, Jerome Doyle, my Morse '55 classmate remarked openly at the 2005 Morse reunion how "good" Sam Povich was to the families in the South end during the post WWII recession years, for Sam had provided untold families with cash and food. Jerry's gratitude fifty years after the fact illustrates implicitly his deep respect for human kindness. For him Sam was a virtuous Jew, better "mensch," a term Jews use to describe good human beings, including women. His teen-age story also argues for an appreciation of us as a minority.

In our August 12 conversation, I used the word "code" to account for the insularity of the immigrants of Bath who did not want to see their brethren or children intermarrying. The fear—similar in Christian/Catholic families—was that the religion would be lost. When I wrote "A Memoir of the Immigrant Jews of Bath, Maine, 1886-1960" (the internet, 2009), I pointed out that nearly every Bath family had already faced the reality of intermarriage, a serious community prohibition and a source of angst. The rate today is about 65%, a figure that would have caused the Jews of Bath, c. 1940, to say Kaddish, or the prayer over the dead. Saying the Kaddish over a live person was a threat of excommunication from the family—not from the community per se-- if they rebelled. That practice, except among the

orthodox, is not a present day reality, but it did symbolize the insularity of the immigrants between the two world wars. Owen Greenblatt who became Colonel Greenblatt in the U.S. Air force Intelligence Corps tells how in the early Fifties his Mother finally accepted his military career choice though she had initially threatened him with the curse of disowning him.

It's fair to say that most of the Jews of Bath raised their boys to participate in sports, and sports in the Hank Greenberg era became the great social leveler, no matter what social "class" families fell into. (The thirty or so families were socially divided by age, strength of their businesses, wealth, education, etc.) It's no coincidence that Shirley Povich of Bath was a local as well as national hero as sports writer in Washington, D.C., for years after he left in 1919. Indeed the Jews of Bath took great pride in his accomplishments. Acceptance into the "American scene" was important to both generations. By the way, when the Washington, D.C. Povich entourage showed up for the high holidays in 1945, he was there and so revered as a town hero.

But change in the composition of the community became rampant during and after WWII. The four Petlock sisters had moved--three by the mid-Forties, my Mother in 1956. All seven Cohen kids had moved 1935-1956. Four Greenblatts remained, including the two brothers, and the unique, unmarried Ada, the prominent real estate agent. But two sisters, Sophie and Reva left in the Forties and became accomplished news reporters. The David S. Cogan-Arik family of eleven moved to Oregon (1948), and three of the Cogan brothers including Sonny, Morse '45; Gerald '46) advanced to professional careers in chemistry, dentistry, and land use planning. Many of the 2nd or 3rd generation Povich brothers—Bernie, for example--who had left Bath for Washington, D.C. in the Thirties, had become lawyers; and a generation later, Lon (Don and Janice's son) went into law in Boston, and his sister Elaine became a distinguished professional writer and journalist in Washington. The Prawers moved to Portland in the 70's. The widowed Mrs. Zibblatt left c. 1963. By 1950 the Louis Ginsburgs had also left.. To summarize, these moves indicate, of course, a fragmentation, which left the remaining immigrants like the Kutzes and the Petlocks, but their children had moved on. Incidentally, Abe and Gertie Kramer returned to Bath, in the Sixties, and rejoined a very aging community.

In important ways Bath provides a lens on how its 2nd and in some cases 3rd generation Jews found levels of acceptance in and beyond Bath via occupation, college attainment, and marriage. What we did not emphasize in our conversation is that as the immigrant Jews of Bath retired, sold or closed their businesses, or died, many of the new generation did move on to other settings, and by 1975 this left Bath nearly devoid of the earlier atmosphere created by the immigrants. While store signs like "Povich," "Gediman," and "Greenblatt" remained up for decades, Don—and of course Janice--Povich almost single-handedly played the role of the local "Jewish" clearing house, staying on through his untimely death in 2001. Meanwhile the "old" Bath immigrant community had become history.

It's safe to say that by the Fifties a significant shift in human relations had occurred, and this was a result, in part, of the American victory in WWII and, for the Jews, Israel's Independence in 1948. Meanwhile Sam Praver became active in the Lions club, Arthur Gediman served on the City Council, Harold Rubin became a judge, Morris Povich became a trustee at a Bath bank, the Praver family, including brother-in-law Benny Berenson, built up a statewide wholesale fruit company into a national business. Isear and Abe Greenblatt "grew" a major local paint store on Front Street. Simultaneously Bath itself was undergoing change in the Fifties with the advent of large commercial businesses like Sears and the A&P. Still the post WWII recession had destabilized the workers at the BIW, causing many to leave for war construction opportunities in Connecticut, Mississippi, and elsewhere. The younger generation of Jewish kids—those who reached maturity in the Sixties and Seventies—ultimately moved to Portland, Boston, and beyond.

What this post-conference paper hopes to suggest is that the impetus to achieve remained a cultural bias, and while it is easy to note how the 2nd and 3rd generations truly moved "up" in their professions, much is owed to the stature and achievement of the "small" often quiet shop keepers who encouraged their sons, in particular, to get ahead, and their daughters to find Jewish husbands elsewhere. In that pre-1960 context, preserving the faith was a universal given, and likewise attaining college degrees and moving into the professions remained significant factors in understanding how Bath's families evolved over the three generations in the period 1900-1965.

One anecdote summarizes, in part, the story of how Bath, Maine's 2nd and 3rd generation Jews generally succeeded, and also moved away from the occupational but not mundane world of the Front and Center Street shopkeepers.

"What is the difference between a member of the ILGWU (the International Ladies Garment Workers Union) and Harvard Medical School?"

The answer: "one generation."

Portland, Oregon, August 24, 2016