

# The Depth of Ethnicity: Jewish Identity and Ideology in Interwar New York City

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More than thirty years ago, I was privileged to have the most outstanding American Jewish historian of her era, Professor Naomi W. Cohen, mentor me as a dissertation advisor. It is a testament to Professor Cohen's wide interest in all aspects of our field—not to mention her generosity as the paradigmatic teacher—that she assumed an advisory role on a specific research theme that did not correspond to her own scholarly agenda. She was renowned—as she still is today—for her work on American Zionism, organized Jewish defense activities in this country, and Jewish status in Christian America, as well as the saga of nineteenth century central European migration and life in the United States. And, of course, she continues to produce in these areas—a model for us all. In any event, one of the central thrusts of my work on the Jewish community of Harlem was to look at the applicability of the Chicago School of Sociology's long-standing understanding—they wrote back in the 1920s—of the complexities of intergenerational and intracity Jewish migration to the metropolitan area experience. Among my most salient findings—which took on long-established scholars, most notably Louis Wirth, author of *The Ghetto*—was that the immigrants' and their children's movement out of the downtown hubs of intense Jewish life did not necessarily lead to a decline of group identity. Rather, I argued that to the degree that resettlement in new sections of the city “was conducive to rapid Americanization, they were also hospitable to the maintenance and even the strengthening of Jewish identification.” In that regard, I emphasized the role of new “social and religious forms of American Judaism” in the persistence of group belonging.<sup>1</sup>

As such, my efforts dovetailed with the historiographical contributions of other American Jewish historians of my generation—most importantly, Deborah Dash Moore. She argued that second-generation Jews in the New York neighborhoods that attracted Jews in the 1920s—after Harlem declined—were homes to the emergence of new forms of ethnic identification. She pointedly noted—as I had done—modern religious innovations among other formal indicators of involvement, even as she accounted for the wellsprings of informal neighborhood relations that promoted Jewish continuity.<sup>2</sup>

In the years that followed, I moved away from studies that focused on neighborhood life even as I deepened my interest and understanding of the ways America's religious Jews—through their synagogues, rabbis, leaders, and lay people—adjusted to, or opposed, the American social conditions around them. Currently, however, I am returning to the scene of my earliest efforts—the streets of New York—with an eye toward ascertaining how deeply committed interwar Jews were to Jewish values, causes, and movements; i.e., forms of

identification that transcended the friendly linkages that were part of ongoing neighborhood existence.<sup>3</sup>

As we will see—as I am rethinking what “maintenance and even the strengthening of Jewish identification” truly means—those in the neighborhoods were divided between the majority, whose Jewishness was rooted in their daily mundane associations, and a minority of activists who sought to lead all others to staunch ideological commitments.

There is no question that New York Jews of the interwar period lived together, worked at the same jobs and industries, attended the same public schools—with the fortunate ones continuing together mostly at the city’s municipal colleges—and above all, bumped into each other incessantly, if not happily, on the streets of the several neighborhoods that they called their homes. Memoirs and oral recollections of Jews from that time and place show unequivocally that they felt their entire world was well-nigh Jewish.

That was clearly the vision that William Poster, future author and poet destined to write dance and film criticism for *The New York Times* and *The New York Herald Tribune*, had of his upbringing on Brownsville’s Pitkin Avenue. He would later reflect that up to the age of twelve, Brownsville boys like him, “never really felt that the Jews were anything but an overpowering majority of the human race.” So insular was their vision that they even believed that great American heroes such as “George Washington, Nathan Hale, Tom Mix, Babe Ruth and Jack Dempsey” had to be Jewish, too. Within that atmosphere, Poster’s tightest ethnic linkage was his neighborhood club—a group we might call a “victimless street gang.”<sup>4</sup>

Concomitantly, another Brownsville boy, Alfred Kazin, who would achieve even greater renown in the world of letters, saw that same neighborhood not only as a home—where “men would stand around for hours, smoking, gossiping, boasting of their children, until it was time to go home for the great Sabbath mid-day meal”—but as a mecca apart from the metropolis. For him, “we were of the city, but somehow not in it... I saw New York as a foreign city... that the two were joined in me I never knew.” Ultimately, however, Kazin perceived Brownsville as “notoriously a place that measured all success by our skill in getting away from it.”<sup>5</sup>

During this same era, Adolph Schayes, who would find fame in a very different arena, also felt that his world, centered in the West Bronx, was essentially all Jewish. The son of Romanian immigrant parents, “Dolph” was born in 1928 and grew up on Davidson Avenue and 183<sup>rd</sup> Street, off Fordham Road and near Jerome Avenue. Decades later, Schayes would recall that “as a kid I thought everyone was Jewish.” Schayes had good reason to feel that way. Though in 1930 and 1940 Jews constituted but approximately 45 percent of the so-called “Fordham” section of the borough and shared the region with the Irish, everywhere Schayes turned he saw Jews and Jewishness around him.<sup>6</sup>

His peer group growing up was the “Trylons,” an informal neighborhood street club made up almost entirely of Jews, with a “token Irish” youngster. When they were not playing kick-the-can or stickball, these fellows would simply hang out together, “meeting and talking.” As a teenager, Dolph graduated into a successor club, another all-Jewish contingent called the “Amerks,” which played more organized games against other Jewish outfits and opponents from other ethnic groups. His consummate neighborhood turf was the local asphalt-covered playgrounds, where he honed basketball skills that would hold him in good stead at Mosholu Parkway’s De Witt Clinton High School and earn him a scholarship to New York University. He would stay basically at home—the uptown campus of NYU was then situated merely a short bus ride away, at University Heights—until he began capitalizing on his athletic prowess in the early postwar years, as one of the great early stars of the National Basketball Association.

Schayes’s Jewishness also extended to his large family; once a month, his aunts and uncles would meet at his parents’ home, or he and his family would trek to meet the clan in Brooklyn. The elders would play cards, dine on his mother’s Romanian delicacies, and perhaps speak of their affection for the “liberal” policies of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whom they revered.

Significantly—and we shall return to this dimension—none of Schayes’s Jewish connections were tied to any sort of formal Jewish organizational life. He knew, as a youth, of synagogues in his neighborhood—the large Concourse Center of Israel and some other storefront shuls—where some locals received Talmud Torah training. But neither he nor his club friends ever set foot in these religious institutions. His neighborhood friends, his school, and his family provided him with all of the Jewish identification that he needed or wanted.<sup>7</sup>

Elsewhere in the Bronx during the 1930s, Crotona Park was, for Irving Fier, the place to be not only to recreate—as Schayes might have done—but a romantic preserve perfect for liaisons with the opposite sex. When Irving was not working in his father’s dairy business, the teenager relaxed in the great park, perhaps lounging with picnickers on “a big lawn that thousands shared.” Fier has reminisced that it was there that he had his first date. “If you wanted to make out, you walked through the park to Tremont Avenue, got a soda and then walked back.” In time, the young man regularized his romantic routine, but apparently so did other amorous Jewish boys and girls. A search for privacy ultimately brought Irving and his date to the intimacy of her apartment lobby.<sup>8</sup>

For fortunate youths who did not have to work on Saturday to help support their families, the afternoon Sabbath promenade was a perfect time and place to hatch plans for an evening out. One observer of the Grand Concourse scene—the neighborhood corridor that acted as a pathway for young and old to walk between home and synagogue—in the 1930s would report on “a Jewish crowd passing in endless procession,” seeing and being seen by one another. The

major Jewish holidays, most notably the High Holidays, intensified pedestrian traffic, turning Wilkins Street, near Crotona Park, into “the Rosh ha-Shanah gathering place, for the neighborhood.” A comparable organic propinquity convinced young Lillian Elkin that “the entire world was Jewish.” When she too grew up in Brownsville, she used to feel sorry for her Polish janitor because “he did not share my holiday.” At that juncture, she “did not realize that I was a minority and he was the majority.”<sup>9</sup>

During the summer months, public beaches beckoned Jewish crowds. For Bronxites, 1934 was a particularly special season, as Orchard Beach, in the northeast corner of their borough, was opened for the first time for swimming, land sports, and socializing. Youngsters flocked to this outlet, which rivaled the Rockaways in Queens and Coney Island in Brooklyn as popular destinations. Indeed, these free and healthy settings were known as Jewish spaces. As one contemporary survey indicated: “On a normal hot Sunday or holiday these public beaches hold more than a million and a half persons. It is by no means stretching the probability to say that more than half of those come from the Jewish quota of the population.”<sup>10</sup>

For a considerable number of occupationally aspiring and educationally achieving young adults, the next Jewish nexus was the classrooms, cafeterias, and alcoves of the city’s colleges and universities, particularly its municipal-run institutions. For most of these first-generation college students, a combination of both prejudice and penuriousness directed them to local schools of higher education, where they would predominate and their influence would pervade undergraduate life. At that point in American history, informal and formal quota systems severely limited the numbers of Jews who might attend this nation’s elite schools. The paltry and declining numbers of Jewish admissions to the Ivy Leagues in the 1920s and 1930s chilled the dreams of many high school valedictorians. Even if a youngster applied under a pseudonym and fibbed in answering other personal information questions, his Eastern Parkway address, a photograph that revealed to close-looking admissions officers his “semitic features,” and his Boys High School transcript were dead giveaways.<sup>11</sup>

Concomitantly, New York University, taking some cues from the Ivy Leagues, tendered a decidedly mixed reception to Jews. Two journalists who surveyed 1920s and early 1930s antisemitism said that school “represent[ed] probably the most striking dualism, a house divided against itself, to be found in the academic world.” The school possessed a bucolic Bronx campus, a preserve set apart from the larger city, founded in 1894—before the borough became so Jewish—“as a men’s country college, with the good old American collegiate spirit.” (Women would not be admitted to this enclave until the late 1950s.) However, the so-called “old guard at NYU” saw their quiet, “retired hill-top” world changed and, to their minds, undermined in the 1910s when “aliens,” many of them Jews, began attending uptown. Not only did these invaders of

the Heights lack the proper breeding—renowned and racist sociologist Henry Pratt Fairchild was a faculty eminence—but these Jews were identified with unpatriotic, socialist radicalism. Anxious to restore its “proper” racial-religious balance, school officials in the early 1920s instituted “personal and psychological” tests—essential for weeding out Jews. Quickly, during the early and mid-1920s, the Jewish percentages at the College of Arts and Pure Science dropped from nearly 50 percent to less than 30 percent. When Schayes applied in the mid-1940s, receptivity toward Jews had improved. The exigencies of Depression economics helped as NYU, strapped for funds, looked to attract more tuition-paying students with less regard for their origins. But then again, Dolph also was an ideal candidate. Not only was he a fine student, but he was a nationally regarded athlete. One of the persistent canards leveled against Jewish students was that they lacked good old American collegiate spirit because they were not varsity men. Dolph Schayes would become an All-American basketball star.<sup>12</sup>

The “other” NYU—particularly its undergraduate Colleges of Commerce and Education and its Washington Square College, situated in Greenwich Village, where the school first began back in the 1830s—was always far more hospitable to Jewish men and women. Most notably, in the 1920s, James Buell Munn, dean of the liberal arts college, Washington Square, spoke warmly of a mission to provide children of immigrants of both genders—women were part of the mix from the opening of his school in 1914—with “natural cultural opportunities” within in his school; he considered it a “laboratory” for inculcating American values while pupils strived to fashion productive careers. Whether or not this assimilatory message resonated with Jewish undergraduates, they understood that they were welcomed downtown.<sup>13</sup> Still, for most college-bound Jews of this era, the academic place to be was within the city’s own municipal college, most notably, City College of New York (CCNY), “the Cheder [Jewish school] on the Hill”—that is, St. Nicholas Heights in Upper Manhattan.<sup>14</sup>

These “sturdy sons”—as the school’s alma mater described them—from families that could not afford tuition did not care that antisemitic rhetoric defined their school’s acronym as “College of the Circumcised Citizens of New York.” CCNY was their “Proletarian Harvard.” It has been estimated that in the interwar period, close to 90 percent of the student enrollment at CCNY was Jewish. Those who got in were proud and grateful of its century-old tradition of being a tuition-free school and were always ready, understandably, to do what was necessary to protect that distinctiveness. NYU, seemingly by contrast, was out of reach of the most indigent families. In the 1923 to 1924 academic year, the registration fee and tuition amounted to \$245. Ten years later, during the depths of the Depression, it cost \$360 to attend the downtown school. With reportedly a twenty-dollar-a-week salary constituting a “good job” and a shipping clerk in the garment center garnering but fifteen dollars a week, these were steep numbers indeed.<sup>15</sup>

Future award-winning *New York Times* editor A.M. Rosenthal may have captured the decision-making processes of most of his CCNY contemporaries best when he recalled that, “when I was a senior at De Witt Clinton High school”—he graduated six years before Schayes—“I had absolutely no conversations with any of my classmates or with my parents about what college I would enter or try to enter.” For this Depression-era youth, “there was only one choice. You either got into City College or you looked for a job in the Post Office.”<sup>16</sup> Jewish women who were then enrolled in Hunter College in Yorkville undeniably harbored similar sentiments; they constituted 80 percent to 90 percent of that student body. Poor Jews predominated to the same degree at Brooklyn College, which opened its doors in 1930 to both male and female students in the Midwood section of that borough.<sup>17</sup>

Although most day session students took a complete load of semester courses, in a sense many of them were not exactly “full-time” students. Living at home, commuting to school, they rushed back to the neighborhood and to their places of employment with no time for undergraduate hijinks or even for more serious extracurricular activities. “Around CCNY,” wrote one chronicler of college life in 1929, “there flock no romantic legends. There are no dormitories here.... No voices group under a moonlit elm to sing the glories of the College and the bullfrog on the bank.” The reality was, he observed, “students are here a few hours and they are sucked back into the city from which they come.”<sup>18</sup>

Like their brothers at CCNY, college life was also highly transitory for many young women who attended Hunter. A 1938 college report revealed that such “girls spend more than half as much time in their ‘underground campus’—the subways—as they do in classes, lectures and laboratories.” It was determined that a student who resided in Brooklyn “puts in forty minutes in trains, buses and trolleys for every sixty minutes she attends classes.” During such trips, women students at Hunter and at Brooklyn College reportedly perfected “the art of studying while straphanging.” Chivalry was not alive and well beneath the city streets. “Even with the help of an armful of books and a weary countenance,” none of the Hunter co-eds interviewed “could remember having had a seat offered her more than twice.”<sup>19</sup>

After graduation, those with degrees did not necessarily break out of their old neighborhoods. They often lined up with those who did not go to college in the circumscribed workplaces available to Jews, maintaining the organic ethnic ties. A Brooklyn College man who joined the police force after college recollected that “in the 1930s, when there was a Depression on, the biggest factor in anyone’s life was job security. So I guess it was everyone’s duty at that time to take every civil service exam that came along.” In his case, he became one of 1,200 appointees out of 38,000 college and high school graduates who scored on the exam.<sup>20</sup>

While most of these young people were very content with their levels of Jewish engagement, all centered around their neighborhood hubs and inter-

twined day-to-day associations—a minority of the deeply dedicated wanted more Jewish commitment out of their fellow children of immigrants. Religious leaders of the faith’s several movements, radicals of differing stripes, and Zionists anxious to strengthen their footholds in America—each in his or her own way wanted the streets of Jewish New York, not to mention its college campuses, to be ideological strongholds. While historians have identified specific textures for different neighborhoods—for example, it has been said that the Bronx was for radicals, Borough Park belonged to the Zionists, Williamsburg was the place for the Orthodox—in reality their ideas and approaches did not sink deeply into their streets’ concrete. To the leaders’ frequent consternation, they found that the masses they hoped to lead were only episodically interested in the activists’ messages. Rather, they tendered tentative, intermittent assent to the causes, essentially when the leaders’ messages touched their gut needs and emotions.<sup>21</sup>

On the religious front, youngsters showed much disinterest in synagogue life. For example, the “eighty-three synagogues... and dozens of Hebrew and Yiddish schools” that were crowded into less than two square miles of Brownsville were usually empty. Seats were not filled because few boys, as a memoirist has pointed out, “continued their Jewish education or frequented synagogues past the age of thirteen.” A 1940 neighborhood survey confirmed these impressions. It determined that “only nine percent of adult males in Brownsville attended a synagogue with any regularity.” While the High Holidays witnessed closed stores, empty public schools, and thousands promenading in the afternoon, in an enclave where every informal tie bespoke Jewishness, more folks stood outside the synagogues than prayed within.<sup>22</sup>

Although religious leaders of all Jewish movements bemoaned the sight of empty seats in their sanctuaries, Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan unquestionably proffered the most creative solution to this very troubling dilemma. Although he was not the first to hit on the concept that young people could be attracted to the sanctuary through various ancillary portals, his “Synagogue Center” popularized the strategy that those who came to play might, in time, be convinced to stay to pray. His initial home base was The Jewish Center, founded in 1917 in the then-new, up-and-coming West Side.<sup>23</sup>

The formula called for the translation of the synagogue into “a synagogue center... where all the members of the family would feel at home during the seven days of the week. There they could sing and dance and play...” The notion of the week-long synagogue was now activated. The trick was to sustain that social momentum and to bring participants home as more religiously committed Jews. Israel Levinthal, a Kaplan disciple and, beginning in the 1920s, rabbi at the Brooklyn Jewish Center, believed there was “magic” in this methodology. It would come into play when a “young man, entering the gymnasium class, would notice the announcement on the bulletin board that

on the next evening a meeting would be held in the interest of Jewish refugees or for relief.” With his interest aroused, he would come to that meeting. The chair would announce that on the coming Friday evening, the rabbi would speak on a particular subject—an announcement intended to, again, arouse interest. The young man would then attend the services and, if they appealed to him, he would come again.<sup>24</sup>

This “pray through play” posture became the communal calling card of a string of interwar synagogue centers in New York, from the Jacob H. Schiff Center and Temple Adath Israel in the Grand Concourse region of the Bronx to the Brooklyn and Ocean Parkway Jewish Centers, all of which were tied personally or ideologically to their teacher and leader.<sup>25</sup>

However, for all of Kaplan’s and his followers’ enthusiasm, this endeavor fell short of inculcating staunch religious allegiances. The naysayers who questioned from the outset whether athletes or artists or dancers or music lovers would find their way from these secular Jewish venues to holy precincts surely had a point. Brooklyn rabbi Harry Weiss, for one, believed that those who attended the fun and games part of Jewish life were wont to “feel that... [their] duty towards a Congregation is full performed and the Friday night and Saturday morning services are of necessity neglected.” If anything during the 1930s, with so many people with time on their hands, synagogue centers became even more popular as secular Jewish retreats. From 1931 to 1935, “more than four thousand new members came to use the gymnasium” at the Brooklyn Jewish Center, and others flocked to the many other recreational and cultural activities. But there was no concomitant rise of religious attendance. In the Bronx, Schiff Center officials could speak of four thousand Jews attending High Holiday services, not to mention those who, as always, congregated outside. But during the year it was the same old story of half-empty sanctuaries.<sup>26</sup>

These realities were not lost on Kaplan, who acknowledged in 1935 that “at first I thought if the synagogue were transformed into a center that would house the leisure activities of our people, the problem of Jewish life in this country would be solved.”<sup>27</sup> But such had yet to be proven. Throughout the interwar period, his initiative really only produced one more comfortable venue for Jews to interact with each other. They took their strong neighborhood ties indoors, as powerful ongoing personal relationships were sustained.

Radical groups had greater expectations that their efforts would increase staunch support for their causes among the Jewish rank and file, and they did not have to seek out the neighborhood masses. Their several cooperative apartment endeavors—especially in the Bronx—had brought potential comrades into daily contact with those who preached world-changing ideologies. But even though many of these potential comrades benefited from the environment and were grateful for its social services, they generally did not become activists unless the campaign touched them very personally.

For example, house painter Louis Myerson and his wife Bella were among the original owners of the Sholom Aleichem co-ops on Sedgwick Avenue. In time, nine other family members—siblings and in-laws—joined them. As working-class Jews, they were somewhat distrustful of the capitalist system and were taken with radical rhetoric. The Myersons inculcated an affinity for these values within their three daughters, Helen, Sylvia, and Bess, whom they sent “consecutively” to the two Yiddishist schools on the co-op premises after the neighborhood public schools let out. One “schule” was socialist and the other communist, but the girls hardly learned the differences. They received little clarification at home as, reportedly, Louis Myerson’s “political policy was to participate in everything and commit to nothing.” Bess once quipped that her father joined “the IWO” (the Communist International Workers Organization) “because of its excellent burial program.” He stayed clear of the great debates that roiled the co-op, such as the battle royale that ensued between the communists and socialists, particularly the Labor Zionists, over the 1929 Arab riots in Palestine. The Stalinists backed the Arabs, the Zionists supported the Jews. A biographer of the Myerson family has suggested that Louis’s position—or non position, as it were—was “common among thoughtful moderates,” individuals whom Irving Howe has described as “non-party leftist(s) engaged in cultural activities.”<sup>28</sup>

There was, however, one gut issue that hit home and stirred the Myersons to action. In 1932, a year after the co-op went bankrupt and was sold to private investors, forty tenants were tossed out of their apartments for nonpayment of rent. It was then that the three sisters, surely with parental assent, worked the picket lines as a rent strike, championed by radical leaders, erupted on Sedgwick Avenue. Beyond that, the elders and youngsters alike helped out their neighbors, ensuring that “no coop member ever wandered homeless.”<sup>29</sup>

There certainly were youngsters who were fully swept up with the drama, excitement, and promises of the leftist movements that arose from those Bronx streets—youngsters who dreamed of influencing their fellows and ultimately changing the world. Irving Howe, one of the most iconic of these youths, has recounted how having grown up in the “Jewish slums of the East Bronx.... I wandered into the ranks of the Socialist youth and from then on, all through my teens and twenties, the Movement was my home and passion, the Movement as it ranged through the various left-wing, anti-Communist groups.” Here, too, those of a distinct bent felt secure amid their own kind; these sons and daughters of immigrants lived where “the Jews still formed a genuine community reaching half-unseen into a dozen neighborhoods and a multitude of institutions, within the shadows of which we found protection of a kind.” Notwithstanding this “protective aura,” those youths who ached to be heard needed to earn their street credits with the real laborers of their parents’ generation. “You might be shouting at the top of your lungs against reformism or Stalin’s betrayal,” Howe

would recall, “but for the middle-aged garment worker strolling along Southern Boulevard, you were just a bright and cocky Jewish boy, a talkative little *pisher*.” Only on occasion would they venture out of their home base to preach their gospels to other, often unreceptive groups, such as the tough Irish kids on Fordham Road. They did better talking up social justice issues to poor blacks in Harlem.<sup>30</sup>

The young Daniel Bell, the future social theorist and later a professor of social sciences at Harvard, first learned of socialism at home, as his mother was a member of the Ladies Garment Workers Union, always voted the Socialist Party line, and read *The Jewish Daily Forward* “religiously.” By thirteen, her son was ready to tell the rabbi who had trained him for his bar mitzvah, “I found the truth. I don’t believe in God. I’ll put on *tefillin* (phylacteries) once in memory of my dead father, but that’s all. I’m joining the Young Socialists League.” The rabbi apparently retorted, “Yingle (literally little boy, a cleaned-up version of ‘pisher’), you don’t believe in God. Tell me, you think God cares?” Though divorced from the faith and angered by the rabbi’s retort, Bell would later admit that he gleaned much methodologically from the tradition. Soon, he was applying “the same kind of thinking you learned” in analyzing the Bible or Talmud to “Marx’s Torah.” And as a teenage member of Young Peoples’ Socialist League (YPSL), he and his comrades went from corner to corner on the streets of his Lower East Side neighborhood “with a sort of stepladder and [began] gathering a crowd until the main speaker would come along and talk.” Bell was usually the first one up the ladder and spoke for about ten minutes.<sup>31</sup>

Howe, Bell, and other doctrinaire advocates of many and competing stripes reached their full potential as CCNY students. Their hubs were the alcoves of the school’s cafeteria, where they held sway, ready and anxious to convince all who might pass by of the rightness of their causes, always hopeful of recruiting followers to join them in their on- and off-campus campaigns. This indoor Jewish street possessed many kiosks, each staffed by competing ideologists who engaged in legendary debates with Jewish advocates positioned provocatively in the next alcove. One memoirist has recalled that Alcove #1 was the province of a mix of “right-wing Socialists... to splinters from the Trotskyist left wing” to an even more “bewildering” array of “Austro-Marxists, orthodox Communists, Socialist centrists,” not to mention “all kinds of sympathizers, fellow travelers, and indeterminists.” When these debaters were not battling among themselves—starting with a civil call, “Let’s discuss the situation,” and proceeding into shouting matches—this politically heterogeneous combine was at intellectual combat with those in Alcove #2, the home of the pro-Stalinist Young Communist League, headed by Julius Rosenberg.<sup>32</sup>

For those who took up the cudgels for their deeply felt convictions, the alcove arena was more important than any class. Howe showed his priorities through a “device of checking in at the beginning of a class when a teacher took attendance... and then slipping out to the bathroom and coming back at

the end of the hour and meanwhile spending that hour in the alcove.”<sup>33</sup> Howe and his confreres—which included, among others, Bell (class of 1939), Irving Kristol (1940), and Nathan Glazer (1944)—would there hone skills as debaters and dialecticians, which would hold them in good stead throughout their lives as major American Jewish intellectuals. Indeed, these self-assured men would eventually be lionized, if not revered, as the “New York Intellectuals,” renowned political thinkers and cultural arbitrators even if, over their long careers as writers and social commentators, they altered their views of society’s destiny.<sup>34</sup> Even then, as they held forth from their cafeteria soapboxes, these advocates were voices to reckon with on campus. They were an attraction to many students who gravitated to the alcoves to listen in on a point well struck. “When that happened,” one veteran of these battles has recalled, “a crowd gathered around the contestants, the way kids do, waiting for a fight to explode. But there were no fist fights, even when the provocations seemed unbearable.” However, when the noise and excitement died down—debaters were known to engage one another “at the top of [their ] lungs”—the masses of listeners who did not share the depth of the debaters’ universal concerns drifted away to their worldly pursuits, either to classes or to part-time jobs.<sup>35</sup> According to Kristol, although 85 percent to 90 percent of the students were from working-class Jewish backgrounds that possessed some degree of radicalism in their traditions, “most were passive political.... The active types numbered in the hundreds.”<sup>36</sup>

This endemic passivity was particularly frustrating to those radicals who sought to energize the campus, to take their fights out of the alcoves and into the streets within and beyond CCNY. Future renowned Marxist economist Harry Magdoff was one such instigator. This Bronx-born house painter’s son came from a home environment “in which the class problems—unemployment, seasonal unemployment, negotiations, problems of the union”—were the talk around the kitchen table. His first formal exposure to radical teachings took place at his local Sholom Aleichem school, where the literature of the European left was imparted in Yiddish. Acting on these inculcated beliefs—fostered daily through his reading of the Yiddish press—he was, already as a high school student, agitating among his classmates to take class conflict seriously. So disposed, when he enrolled at CCNY in 1931, he immediately joined Alcove #2, Communist, Social Problems Club, and became an editor of the organization’s magazine *Frontiers* (albeit without college administrative approval). A year later, in 1932, he went off-campus to be part of the inauguration of the National Students League and the Youth League Against War and Fascism. However, Magdoff has admitted that he and his comrades often stood alone. All of his efforts—starting with that unauthorized magazine and culminating with his heated opposition to autocratic CCNY President Robinson—would ultimately lead to his expulsion; he finished his bachelor’s of arts at NYU. The reality was that, while many students were sympathetic to his campaigns, in the end the

vast majority was focused on preparing for careers at a school that was, as this campus activist once put it, “horrendously competitive, terribly competitive in terms of class work.” Moreover, many impoverished students—even those who understood the issues as Magdoff saw them—simply did not have spare time to hang around for rallies and protests when part-time jobs hung over their heads. Still, men like Magdoff soldiered on. As one of his non-Marxist contemporaries at CCNY would later observe, with some degree of admiration: “Communists in the student body, although only a handful... were the most dedicated and aggressive missionaries—challenging teachers and deans whenever the occasion presented itself but concentrating especially and relentlessly on skeptical and/or indifferent fellow students.”<sup>37</sup>

Women radicals at Hunter College were, likewise, disappointed with their rank and file’s unwillingness to fully commit to their causes. The most dedicated members of its Young Communist League endeavored to do it all. They traveled long distances back and forth from home, held part-time jobs, distributed party literature, solicited names on petitions, perhaps sold the *Daily Worker* on Manhattan street corners, and attended interminable political meetings on campus, even as veterans of their struggles have averred that they were sure not to miss classes. For notwithstanding their activism, and like so many other students around them, they, too, in the end, sought to earn the credits required for a teaching degree. Most other Hunter students—including many who agreed with the leaders’ feelings about changing society—simply neither could, nor would, juggle home, job, social, and educational demands. There were also those at the school who might have taken to the streets but held back because of reasonable fears that if word got out that they were party-affiliated “troublemakers,” they might lose their part-time jobs. Looking even further down the road, aspiring teachers understood that if the Board of Education’s Board of Examiners designated them as a “potential threat to the school system,” they would be denied their coveted pedagogue’s license. The many CCNY men in its education department may well have harbored the same strong apprehensions. Conflicted, the majority of Hunter students remained on the sidelines at critical protest moments.<sup>38</sup>

Looking back at his and his comrades’ efforts to create ideological strongholds in colleges in the 1930s, socialist Hal Draper, who first spoke out at Brooklyn College and remained with radical movements long enough to link up with New Left operatives in the 1960s, has suggested that during his time at the college, only 1 percent joined the student groups. But their influence, he proudly believed, was transcendent, with “concentric rings of influence embracing different portions of the student body.” There were those who would have become more involved had they the time. Others supported particular campaigns when the issues touched home. Perhaps, in this regard, the National Students League and other such leftist organizations found their widest and

staunchest support at CCNY, Hunter, and Brooklyn, in 1932, when they championed the student bodies' ultimate gut issue: their desire to maintain free tuition. As just one sign of the vitality and pervasiveness of this protest, the league was able to turn out some three thousand CCNY night students, arguably the least politically involved cohort on campus, for its 23 May rally. Here activism, in fact, led to city hall's revocation of its tuition plan. Draper has also argued that among those who never showed up at meetings or drives and kept solely to their books and jobs, "even while doing so they could not help absorbing the climate of ideas which pervaded the political life of the campus as a part of the larger society."<sup>39</sup>

Notwithstanding these claims of cultural suzerainty over college life and attitudes, many CCNY students were totally indifferent to the radicals' causes—like those "partisans" ensconced in the sports fan's alcove who "fought over the relative merits of the Dodgers and the Giants" baseball teams. There were also those who actively antagonized the leftists on campus.<sup>40</sup> The most aggressive opponents were those enrolled in the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC), a group that, like all organizations at the school, was made up predominantly of Jews who hailed from the very same neighborhoods as the socialists and communists. Explosive contretemps at CCNY between radicals and ROTC men evidenced that New York's Jewish neighborhoods were producing young people who possessed both "revolutionary" and "patriotic" proclivities.<sup>41</sup>

Meanwhile, primarily on the streets of interwar Brooklyn, committed Zionists strove to construct their own ideological strongholds, building on an early heyday of efflorescence that had begun in the late 1910s. Early in the immigrant generation, the Jewish national movement had great difficulties gaining traction. The European assertion that the promises and bounties of the emancipation were ultimately illusions and that the only place where Jews could be free and secure was in their ancient homeland, did not resonate with most downtowners. However, in the early decades of the twentieth century, first under the auspices of the Federation of American Zionists and subsequently within the Zionist Organization of America—and spurred on by the advocacy of the famous jurist Louis D. Brandeis—an attractive new definition of Zionism evolved, tailored for both first- and second-generation American Jews. Often referred to as "Palestinianism," it emphasized American Jews' obligation—as good philanthropists—to assist their European brethren who were building up the settlement in the homeland. No less important, it augured to provide acculturating Jews, who were perhaps estranged from transplanted forms of Judaism, with a new ethnic identity fully in line with the American ideology of cultural pluralism. That teaching stressed that in a heterogeneous society, a good American had to retain a connectedness with his or her group's traditions and future. Studying about Zion and Zionism, attending the movement's rallies, and learning Hebrew were among the most warranted activities.<sup>42</sup>

Palestinianism first crested during World War I, especially when in 1917 the international Jewish movement was the recipient of the Balfour Declaration, the crucial document that would serve as the basis for the British Mandate over Palestine. In the 1920s, with the guarantee of a national home in place, the challenge for the most committed Zionists was to sustain the movement's momentum toward the goal of creating a strong and enduring modern Hebrew culture within second-generation communities.

The best place to imbibe these crucial lessons was within a small string of Jewish day schools that sprung up in several Brooklyn neighborhoods. At the Etz Hayim-Hebrew Institute of Boro Park or the Shulamith School for Girls or the Crown Heights Yeshiva and the Yeshivah of Flatbush, parents could enroll their sons and daughters in modern Jewish educational settings dedicated “to engender[ing] in them a love of their people and its cultural heritage and a strong attachment to the Zionist way of life,” even as they upheld modern versions of religious Orthodoxy. For its neighborhood supporters—primarily the parents who paid tuitions—their fondest hopes were that these integrative institutions would become “a training ground for future leaders in Jewish life both in America and Israel.” Some of these youngsters would transcend Palestinianism and find their destiny ultimately in the State of Israel. More would be among the best American Zionists. These young people spoke Hebrew and read Hebrew books and magazines, promoted Jewish nationalism as a critical means of group identification in this country, and, of course, were deeply concerned with the fate of the Jewish state.<sup>43</sup>

However, here too most neighborhood youths were neither intrigued nor engaged in this Jewish expression. Certainly, American Zionism in Brooklyn and elsewhere in the city received an additional boost in the 1930s, when the public school system, in a remarkable turnaround from its long history of undermining Jewish identity, accepted Hebrew as a Regents foreign language. Still, as of 1940, the some 3,200 junior high and high school students who opted for this course of study—seven Brooklyn schools offered the subject—and presumably also took part in the Zionist co-curricular Hebrew Culture Club, constituted less than 5 percent of Jewish enrollment in city schools. And not all of the students who enrolled were Jews.<sup>44</sup>

The consummate reality was that for all the efforts of those engaged in promoting Jewish ideologies on the streets of New York, “very few Jewish youth,” a survey in 1940 concluded, “belong to clubs connected with their religion.” And the same could be said for affiliation with radical groups. The report continued: “Although the Young People’s League of the United Synagogue is reported to have 10,000 members in New York City, the Youth Zionist movement other thousands, and there are smaller groups of Jewish youth organized to promote understanding of Jewish traditions and religion, the total number of members hardly makes an impression on the estimated nearly one-third of a million young

Jews under 25 who live in New York.” Perhaps the most salient finding was, seemingly as always, that what these young men and women enjoyed most, is “just hanging around” with their closest friends.<sup>45</sup>

Throughout this era, it seems, the most successful controllers of ideological turf—more successful than the advocates for the all-purpose American synagogue or the radicals or the Zionists—were strictly the Orthodox Jews who maintained enclaves in their parts of Brooklyn. They were a remarkable set of first- and second-generation Jews who had avoided the lures of Americanization and the calls for cultural—if not political—change that had captivated the vast majority of their fellow newcomers and their children. Instead, they maintained a strictly separatist social profile. They surely stood out on the neighborhood scene. In Williamsburg, amid the “dance halls and poolrooms for the young,” there lived an aggregation of “really *baale-battishe* [religiously upstanding] Jews and many *talmidei chachomim* [truly learned individuals].” More important, their youngsters tended to follow suit. A comparable pocket of piety could be found in that same Brownsville where most Jews stayed clear of religious life. Minorities of highly observant Jews also called East New York and Bensonhurst their homes.<sup>46</sup>

The focus and pride of their efforts was their yeshivas, most notably the Mesivta Torah Vodaath. It was the most comprehensive of five borough schools for boys and young men that placed the highest premium on the transmission of traditional Torah and Talmud learning, evinced only marginal interest in modern Jewish subjects such as the study of modern Hebrew, and frowned on the teaching of Zionism. These curricular features, as we have previously indicated, were emblematic of those modern nationalist day schools in their own sections of Brooklyn. A similar mission motivated the leaders of the Yeshiva Chaim Berlin, in neighboring Brownsville. It, too, “aspire[d] to reproduce in this country,” as one contemporary student of these Brooklyn institutions observed, “the old type of observant God-fearing Jew devoted to the ancient ideals of learning and piety [who would] exhibit the diligence, sincerity and other-worldliness of the traditional *yeshiva bochur*... extreme and uncompromising in its Orthodoxy.”

These schools’ protocol was to discourage students, as much as possible, from pursuing secular training beyond the high school years that state law required. If their disciples really desired a college degree—to help them earn more money—they were directed to attend Brooklyn College at night. There they would endure fewer challenges to their faith’s ideas, and most evening students had no time for secular protests. Nowhere else in this country—not even on the Lower East Side where, until World War I, religious separatism maintained tenuous footholds—were so many young Jews studying more of the Torah and less of the secular world in such a programmed way.<sup>47</sup>

While these religious hubs did well to hold on to many of their youngsters, still they were a limited population. And for all their efforts at isolation, there were young people who drifted or who moved deliberately away from their

parents' worlds. Some became friendly with the also small day school crowd of young men and women; Yeshiva officials wanted them to stay separate from these more modern students. Others pursued college educations by day; but were still quite observant. Finally, other scions of the borough's faithful Jews broke almost completely from traditional religious values. As recounted in one bittersweet family chronicle, a pious Williamsburg family had one son and a daughter who followed in parental footsteps, as "good and upright" second-generation Jews. But a second son reportedly wanted to become a "man of the world." As his still-observant brother would later tell an investigator, after his return from World War I, "he began to mock some of our customs and criticized our rigid observance of the traditional laws.... It was only a question of time until he would go his own way."<sup>48</sup>

While these communities suffered attrition, their numbers soon grew exponentially, and their neighborhoods' commitments to resistance would be reinvigorated and intensified. During and after World War II, Holocaust survivors and refugees from Soviet-dominated eastern Europe who made their way to the United States gravitated to these indigenous Orthodox enclaves. There they would begin their American experiences as Jews who found homes in this country but who endeavored—with a drive that exceeded that of the devout here before them—to live socially and culturally apart from secular environments. There, with their values and perspectives intact, they would strengthen ideological strongholds.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Jeffrey S. Gurock, *When Harlem Was Jewish, 1870–1930* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 164.

<sup>2</sup>Deborah Dash Moore, *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), especially chs.2 and 5.

<sup>3</sup>This article is part of a book-length treatment of New York Jews from 1920s–2010, to be published in a three-volume history of Jews in the metropolis, *City of Promises* (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup>William Poster, "'Twas a Dark Night in Brownsville: Pitkin Avenue's Self-Made Generation," *Commentary* (May 1950): 458–464.

<sup>5</sup>Alfred Kazin, *A Walker in the City* (New York: Harcourt, 1951), 11–12, 37–38.

<sup>6</sup>The estimates on Jewish percentages of the population are based on Horowitz and Kaplan's examination of numbers for the so-called "Fordham" section of the Bronx, which constitutes a larger slice of the borough than just the areas surrounding Davidson and Jerome avenues and West Fordham Road, which was Schayes's turf. For both 1930 and 1940 statistics, see C. Morris Horowitz and Lawrence Kaplan, *The Jewish Population of the New York Area, 1900–1975* (New York: Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, 1959), 181.

<sup>7</sup>Phone interview with Dolph Schayes, 5 December 2008.

<sup>8</sup>Ira Rosen, "The Glory That was Charlotte Street," *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* (7 October 1979): 51.

<sup>9</sup>Fred Ferretti, "After 70 Years, South Bronx Street is a Dead End," *The New York Times* (21 October 1977): 51; Beth Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression: Uncertain Promises*

(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 97; Lillian Elkin, "Memoir," American Jewish Committee Oral History Collection, New York Public Library, New York.

<sup>10</sup>On the creation of Orchard Beach, see Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Knopf, 1975), 365–367. On Jews using the beaches, see Wenger, 58.

<sup>11</sup>Stephen Steinberg, *The Academic Melting Pot: Catholics and Jews in American Higher Education* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1974), 20–21; Marcia Graham Synott, *The Half-Opened Door: Discrimination and Admissions at Harvard, Yale and Princeton, 1900–1970* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 158, 195.

<sup>12</sup>Heywood Broun and George Britt, *Christians Only: A Study in Prejudice* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1931), 107; Felix Morrow, "Higher Learning on Washington Square," *Menorah Journal* (Autumn, 1930): 353; David Hollinger, "'Two NYUs and the 'Obligation of Universities to the Social Order' in the Great Depression," in *The University and the City*, ed. Thomas Bender (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 255. On NYU's Depression-era reversal of policies, see Bender, *New York Intellect: A History of Intellectual Life in New York from 1750 to the Beginnings of Our Own Time* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 291.

<sup>13</sup>Hollinger, 256; Morrow, 348; Broun and Britt, 106–107; Bender, 291. See also Synott, 19, and Harold Wechsler, *The Qualified Student: A History of Selective College Admission in America* (New York: John Wiley, 1977), 133.

<sup>14</sup>Morrow, 348–349.

<sup>15</sup>The information on NYU tuition and fees was derived from the school's catalogue for 1923–1924 and 1933–1934, provided by the NYU archive on 15 December 2008. My thanks to Laura Joanne Zeccardi for her assistance. On earning power during the Depression, see Nathan Glazer's memoir comments in Joseph Dorman, *Arguing the World: The New York Intellectuals in Their Own Words* (New York: Free Press, 2000), 43–44. See also Bernard Rosenberg and Ernest Goldstein, eds., *Creators and Disturbers: Reminiscences by Jewish Intellectuals of New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 274 on workers' wages.

<sup>16</sup>A.M. Rosenthal, "Of Course, It Is all Quite Obvious As to Why I Am So Moved," in *City at the Center: A Collection of Writings by CCNY Alumni and Faculty*, ed. Betty Rizzo and Barry Wallenstein (New York: City College of New York, 1983), 67.

<sup>17</sup>Steinberg, 9; L. Shands, "The Cheder on the Hill," *Menorah Journal* (March 1929): 266–267; Thomas Evans Coulton, *A City College in Action: Struggles and Achievement at Brooklyn College, 1930–1955* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955), 8, 18.

<sup>18</sup>Shands, 269.

<sup>19</sup>"Subway a 'Campus' for Many at Hunter," *The New York Times* (2 October 1938): 54; Ruth Jacknow Markowitz, *My Daughter the Teacher: Jewish Teachers in the New York City Schools* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 27.

<sup>20</sup>Louis Weiser, "Memoir," American Jewish Committee Oral History Collection, New York Public Library, New York.

<sup>21</sup>For the vision of ideologists setting tones and textures for neighborhoods, see, for example, Moore, 64, and Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1963), 161. See also Jenna Weissman Joselit, *New York's Jewish Jews: The Orthodox Community in the Interwar Years* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 16–17.

<sup>22</sup>Gerald Sorin, *The Nurturing Neighborhood: The Brownsville Boys Club and Jewish Community in Urban America* (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 16. Nettie Pauline McGill, "Some Characteristics of Jewish Youth in New York City," *Jewish Social Service Quarterly* 14 (1938): 266–267.

<sup>23</sup>See Gurock, *Judaism's Encounter with American Sports* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 66.

<sup>24</sup>Israel Herbert Levinthal, "The Value of the Center to the Synagogue," *United Synagogue Recorder* (June 1926): 19.

- <sup>25</sup>On the rise of synagogue centers in New York during the 1920s, see Moore, 140–143.
- <sup>26</sup>Gurock, *Judaism's Encounter*, 70–71; Wenger, 186.
- <sup>27</sup>Wenger, 187.
- <sup>28</sup>Susan Dworkin, *Miss America, 1945: Bess Myerson's Own Story* (New York: Newmarket Press, 1947), 13–17.
- <sup>29</sup>Dworkin, 14–15.
- <sup>30</sup>Irving Howe, “A Memoir of the Thirties,” in his *Steady Work: Essays in the Politics of Democratic Radicalism, 1953–1966* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966), 349–353. See also Gerald Sorin, *Irving Howe: A Life of Passionate Dissent* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 11.
- <sup>31</sup>Dorman, 33–34, 36, 39.
- <sup>32</sup>Meyer Liben, “CCNY: A Memoir” in *City in the Center: A Collection of Writings by CCNY Alumni and Faculty* (New York: City College of New York, 1983), 48; Sorin, *Irving Howe*, 17.
- <sup>33</sup>Dorman, 45.
- <sup>34</sup>As Wenger has pointed out (214 n. 6), the attitudes and changing perspectives of the “New York Intellectuals” have been favored with much scholarly discussion. See, for example, Terry A. Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals, Partisan Review and Its Circle* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986); Alan M. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); and Alexander Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and their World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
- <sup>35</sup>Dorman, 46; Liben, 48.
- <sup>36</sup>Dorman, 44–45; Liben, 51–52.
- <sup>37</sup>Cohen, 24, 27–28, 274–275, 350n. 16; Christopher Phelps, “An Interview with Harry Magdoff—Co-Editor of the ‘Monthly Review,’” *Monthly Review* (May 1999), online edition. See also Morris Freedman, “CCNY Days,” in *City in the Center*, 65.
- <sup>38</sup>Markowitz, 52–54, 60–61.
- <sup>39</sup>Hal Draper, “The Student Movement in the Thirties,” in *As We Saw the Thirties: Essays on Social and Political Movements of a Decade*, ed. Rita J. Simon (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1967), 182–188. On the tuition crisis, see also, Cohen, 68–71.
- <sup>40</sup>James Traub, *City on a Hill: Testing the American Dream at City College* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995), 39.
- <sup>41</sup>“Four Students Seized at Military Drill,” *The New York Times* (18 May 1940): 8.
- <sup>42</sup>For an overview of the early trials of Zionism in America and the emergence of a distinctive American form, see Naomi W. Cohen, *American Jews and the Zionist Idea* (New York: Ktav, 1975), 1–24 and Melvin I. Urofsky, *American Zionism from Herzl to the Holocaust* (New York: Anchor Press, 1975), 43–152.
- <sup>43</sup>Noah Nardi, “A Survey of Jewish Day Schools in America,” *Jewish Education* (September 1944): 22–23; Nardi, “The Growth of Jewish Day Schools in America,” *Jewish Education* (November 1948): 25.
- <sup>44</sup>Judah Lapson, “A Decade of Hebrew in the High Schools of New York,” *Jewish Education* (April 1941): 34–45.
- <sup>45</sup>McGill and E.N. Matthews, *The Youth of New York City* (New York: Macmillan, 1940), 241, 334.
- <sup>46</sup>On strict observance in Williamsburg, see George Kranzler, *Williamsburg: A Jewish Community in Transition* (New York: Feldheim, 1961), 17–18, 214–215.
- <sup>47</sup>Meir Kimmel, “The History of Yeshivat Rabbi Chaim Berlin,” *Shevilei Ha-Hinnuch* (Fall 1948): 51–54; Alter Landesman, *Brownsville: The Birth, Development and Passing of a Jewish Community in New York* (New York: Bloch, 1969), 234–235; William B. Helmreich, *The World of the Yeshiva: An Intimate Portrait of Orthodox Jewry* (New York: The Free Press, 1982), 33–34.
- <sup>48</sup>Kranzler, 213–215.