
New States

ALASKA *

Jewish Population and its History

ALASKA, the largest and second youngest state, had the smallest and most widely dispersed Jewish population of any of the fifty states. Of the estimated 300 to 400 civilian Jewish residents, more than half lived in the two largest cities, Anchorage and Fairbanks, which were adjacent to the larger military bases. But there were also one or more Jewish families in Juneau, Sitka, Nome, Seward, Tielke, Skagway, Ketchikan, Cordova, Hoonah, Haines, Palmer, Fox, Dillingham, Beth El, Valdez, and Petersburg. Jewish military personnel in Alaska outnumbered civilian Jews by nearly two to one.

Before 1940 there were hardly more than 100 Jews in Alaska. Widely scattered from the Panhandle in the south to the Seward Peninsula facing Siberia in the northwest, the handful of merchants, government employees, engineers, cannerymen, fishermen, and scientists had no organized Jewish community or religious life of any kind. Yet they gave enthusiastic support to the plan proposed in 1938 by Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes to settle Jewish refugees from Nazi Europe in Alaska.

When Alaska became a cornerstone of American defense during World War II and the subsequent cold war, the Jewish residents of Alaska acquitted themselves magnificently in helping to organize religious and hospitality programs for the hundreds of Jews who arrived after 1941 with the American troops and civilian construction workers. Robert Bloom of Fairbanks and Jacob Gottstein of Anchorage and their wives made their homes headquarters for all Jewish military and civilian personnel. The Blooms, who came to Alaska at the turn of the century, were hosts at the first public *seider* in Alaska, held in the Fairbanks Masonic hall in 1942 with the aid of supplies flown in by JWB. Jewish army chaplains who arrived in 1943 were the first rabbis to officiate in Alaska.

After World War II there were two accretions to the Jewish population. One came from demobilized servicemen and civilian personnel assigned to military installations who decided to try their luck in Alaska, and from a few Jewish professional men who came as government employees working on technical projects and in schools. One of the latter was Isaac Knoll, the only licensed and practicing Jewish physician in Alaska, in Sitka since 1947. The second group was the so-called 59ers, young Americans who headed for Alaska after statehood. Ronald Jacobowitz of Detroit headed the first party of home-steaders to reach Alaska after it was admitted to the Union in June 1958.

* For meaning of abbreviations, see p. 359.

One of Alaska's first two senators was Ernest Gruening, scion of an old New York Jewish family, but he was said not to regard himself as a Jew. As territorial governor from 1939 to 1953 he did much to prepare Alaska for statehood. On the eve of statehood Zachary Loussac, who came to Alaska in 1907, gave Anchorage its public-library building, which was named for him. A former mayor, he had been voted Alaska's outstanding citizen in 1946. Samuel Applebaum, a Chicagoan who had lived in Alaska since 1898, operated mines in Flat and Otter Creek. He lived in a town he named Beth El, about 190 miles away from Mount Applebaum. The only residents of Tiekel, a town near Valdez, were George Loewe and his wife, who for 14 years had operated a road house for trappers and fishermen.

Other prominent Alaskan Jews were Herbert Greenberg, who built Alaska's first radio station in 1922; Edward Seidenverg, mayor of Nome in the 1930s; William Gross, who opened the first movie houses in the territory in the early 1900s; Isador Bayles, a merchant in Anchorage; Nathan I. Gerson of Fairbanks; Rex Swartz, a physician, who served as mayor of Nome before World War II, and the Goldstein family of Juneau.

Robert Goldstein and his wife, who came to Juneau in 1885 from California, were probably the first permanent Jewish settlers in Alaska. Eight Goldstein children were raised in Juneau. Charles, the eldest, was the city's leading merchant for 50 years and headed the local JWB committee. His brother Isadore served six years as mayor and established Evergreen Bowl, the first children's playground in Alaska.

Another pioneer was Solomon Ripinski, a Polish Jew, who established a government school at Chilkat in the 1880s. The town of Haines grew up around a general store he opened on the Chilkat Peninsula. The 3,400-foot Mount Ripinski, in the St. Elias range, is his memorial. A leading advocate of Alaskan home rule, he was a delegate to the Skagway convention for Alaskan representation in the Congress of the United States.

The Goldsteins and Ripinski were among the Jews who came to Alaska between 1897 and 1900, the period of the Klondike gold rush and the subsequent mineral discoveries around Nome. The Jews who stayed on after the gold fields petered out tried to create a semblance of Jewish living around 1905, when a short-lived congregation was established in Fairbanks under the leadership of Robert Bloom. In 1907 it acquired the Fairbanks Jewish cemetery, the only Jewish burial ground in Alaska. It had only six graves, because most Jews who died in Alaska were buried elsewhere.

Community Activity

By the end of the war JWB committees in Fairbanks, Anchorage, and Ketchikan had become the foci of a flourishing Jewish community life. Religious services for military personnel were attended by Jewish civilians who for the first time could send their children to a religious school. After 1950 the USO-JWB worker and the Jewish chaplain assigned to the Alaskan Air Command helped to stimulate civilian Jewish activity throughout Alaska, their services and programs for military personnel at Fairbanks and Anchorage and at the remotest air fields and radar and weather stations being open

to Jewish civilians as well. For Passover and Rosh ha-Shanah Jewish civilians flew into Anchorage, and the scattered Jewish residents began to feel like a community.

In 1942 the wife of a Jewish chaplain founded a Hadassah chapter in Anchorage. In the same year the foundation was laid for a permanent Jewish community council in Fairbanks and Anchorage.

RELIGION AND EDUCATION

In the second half of 1958 a civilian congregation, Beth Shalom, was formed by 25 Jews in Anchorage, and an auxiliary of the City of Hope was organized. Beth Shalom was not yet affiliated with any congregational union. Services were held in private homes and mimeographed sheets were used as makeshift prayerbooks. Through the efforts of the *Connecticut Jewish Ledger*, funds were raised to provide the congregation with a Torah Scroll.

The only Jewish school was still the one directed by the Jewish chaplain for children of military personnel, but some civilian children also attended. In 1959 this school was the scene of Alaska's first *bat mitzvah*. Kosher food was not yet obtainable in Alaska but some Jews had it shipped in from Seattle. A supply of such foods as well as Jewish books and literature for military personnel, was provided by JWB.

History of the Purchase of Alaska

Few Jews in mid-20th-century Alaska knew of the part played by Jews in the United States' purchase of Alaska in 1867 and the subsequent development of Alaska's vast resources.

In the 1850s and 1860s San Francisco Jews had already developed extensive commercial ties with the Russian American Company, which had a virtual monopoly on Alaskan trade. Fur dealers Herman Liebes and A. Wasserman were pioneers in importing sealskins. J. M. Oppenheim Co., London's biggest fur house, numbered among its California agents Jewish traders who had visited Alaska and knew at first hand its potential wealth. Ships of the Jewish-owned San Francisco Ice Company regularly carried ice imported from the Russian monopoly. To save Alaska from possible British capture during the Crimean War, a Russian diplomat suggested in 1853 a fictitious sale of the territory to the Jewish company.

While historians differed as to the real motives for the sale of Alaska, there was substantial agreement that the efforts of San Francisco fur syndicates to buy out the Russian American Company was a factor in bringing about the purchase. Louis Goldstone, who had visited Alaska several times as an agent for California fur houses, came back in 1865 with information that the Russians were ready to sell out and that they preferred an American company. Goldstone's employers quickly formed the California Fur Company and engaged as their Washington lobbyist Cornelius Cole, a senator from California in 1866. In pressing his clients' offer, Cole had the advantage of a boyhood friendship with Secretary of State William H. Seward, who found Cole's lobbying helpful in the secret negotiations for the acquisition of all of Alaska.

John E. Ballaine, Alaskan pioneer and founder of the town of Seward,

quoted Cole as having said in 1915 that "the original and most active mover in the plan to buy Alaska after the Civil War was an enterprising Jewish-American promoter and fur trader named Philip [sic] Goldstone of San Francisco."

Writing in the *Seattle Jewish Transcript* for May 22, 1936, Ballaine attributed to Cole the statement that Goldstone and his associates "conceived the idea of buying Alaska outright" when their efforts to succeed to the rights of the Russian American Company were blocked by the British-controlled Hudson's Bay Company. According to Ballaine, Cole said the motives of Goldstone and his associates "were frankly commercial . . . but they rendered a patriotic service to the nation which we are only beginning to appreciate."

Commercial and Trade Developments

Soon after Alaska became American territory on March 30, 1867, another syndicate, largely controlled by San Francisco Jewish businessmen familiar with Alaskan commercial prospects, organized Hutchinson, Kohl and Co., which bought from the Russian American Company its entire stock of goods as well as its trading posts, warehouses, wharves, and ships. Lewis Gerstle and his brother-in-law, Louis Sloss, were the key figures in this firm. A company agent was aboard the government transport carrying the American officials who took possession of Alaska on October 1, 1867. Also on board was Benjamin Levi, whose obituary in the *American Israelite* in 1882 credited him with having hauled down the Russian flag and hoisted the Stars and Stripes when the formal transfer of sovereignty took place at Sitka. Levi later went into business at Wrangell. Samuel Sussman, who arrived early in 1868, became resident manager at Kodiak for Hutchinson, Kohl.

Ownership of the former Russian installations and control of ships freighting supplies between California and Alaska gave the company the inside track in the race for commercial supremacy in Alaska. In 1869 the company reorganized as the Alaska Commercial Company, an enterprise destined to become one of the great mercantile institutions of the west and a decisive power in Alaskan affairs for a generation.

Seeking a monopoly on seal hunting in the Pribilof Islands, the new company became the target of bitter attacks by corporate and individual rivals who did not scruple to use antisemitism. Some of the competition, however, was Jewish, notably the Alaska Traders Protective Association and Louis Goldstone. The latter fought a long but futile battle to prevent Congress from granting the Gerstle-Sloss interests a 20-year exclusive lease, giving it the right to take up to 100,000 seals a year from Alaskan waters. In two decades the company returned to the United States treasury more than the \$7,200,000 paid for Alaska.

The Gerstle River in Alaska is named for Lewis Gerstle. Responsible for popularizing the use of sealskins, Gerstle and his associates developed steamboat transportation and financed some of Alaska's first mining ventures. The Guggenheims became interested in Alaskan mines when the Gerstle and Guggenheim families were joined in marriage.

Letters containing news of the Klondike discovery of gold reached the out-

side world early in 1897, but the real rush to the Klondike did not begin until one of Gerstle's steamers docked in San Francisco with \$750,000 in gold aboard. The Alaska Commercial Company's line of river boats between Nome and Dawson on the Yukon River carried thousands of goldseekers and tons of their supplies and equipment. A number of early Jewish settlers in Alaska came originally as employees of the Gerstle company. Although its monopolistic practices were bitterly criticized and it was often charged with discouraging new settlers, the company did much for native health and education and helped to open up new industries.

Among the independent traders, merchants, promoters, speculators, gamblers, saloonkeepers, and fortune hunters that flocked to Alaska in 1867 were a number of venturesome Jews. The first issue of the *Sitka Times* (September 19, 1868) mentioned David Schirpser, who arrived in May 1867. By 1868 he owned general stores at 16 points. A kinsman, Herman Schirpser, was Kodiak's postmaster for several years before his death in 1873. Isaac Bergman, Sitka's first butcher, was elected an alderman in the territory's first election in 1868. Sam Storer was Sitka's acting mayor in 1869. Benjamin Levy established Alaska's first brewery. Other early settlers at Sitka were J. A. Manase, tobacconist; Lazar Caplan, saloonkeeper; Sam Goldstein, merchant; William Phillipson, Henry Friede, Albert Hahn, Theodore Haltern, and Henry Heitman.

Because Sitka was Alaska's chief commercial center and only harbor until the mid-1870s, most of the first Jewish settlers established themselves there. But a few also found their way to Wrangell and Kodiak. One traveler reported meeting C. Sheinefelt, manager of a trading post at Unalaska in the 1870s, and Bill Levy, a miner, at Cassiar.

Travelers who left records of their visits to Alaska in the 1860s and 1870s often described the Jews there in uncomplimentary terms. One of these was Emil Teichman, agent of a Jewish fur company, whose diary, a *Journey to Alaska in the Year 1868* (published in 1925), also revealed that Jewish religious services were held in a warehouse in Sitka as early as 1868.

When Lazar Caplan, owner of Caplan's Billiard Saloon in Sitka, visited San Francisco in 1869, the San Francisco Jewish paper, the *Hebrew*, quoted him as saying there were then 14 Jewish residents in Sitka, including four families. He described the community's *seder*, at which *matzot* shipped from San Francisco had been used, and told of plans to organize a congregation. A year later the same paper published a letter from A. Levy, also of Sitka, protesting against the conference of Reform rabbis in Philadelphia in 1869. "Let them know," he wrote, "that there are Jews close to the North Pole . . . who will never be converted, not even by the Jewish rabbis who held the above-mentioned conference in Philadelphia." The *Jewish Messenger*, in New York, also published correspondence in 1870 from subscribers in Alaska.

When the *American Israelite*, in Cincinnati, proposed in the 1880s that the new Russian Jewish immigrants be "bundled off to Alaska," it did not foresee that three generations later some of these immigrants and their descendants would have laid the foundation for a Jewish community, small but destined to grow, of a 49th state.

HAWAII *

HAWAII became the 50th state in the United States on August 21, 1959, after having been a territory for 61 years. Before then it had been an independent kingdom and then a republic.

Hawaii is an archipelago—a group of islands, reefs, and shoals—stretching 1,600 miles from northwest to southeast in the Pacific Ocean. The central group of eight islands, only seven of which are inhabited, are about 2,100 miles southwest of San Francisco. The area of the populated islands is 6,435 square miles.

The population of Hawaii was slightly under 600,000, excluding military personnel estimated at 40,000. The racial background was estimated as follows: Caucasian 30 per cent; Japanese 32 per cent; Hawaiian and part Hawaiian 17 per cent; Filipino 11 per cent; Chinese 6 per cent, and others 4 per cent.

Jewish Population and Communal Activity

There were some 300 Jewish families—more than 1,000 persons in all—in Hawaii, nearly all of whom lived in Honolulu and most of whom had come to Hawaii less than 20 years earlier.

Jewish life in Honolulu was centered around Temple Emanu-El, which received its charter from the territory of Hawaii in 1938 under the name of Honolulu Jewish Community. It was reorganized in 1949, when Barnett Sapiro was elected president. He was succeeded in 1950 by Bernard H. Levinson. James Zukerkorn was chairman of the temple's budget and finance committee during Levinson's tenure as president. The first full-time rabbi was Francis Hevesi, formerly chief rabbi of Budapest, who came to Hawaii in 1951 and served for ten months until his death in 1952. He was succeeded by Alexander Segel, from 1952 to 1958, and Roy A. Rosenberg.

Temple Emanu-El was a Reform congregation and joined the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1952. Its new building, at 2550 Nuuanu Avenue (to become 2550 Pali Highway) on 1½ acres of land, was due to be completed in April 1960. It was to have a sanctuary seating 200 persons and a social hall seating 300 more. The facilities were to include a rabbi's study, general office, library, seven classrooms, and a kitchen. There were plans for four additional classrooms to be built later.

Besides conducting religious services, the temple operated a religious school for approximately 80 children and sponsored forums and adult classes on subjects of Jewish interest.

The membership was about 105 families. Inter-marriage in temple families was about 15 per cent. It was considerably larger in non-temple families.

Other Jewish organizations in Hawaii were the sisterhood of the temple, affiliated with the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, the men's club, and the Hawaii Jewish Welfare Fund.

* For meaning of abbreviations, see p. 359.

The Hawaii armed-services committee of JWB had as its chairman Calvin M. Wishna. The navy chaplain was Jason Edelstein.

The Jews of Hawaii were from the start well-integrated in the life of the community. They included doctors, lawyers, accountants, educators, merchants, manufacturers, contractors, salesmen, clerks, government employees, newspapermen, insurance men, architects, and engineers. The president of Temple Emanu-El was also the president of the Rotary Club of Waikiki.

The rabbi of Temple Emanu-El, a Rotarian, exchanged pulpits with clergymen of other faiths and spoke frequently before non-Jewish groups.

One of Hawaii's most distinguished Jews was Max Levine, chief of the bureau of laboratories of the department of health. He was a trustee of Temple Emanu-El and a member of its choir, vice-chairman of the Hawaii Jewish Welfare Fund, and vice chairman of the Hawaii chapter of World Brotherhood.

There had never been a *mohel*, a kosher butcher, or a *mikweh* in Hawaii, but some of the supermarkets stocked packaged kosher meats and other kosher foods.

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