Epilogue

World War II and the Beginning of the End for the Jewish Fraternity System

The entrance of the United States into World War II paradoxically came almost as a relief to leaders of the American Jewish community. For years, and particularly since the outbreak of the War in 1939, they had agonized over the triumph of Nazism while fearing to speak out lest they bring harm to themselves and fulfill the antisemitic charge that the Jews were fomenting war. Large segments of the population and the Congress had been staunchly isolationist. Now, American Jews could join their fellow citizens of all faiths in fully and patriotically opposing the Axis foe.

Half a dozen members of Zeta Beta Tau and Phi Epsilon Pi, along with other young Jewish men, had been unable to wait and traveled to Canada in order to enlist in His Majesty's forces. Their comrades soon followed, voluntarily or involuntarily. With the draft age lowered from 21 to 18, a majority of college-aged men doing military service, and most of their chapter houses taken over by the Armed Forces for the duration of the war, fraternity life as it had been known on the American campus virtually ceased to function. Sororities were less depleted by the war than the men's groups, although their journals are filled with stories of members serving in some capacity, including as WACs, WAVEs, and nurses at the front. For the most part, however, they discontinued most of their usual activities, turning their energies to supporting the general war effort as well as their individual boyfriends and husbands in any way they could.

A rash of hasty marriages, resulting in a wife who had to follow her serviceman husband to bases around the country, brought an end to many a college and sorority career. On the other hand, the wartime shortage of men served as a window of opportunity, bringing unprece-
dented professional and technical advancement for college-trained women and opening the portals of certain previously all-male colleges and educational programs to the other gender. It also led to repeated suspensions of peacetime rules of propriety and etiquette. The ubiquitous U.S.O. dances with sorority women serving as hostesses and dance partners to men on leave were one example. In another case at the University of Arizona in 1943, the members of Alpha Epsilon Phi sorority and Zeta Beta Tau fraternity—by then almost empty with most of its members in the army—decided to stretch their ration coupons and help maintain the ZBT chapter house by sharing meals together. Accompanied by their chaperone (as the national office insisted) the women joined their remaining comrades at the ZBT house twice each day, as well as entertaining at their own house any ZBT servicemen who happened to be near.1

For the men, even though the system as such almost ceased to function and scores of fraternity houses were taken over by the armed forces to quarter men in campus military training programs, fraternal bonds and friendships reached perhaps the apogee of their strength. As long as the journals could continue publishing, articles by early enlistees instructed and warned their apprehensive fraternity brothers at home what to expect, how to succeed in army life, and the importance of their cause. The national fraternity office was one of the few institutions that could keep track of literally thousands of men scattered all over the globe and bring them in touch with each other—and also to spread word that one of their number was missing, had been taken prisoner, was wounded, or had been confirmed as killed in action. This news prompted letters of condolence to family and friends and also letters to one another expressing grief, anger, and an inability to believe that the friends of school days such a short time ago were gone forever.

Hundreds of letters from overseas, some written directly from soldiers and some forwarded by their families, poured into fraternity offices, describing their activities. Sometimes for security reasons the letters had no return addresses save Somewhere in North Africa, Somewhere in the Pacific, Somewhere in England, Somewhere in Australia, or Somewhere in the Aleutian Islands. The letters were in turn excerpted, printed, and sent out again in national and chapter newsletters reaching membership and their loved ones. Through these newsletters, fraternity brothers based in the same vicinity or stationed on the same Pacific island who would never have known of each other's existence so
close by were able to renew old friendships at a time when they were badly needed.²

Fraternity bonds extended to include nonmembers as well. As the only chapter of any Jewish fraternity at the University of Arizona in 1942, the ZBT house there reportedly became the social gathering center for all Jewish servicemen at David-Montham Field at the Tucson Air Base.³ As part of their wide-ranging “Service Men’s Service” (SMS) program, Zeta Beta Tau sent thousands of care packages filled with tea, coffee, cookies, delicacies, toiletries, and copies of the New York Times to its members. The U.S. Armed Forces, knowing how important such packages were for the fighting men’s morale, allocated valuable shipping space for them, although as the war went on the allowable size and weight of the packages decreased.⁴

Religious traditions and symbols, even when they were considered of slight importance during college years, also provided a sense of comfort and stability to young Jewish men overseas. Capt. Arnold D. Swartz, Miami ’37 (U.S.M.C., Unit 650), wrote on January 23, 1943, from Guadalcanal that while walking through the cemetery there, he noticed the name of a fraternity brother from Columbia College. Immediately, he arranged for a Star of David to be placed on the crosspiece at the head of the grave.⁵ (His brother, like many others, had likely declined to have an “H” engraved on his dog tag.) Jewish fraternity men not observant in their civilian life reported attending whatever Jewish services were available, sometimes leading services themselves when able and being pressed into duty as unofficial chaplains to their fellow Jews.⁶

One Western Reserve graduate, raised with relatively little Jewish education, described his attendance at traditional High Holy Day services in a small room in a tiny town “somewhere in England” in September 1942: “The sincerity and vitality that these old-timers put into their service made it as sacred as if it were the most ornate synagogue,” he wrote:

For the first time in my life, I observed the orthodox service. I say “observed” because that’s about what it was. I didn’t know what they were doing or saying most of the time. And you know how this orthodox service is—every man for himself. Not like our reformed service, where we just sit, and let the Rabbi do all the work. It was, however, a strange and good feeling to be there in that group of civilians, officers, British soldiers and American soldiers, all brought together from all over the world on those days by our common, though somewhat indefinable bond. An English chap in front of me remarked how strange it was “you get a bunch of Jews together from all over the world, and they all read out of the same book.”
I smiled. Especially because I, among many others, could not read out of the same book. But he had something there anyway.

As the war drew to a close the fraternities' soldiers wrote longingly of being together at home again and their hope of attending the huge “Victory Conventions” to be held after it was finally over. Several members of Zeta Beta Tau humorously suggested holding the convention, rather than in the usual American cities, in Tokyo, Rome, or Berlin instead. All agreed that location was not as important as the fact that it take place as soon as possible.

When World War II finally ended and ten million American soldiers demobilized, among them approximately half a million Jews, it appeared at first that the picture for fraternities was bright. When the U.S. Congress passed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944—popularly known as “the G.I. Bill of Rights,” which among other measures guaranteed full tuition and stipends to most veterans and their families at the college of their choice—it was as a dream come true for millions of Americans of modest circumstances who could never have gone to college otherwise. Once on the verge of closing during the war, the universities of the nation literally overflowed with new and returning students. The resulting desperate housing shortage made residence in fraternity and sorority houses especially desirable.

However, the post-war period brought its own challenges to Jewish Greek-letter societies. Sharp inflation had vastly raised the cost of food and services. Traditions and leadership techniques that had been forgotten now had to be relearned. Veterans, some of whom had been wounded in action, did not wish to tolerate the foolishness, the paddling, or the hazing which, despite constant attempts at regulation or elimination, had always been a part of fraternity life. It was extremely difficult for them, after having faced death in combat, to embrace what seemed to them to be the more juvenile aspects of these organizations. In the years after the war they coexisted in chapter houses with teenagers much younger and more inexperienced than they were, and although the younger ones benefited from exposure to more mature models, some tensions inevitably resulted.

However, by far the greatest post-war challenge for Jewish fraternities and sororities was what came to be known euphemistically as the “S” question—or the “sectarian” question. After generations of taken-for-granted strict segregation by religion, race and class, sometimes de facto and sometimes de jure, a complex variety of factors and his-
historical forces caused a post-war movement to far greater democratization of American social and educational institutions—at least in theory, if not always in fact. The lowering of traditional social barriers during the war, the anger of minorities at not being granted full rights in the country they had laid down their lives to defend, the need to forestall Communist criticism of American racism, the growing need for academically and technically trained personnel no matter what their background, and an awareness of just how appallingly far racism and religious prejudice had so recently been taken, all played a role. As tax-exempt institutions and, increasingly, recipients of public funds, American universities were especially vulnerable to these trends. The results changed the face of American society. The struggles of the Civil Rights movement and the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* that the doctrine of “separate but equal” was inherently unequal and unconstitutional, were major turning points.

For members and leaders of Jewish fraternities and sororities all of these changes had enormous ramifications and caused them to be caught on the horns of an acutely painful dilemma. On the one hand, great pressure was placed on them, from both within and without the Jewish community, to go along with what appeared to be the longed-for dawning of a new day in America and to remove from their charters the clauses restricting membership to Jews, or in cases where no such clause existed, to follow a fully nondiscriminatory pledging policy. Pressure was especially strong from the American Jewish Committee and the B’nai B’rith Anti-Defamation League, whose ranks included several prominent Jewish fraternity members and who met with representatives of the Jewish Greek system continuously through the late 1940s and early 1950s to discuss this issue. How, these critics asked, could Jews in good conscience push for an end to restricted schools, corporations, summer camps, law firms and country clubs while themselves discriminating against others on the basis of religion, especially after the example of Hitlerism?

On the other hand, at the same time the Gentile Greek-letter groups in the National Interfraternity Conference and the National Panhellenic Congress were asking for Jewish fraternal groups to make a common cause of fighting back the veritable rain of federal, state, and local legislation demanding that social Greek-letter groups demonstrate lack of discrimination within set deadlines or else get off campus. Highlights of this movement were the 1948 decision at Amherst College to ban any fraternities with membership restrictions based on race, color, or
creed, and the 1953 decision by the authorities of the State University of New York system to abolish national fraternities altogether.\textsuperscript{15} Campus after campus was requesting all fraternities and sororities to open their constitutions and rituals to public view, reveal whether or not they had discriminatory clauses, and risk expulsion if any were found.\textsuperscript{16} Jewish fraternity and sorority leaders had always striven to be loyal members of the general Greek system, whether or not they were fully permitted into its institutions, and they all supported the right to maintain free association and selective membership—after all, these were the very basis of fraternity life. Indeed, to some extent the older and more conservative Jewish and Gentile Greek system alumni could easily make a common cause of the issue of not being forced to accept Black students, which quickly became a \textit{cause célébre} for both groups. But overall, to offer public support on this issue to the Gentile groups, some of whom had for years and still were discriminating against Jews, was like “being asked to hunt with the hounds and run with the hares,” in the words of Alpha Epsilon Phi president Joan Loewy Cohn in 1957.\textsuperscript{17}

Pressure was also strong from both the Christian and Jewish undergraduates, who tended to be far more liberal in their views on membership policy than the alumni. This fact led to numerous intergenerational conflicts especially when undergraduate members of Jewish fraternities took the lead in doing the formerly unthinkable and pledging Blacks to their fraternity. In one of the earliest examples, a major uproar ensued in May 1950 when the Phi Epsilon Pi chapter at the University of Connecticut at Storrs attempted to initiate Alfred Rogers, a Black student who was an excellent scholar, president of the Freshman class, and a varsity football player. When the national organization threatened to expel the chapter, the undergraduates mobilized fourteen other sympathetic undergraduate chapters across the country and threatened to secede en masse over the issue. In the meantime, dozens of alumni wrote in to resign their membership. The incident attracted national attention, not just among the American Jewish community but also among prominent non-Jewish social activists as well. These included Eleanor Roosevelt, who in her role as member of the U.S. delegation to the United Nations and proponent of its Human Rights Covenant, heard about the incident and wrote to the leaders of Phi Epsilon Pi fraternity to demand an explanation for their behavior. Finally, at a Special Grand Convention convened December 28, 1950, to consider this issue only, a resolution was adopted that membership in Phi Epsilon Pi would not be denied to anyone because of race, color, or creed. Alfred Rogers was duly initiated, and the fraternity survived.\textsuperscript{18}
Throughout the 1950s it became more acceptable for the historically Jewish fraternities to accept Blacks and other non-White or non-Christian students. By 1954 all with the exception of Alpha Epsilon Phi, Zeta Beta Tau, and Sigma Alpha Mu had at least one Black member if not more, while eight of the Gentile fraternities—Beta Theta Pi, Alpha Kappa Lambda, Theta Delta Chi, Delta Kappa Epsilon, Alpha Delta Phi, Tau Kappa Epsilon, Sigma Tau Gamma, and Zeta Psi—had initiated Black students. Before his graduation Michael “Mickey” Schwerner (Cornell ’61), who later lost his life in Mississippi along with fellow civil rights workers Andrew Goodman and Seth Chaney, successfully led the fight to pledge the first Black student to his Alpha Epsilon Pi chapter. In 1955 Leonard Jeffries ’59, one of four Black freshmen at Lafayette University, was approached by the officers of Pi Lambda Phi and asked to join them. He accepted and in his senior year became “Rex” or president of the chapter. In later years Jeffries earned his Ph.D. and became director of African American Studies at the City College of New York. At Columbia, the Phi Sigma Delta chapter in 1958 included Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Armenians, Japanese Americans, and Blacks, to the degree that some other fraternity houses, rather than referring to it by the customary abbreviation “Phi Sig,” began to call the house derogatorily “Phi Nig.” In a number of cases, if alumni objected, members resigned from their fraternities over the issue, went back to being “locals,” or took the initiative and declared that they would pledge whomever they pleased, something which the power structure of a national fraternity did not allow them to do.

Among American Jews there could not help but be a certain amount of pleasure and pride that for the first time, it was actually possible for Jewish students to be accepted into formerly exclusively Christian fraternities, a phenomenon that occurred with increasing frequency through the late 1940s and 1950s. However, the awareness of the recent devastation of European Jewry and the inability or unwillingness of Gentiles to stop it, though rarely mentioned, colored all decisions on the maintenance of community solidarity. There was a sense of resentment that Jews should have to make sacrifices in order to eliminate a situation which had been originated by Gentiles, and a strong sense of doubt that, once their doors were opened to non-Jews, the non-Jewish groups would fully reciprocate the favor. The relaxation of unguarded speech might disappear; and it was feared that the especially close ties of brotherhood, sisterhood, and intrafraternal marriage and friendship that was so characteristic of Jewish fraternities and sororities would be irreparably damaged if Gentiles were admitted as well.
Obviously the separate religious identity of the Jewish fraternities and sororities also seemed at stake. While the degree of specifically Jewish content in their activities varied widely from group to group and from campus to campus and was usually never enough to satisfy rabbis and communal leaders, nevertheless any review of fraternity and sorority periodicals and minutes, as well as alumni interviews, reveals that it was a significant factor through the 1950s as well as a source of comfort to parents. Philanthropy and participation in Jewish communal affairs after graduation was taken for granted, and national meetings of such organizations as the National Council of Jewish Women, the National Federation of Temple Brotherhoods, and B'nai B'rith are frequently mentioned as serving as quasi-reunions for Jewish fraternity and sorority members.

Jewish identification was not limited to times of crises but was woven into the fabric of daily fraternity life in myriad ways. In the “pledge period” which preceded initiation into a fraternity, the reading of at least one book on Jewish history had been a typical requirement. Trading phrases in broken Yiddish learned from parents or grandparents and indulging in typical in-group “Jewish humor” was a feature of life in some fraternity houses. The placing of a Mezuzah on chapter house doorposts and avoidance of pork and shellfish at chapter house meals was also not unusual. Some Alpha Epsilon Phi chapters, while not preventing their members from attending parties elsewhere, would avoid scheduling their own parties for Friday nights, the eve of the Jewish Sabbath. Before meals, a Jewish-style Grace over bread, or the chanting of a brief prayer over wine and lighted Sabbath candles on Friday night was customary at certain chapter houses and national conventions. At times a Jewish sorority member would join the men in order to light the candles and a man would go over to the sorority house to say the traditional blessing over the wine. Hillel rabbis in their correspondence would often criticize these practices as insufficient and superficial, but on young college students they made a deep impression.

The cycle of Jewish holidays was also acknowledged in fraternity chapters. In September and October, a practical reason for acquiescing to separate “Jewish” and “Gentile” rush weeks was the ability to schedule recruitment events that would not conflict with the Jewish High Holidays. In December, chapter house abstention from putting up a Christmas tree or joining the singers of Christmas carols could also be an identifying mark. In the spring, chapter houses would hold some form of a communal Passover seder meal, however truncated, for students not going home for the holiday. At least one monthly Friday
night attendance for the house as a whole at synagogue or Temple was urged by the national officers of several fraternities, though the undergraduates might make light of it. With even one Gentile member in the house all of these observances and in-group forms of identification were of course made highly problematic. Moreover, the concern of Jewish students that their Gentile friends be made comfortable and the resulting elimination of any vestige of Jewish ritual was reportedly rarely matched by the willingness of Christian fraternities to give up their traditional religious practices for the sake of their new Jewish members.

In debates on the “S” question an important consideration also included the ever-present dynamics of prestige and social desirability, which were as much based on subjective perception as they were on any objective, historically measurable reality. In the beginning, the Jews now being taken by the formerly all-Christian fraternities were the “best” students, the ones who would bring luster to any group—the best-looking, the brightest, the richest, the best athletes. Jewish fraternity officials in the 1950s, as well as alumni parents, were perturbed to find that their best pledging prospects were now the objects of interest of the leading Gentile fraternities, eager to demonstrate their magnanimity and compliance with new nondiscriminatory policies. But after all, they asked one another, what kind of Gentile would want to join a Jewish fraternity, with all the others to choose from? Jews, they feared, could not hope to compete in a truly integrated Greek system. Particularly for the more elite groups, much hard work had gone into cultivating and building their prestige and selecting and training only the “best” members. If Jewish fraternities were forced to cease being Jewish and open their doors to non-Jews, it was greatly feared, too many Christian students who might not be accepted by elite groups elsewhere might join, and the size and character of their beloved fraternities would quickly deteriorate. “It has taken us sixty years to build what we have,” wrote Maurice Jacobs in 1961, making this and other arguments. “Let’s not destroy it so quickly, merely because of a theory of the sociologists, who have been wrong before and will be wrong again.”

Finally and most importantly, Jewish parents, some of whom for generations had urged their college-aged children to join Jewish Greek-letter groups and had supported the chapters through Parents’, Fathers’, and Mothers’ Clubs, feared for the loss of their children and the inevitable rise in intermarriage which was sure to ensue once the national Jewish Greek matchmaking system broke down. “Many marriages are made in heaven,” commented one Jewish mother of a college-age son.
in 1960, in an article expressing her views that Jews should maintain their own separate fraternity system despite legal pressures to the contrary. "Many more are made on college campuses." Christian parents too, who otherwise supported the movement toward equality of Jews, Blacks and other minorities in American society, shared these fears, as noted by a prominent spokesman of the Gentile fraternity world who described the problem from a non-Jewish perspective:

It was on this basis that some of them [parents], while joining efforts to equalize opportunities in classrooms, employment, voting, housing, and other spheres, felt justified in opposing the integration of chapters; for these were perceived as very much involved with exchange parties and dances, with getting dates and double dating and going steady, with pinnings and serenades and sweetheart songs, with the passing of cigars at fraternity houses and the pouring of ice water at sorority dinners, with bachelor's dinners and the showering of gifts to brides, with the lining up of "brothers" to serve as ushers and of "sisters" as bridesmaids, and all the other elaborate rituals of middle class Americans that help bring compatible young people of marriageable age together. . . . [These] were near the core for explaining much of the reluctance to experiment with unsegregated and possibly awkward social arrangements.

The sectarian and racial controversy rocked the entire fraternity and sorority world for years, beginning in 1946 and continuing through the early 1960s. The lines were sharply drawn and many friendships of long standing were broken. In the end, the new mood of the country and the relentless legal pressure against official bigotry of any kind proved to be too strong. Officials in the fraternity world realized that they were dependent upon the universities and were there only by their sufferance. On many campuses, Greek-letter societies with discriminatory clauses in their constitutions were simply not allowed.

Approximately half of the eleven historically Jewish fraternities and sororities still in operation in the early 1950s, including Alpha Epsilon Pi, were less of a target on this issue. Ironically, their constitutions had never had clauses limiting membership to Jews in the first place. Either they had always maintained official nonsectarianism or, despite or perhaps because of an overwhelmingly Jewish membership, had never conceived that anyone else would want to join them and so had not specified Jewish background as a condition for entrance. For Zeta Beta Tau and Sigma Alpha Mu, however, the "S" Question could not be sidestepped. Both had specific Jewish sectarian clauses written into their constitutions and their secret rituals, and both required a fraternity-wide
vote at the annual convention in order to remove them. After several attempts, years of debate, and continued pressure, Sigma Alpha Mu removed the last of such clauses in 1953 and Zeta Beta Tau did the same in the summer of 1954. In the case of ZBT, an impassioned discussion on the resolution went on for more than three hours, and the final resolution to remove the clause passed by a mere three votes. In the eyes of the law, they thus ceased to be officially Jewish. That they continued to be identified as such and to a great extent still are, is only evidence that one cannot so easily change social characteristics simply by removing a clause from a charter.

The zeal for fraternity reform lessened for a time from the mid-1950s through the early 1960s, partly because World War II and the Korean War were receding from the memories of students and the general public. Observers of U.S. campuses during the Eisenhower years spoke of a return to more conservative "collegiate values," and the practice of fraternity hazing, which had never been entirely eliminated, enjoyed a revival. Colleges and universities appeared relatively peaceful, their students docile. No one surveying the campus scene in 1959, wrote one historian of American college student life, could have predicted the campus upheavals that would follow a few short years later. Discriminatory clauses were gone from most fraternity constitutions, but the crossing of traditional lines, especially in the midwestern and southern parts of the country, did not become a routine. On many campuses, Jewish, Gentile, and Black fraternities continued to go their separate ways.

Nevertheless, under the surface, rebellion was brewing, and the power and influence of the Greek system was undergoing a gradual decline. A second stage of forced change during the era of the Vietnam War and student protest from the mid-1960s through the early 1970s dealt the final blow to the traditional Jewish fraternity and sorority system. The passage by Congress in 1964 of the Civil Rights Act and other related legislation in following years that formally outlawed segregation and discrimination on the basis of race or religion provided the legal nails for its coffin. By then, motivation to fight for the Greek system against its detractors was waning, as the entire social structure and complex of aspirations that had buttressed it came tumbling down.

The Jewish Greek subsystem had been distinguished from its Gentile counterpart by the intensity of its commitment to social training along the lines of mainstream, Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture. Its leaders in the 1920s and 1930s displayed a sense almost of religious and communal mission as they taught their members everything from the
importance of school loyalty to playing golf to making proper introductions to how to use a pastry tube. The learning of these skills would insure the happiness and success of the individual, enhance the status of the group, and disprove the collective stereotype of the dirty, money-grubbing, disloyal, uncouth, and uncultured Jew. Without outright religious conversion, the embracing of such values within the Greek system appeared to be the ticket of admission to respectable, bourgeois American society.

From the late 1940s until the early 1960s, the focus of public debate had shifted toward making fraternities and sororities more democratic and responsible for fulfilling social needs. Enough Jewish students and their parents, many of whom had been members themselves as undergraduates and had met each other that way, still considered membership in a good fraternity or sorority to be a desirable goal. Enough students were still willing to submit to the discipline of Greek life, which required such things as pledge education, group service, regulated study hours, constantly signing in and out of the house, not having unchaperoned guests, refraining from indulging in liquor (much less illegal drugs), constant submission to group guidance and criticism, or the chanting of ritual and the wearing of jackets and ties or dresses and stockings to required Monday night chapter meetings.

However, the “baby boomers” that flooded the campuses now questioned the need for Greek-letter societies to exist at all. It appeared that one could have a perfectly satisfactory college career without one. In 1968, approximately 300,000 Jewish youth were attending colleges and universities in the U.S. and Canada on a full-time basis, and 90 percent of affiliated Jewish youth planned to attend, as opposed to 50 percent in the general population. Among American college students membership in these groups was increasingly considered outdated or “irrelevant,” a favorite term of derision in the 1960s and early 1970s. College women in particular, whose parents had supported sororities for their Jewish daughters even more than fraternities for their Jewish sons because of the supposed protection, polish, chaperonage, and marriage opportunities it offered them, now went against parental wishes and gladly jeopardized their morals and their virtue by abandoning the sorority house for independent living in apartments.

Fraternities and sororities fell among the first victims of far-reaching changes in American university culture and governance. Formerly, universities had exercised strict in loco parentis control over their students, regulating every aspect of living, dining, socializing, traveling,
and sexual activity (or lack of it). Until the mid-1960s, at most U.S.
women's colleges, for a female student to leave campus and openly sleep
over at her boyfriend's apartment had been, amazingly enough, grounds
for expulsion. Whether American college officials truly had changed
their minds that such regulation was desirable or simply lost the energy
to battle with their students, the barriers came tumbling down. With
them went homecoming queens, campus beauty contests, proms, elabo­
rate dating rituals, corsages and formals; a contemporary observer noted
with shock that a female college student might now pack off to college
with only three pairs of Levis and four workshirts in one bag.32 One
group of four Alpha Epsilon Phi women who remained close friends
after graduation remembered entering the University of Pennsylvania
in 1966, when men and women were housed separately, men were only
allowed to visit women in their rooms every other Sunday if they kept
both feet on the floor and the door open at least a book's width, and skirts
were required wear to dinner and to classes. By the time they graduated
in 1970, one woman recalled, "we had co-ed dorms."33

For those who did join, the social hierarchy of fraternities and
the age-old requirements of "good family," breeding, and wealth no
longer seemed so important, in part because the American Jewish com­
community had become more homogenous since the 1920s and 1930s and
such former distinctions as those between "Germans" and "Russians"
had lost any meaning. "We just have to understand that things have
changed," wrote Alpha Epsilon Phi president Blanche Greenberger in
July 1965, in insisting that "any decent girl from a decent family against
whom there is nothing that can be said morally" should receive a refer­
ence for membership. "One has only to pick up the newspaper any day
of the week to realize that we are living in a completely different world
than that in which we grew up."34

All segments of the Greek system in the United States suf­
fered in the late 1960s, but the Jewish groups suffered more, both
because they were relatively younger and smaller to begin with, and
because their members exhibited a disproportionate tendency to par­
ticipate in or at least sympathize with liberal causes and the protest
movement. A director in the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundations in 1967
estimated that, while Jewish students were approximately ten percent
of all college and university students, they made up no fewer than one­
third of the campus Protesters.35 The sociologist Nathan Glazer, in an
influential article in Fortune magazine entitled "The Jewish Role in
Student Activism," estimated that Jews made up anywhere from one-
third to one-half of the small number of college militants who actively courted arrest. 36

What was even more remarkable about this phenomenon, Glazer noted, was that these militant young Jews “make nothing of it. Indeed, they are scarcely conscious of it, and are not aware of it at all in connection with their political activities.” Unlike their parents and grandparents, these children of a new age could not even conceive that anyone might think that their actions might bring a pogrom upon their communities. Richard Gutstadt, head of the Anti-Defamation League in the 1930s, along with many other college-educated Jewish men and women who graduated before World War II ended, would have been shocked. For such blithe heedlessness and feelings of security to exist, either the world had been transformed, the civil rights and American Jewish defense agencies had done an excellent job since the end of World War II, or both; perhaps the latter had helped to bring about the former. The author himself took this into account in his squib for the article. “This is not a period in American history in which there is much danger that Jews will suffer from unequal treatment, prejudice, or discrimination,” he wrote, reassuring his readers and perhaps salving his own guilty conscience. “If it were, I for one would hesitate to discuss in a non-Jewish periodical the interesting and peculiar phenomenon that Jews, who are very likely the most prosperous religious group in the country, are strikingly prominent among young radicals both on and off campus today.” 37

Strikingly prominent they were, and the Jewish fraternities felt the consequences. In a symbol of an era, the Phi Epsilon Pi house at Columbia University was abandoned and closed during that school’s spring 1968 campus riots as members joined the demonstrations. Shortly afterward, it was taken over as campus headquarters for the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society). 38 The Jewish sororities showed more stability; but virtually overnight, Jewish fraternities closed, merged, or lost half their chapters, and one executive director was forced to temporarily give up the office and to run the entire operation from his basement. 39

The American college Greek system as a whole did not die out during these years of upheaval, nor did the historically Jewish segment of it ever disappear entirely. After a few lean years, college fraternities rebounded in the late 1970s and 1980s. Today no college fraternity is officially permitted to set religious tests for membership. Jewish students can and do join fraternities and sororities that were once restricted against them. This can be a source of feelings of joy and triumph on the
one hand and feelings of dismay on the other in older Americans who
know or remember how the system used to work. As for the historically
Jewish organizations, of the nine remaining groups at the turn of the
twenty-first century perhaps three choose to emphasize their historical
Jewish identity consistently and go out of their way to recruit Jewish
students. Another three tend to acknowledge their heritage with pride
while trying to retain official neutrality. The national leaders of the other
three are adamant in their preference that the world forget they ever
had any Jewish connections at all, and their membership today is in­
deed predominantly non-Jewish. No national organization is as capable
as it would wish to be of wielding strong central control, however, and
there are wide variations in chapters from campus to campus. Within
the same national fraternity, chapters in one part of the country can be
predominantly Jewish while chapters in another part of the country can
consistent entirely of non-Jews.40

In the minds of the public, however—as well as in the minds
of occasional campus vandals—the impression persists that all these
fraternities are still Jewish. Among active alumni and national officers
the question of how they should or should not relate to their frater­
nal heritage is cause for continued impassioned debate and internal
factionalism.

Regardless of the outcome of these debates, it is unlikely that
the Jewish Greek subsystem will ever again function with the same in­sularity, cohesiveness, and communal support that it enjoyed in the first
two thirds of the twentieth century. Legal considerations alone and strict
interpretations of the church/state separation principle make a revival of
the old system untenable. Too much time has passed, and no one can
turn back the clock. Furthermore, as can be seen here, the complex of
factors that gave birth to it and helped it to flourish no longer exists,
due to a series of developments that from a communal point of view are
largely positive.

The Greek system as a whole, once riddled with discrimina­tory
clauses, no longer enjoys the centrality and prestige it once had. Social,
residential, occupational and resort discrimination against Jews
that helped to make their own fraternity houses necessary either disap­
peared or slipped underground. Hostile administrations are no longer a
common problem. By the 1980s American Jews were well represented
not only among the students but also among the faculty, deans, and
presidents of the nation's most elite universities. As Hillel rabbis and
other observers began to note with pleasure from the late 1950s on­
ward, American Jewish college students appeared far less self-conscious
about their Jewish identity than their predecessors in the 1920s and 1930s and less eager to escape it. Keeping quiet and blending in were no longer supreme values. Public celebration of one's ethnicity became a common occurrence. Young Jewish men who in previous generations might never have dreamed of wearing a kippah in public in the post-1967 years now strode to classes wearing their distinctive crocheted skullcaps with aplomb. On the most elite Ivy League campuses college administrations supported the creation of kosher living and dining options. 41 Mass Jewish student migrancy became a phenomenon of the past; attending school thousands of miles from home became a matter of personal choice, not necessity. After graduation, with wider economic opportunities available to Jews, a tight Jewish communal network was no longer so essential; the friends and acquaintances that provided referrals and job contacts were as likely to be Gentiles as Jews. Most of all, in the post-1960s era American Jews no longer needed to put their faith in the armor of Americanization, loyalty to school and country, and faultless manners in order to feel safe. Nor was it any longer necessary for them to attach acute danger to the allegedly uncouth and un-American behavior of their coreligionists.

As for the traditional social and matchmaking functions of the Jewish subsystem, the end of official sectarianism also brought an end to the support and cooperation of parents and the extended American Jewish community. Among the non-Orthodox majority emphasis on the communal arrangement of endogamous marriages in the face of all odds has declined, as has the idea that getting married is somehow mandatory. Jewish men and women, once limited in their choices, are freer to choose their mates, and to be chosen, from a much wider pool. Meanwhile, Gentile families are as likely to welcome a Jewish spouse into the family as to reject him or her. After all the years and energy expended by American Jewish defense organizations to win social approval, no one could wish for a level of greater acceptance.

The new freedom from oppression and official bigotry that was such an important gift of the post-World War II era helped to eliminate American antisemitism as a significant force. The battle against it had been at the very core of much of American Jewish communal and organizational life for most of the century. Ironically, however, antisemitism and segregation at the nation's colleges and universities had also been a crucial ingredient in the birth and flourishing of separate fraternity systems in the first place. When that was eliminated, so too was much of the justification for the Jewish Greek subsystem.
Contemporary Jewish parents, rabbis, communal leaders, Hillel directors and other observers might be tempted to look back today with some nostalgia at the positive functions the Jewish Greek subsystem once served in fostering identity, training students for communal lay leadership and, most of all, fostering endogamous marriage. As we have seen, college fraternities were an important technique used and encouraged by non-Orthodox American Jews of the middle class to keep their young people's intermarriage rates negligible. This was and is a daunting challenge on residential college campuses where students are so far removed from the influence of family and community. Precious few historical alternatives remain. Surviving institutions and organizations that stress the more affirmative aspects of American Jewish education, identity, fellowship and marriage remained seriously underfunded and underdeveloped during years of channeling the bulk of philanthropic time and energy into sheer survival. For generations the U.S. communal ethos appears to have been dominated by the idea that being Jewish was a thing to rescue people from, certainly not something to be loved or embraced.

Who could wish to return for even a moment to precisely those college days of fear, antisemitism, internal divisions, snobbery and self-hatred that served as such a solid backdrop to the Jewish Greek subsystem's most successful era? As it is, adults who spent their most formative years under the old system—or the children raised by them—too often seem to be caught in a temporal vise. By force of training and habit they scramble to meet external standards or to disprove accusations that either no longer exist or are no longer as pressing as they once were. In a new era of freedom and choice, new, creative and fully voluntary forms of campus organizations would be necessary to maintain that same positive level of campus social, ethnic, and religious solidarity that apparently reigned in those recent days of so long ago.

The surviving fraternities and sororities in the subsystem, even after decades of pursuing the goal of nonsectarianism, could conceivably retool themselves, by reaching back through the generations and trying to take up a similar positive role once more. But first, they themselves would have to choose to assert their historical role as Jewish organizations—a step most painful to their many loyal non-Jewish members and officers and seemingly almost impossible under the prevailing legal system. Second, they would require as they once had the strong support or at least the responsible supervision and concern of
alumni and the adult organized Jewish community, including that of the Hillel Foundations.

As these questions continue to be debated, scholars will still look back at the history of Jewish immigrants and their descendants in America in the twentieth century and marvel at their success in higher education, at the speed of their flight up to the heights of American intellectual, business, professional, and artistic achievement. But education comes in many forms. The records of Jewish college fraternities show us, in detail that the participants would probably prefer to forget, some of the obstacles these great achievers had to overcome as they made that flight, and some of the personal and collective sacrifices they had to make along their way.