Chapter 9

In the Shadow of Hitler

Social Life, Snobbery, and Jewish Identity

When Jewish college students and fraternity members encountered evidence of anti-Jewish feeling and discrimination during their years at school, their pain and resentment was usually tempered by awareness that conditions had been far worse for their immediate ancestors. In the 1930s their pain and resentment was also tempered by awareness that conditions were infinitely worse at that very moment for extended family trapped overseas. A newly married Elizabeth Eldridge and her husband found themselves pouring every penny of their wedding gifts toward rescuing two relatives from Nazi Germany and bringing them to America;1 such stories and desperate attempts, not always successful, could be heard among American Jews of German heritage across the country. Prayers of thanksgiving for the ancestors who decided to leave for the United States in time soon became part of the private liturgy of thousands of citizens. Meanwhile fraternity travelers in the late 1930s were already well able to communicate their gratitude to friends at home.

“Europe, with the exception of perhaps France and England, is a hell of a place for the Jew to live,” wrote Leo R. Markey, M.D., on January 29, 1937. A Phi Epsilon Pi and recent medical school graduate from Ohio State University, he was spending the winter and spring of that year traveling and working in Hungary, Austria, and France.

Really and truthfully, I thank God I was born in the United States and that I am a citizen of that country. The land of the free and the home of the brave is no idle boast. It is more and more appreciated after seeing
and living in countries that limit the freedom, money, and pursuit of happiness of its citizens. I feel more and more each day that I will be the most happiest man in the world when I can set foot again on American soil and inhale a pure breath of American air . . . the LORD was good and kind when he made me an American.²

Fighting Nazism at Home: Protests and Condemnations

At that time, the faith of American Jews that they would be safe in their land was strong, but not strong enough to take for granted. Fraternities were concerned with fighting Nazism on their own campuses. In one instance, in December 1933, a Sigma Alpha Mu delegate from the University of Washington chapter traveled to a national committee meeting to complain that one of the Gentile fraternity houses had flown a Nazi flag for the period of one week without any interference from the university. In the ensuing discussion, officers agreed that similar occurrences could not be tolerated and that the National Interfraternity Conference must be enlisted to help prevent them in the future.³

During the same period Phi Epsilon Pi found itself confronting directly not only an American Nazi, but someone who was no less than their American Nazi. Back in the founding days of the fraternity at City College, German-born poet, playwright, publisher, and journalist George Sylvester Viereck ’06 had been a dedicated member of the allegedly nonsectarian Phi Epsilon Pi. There he shared his love of German culture with his Jewish fraternity brothers, who in those days also came from a predominantly German cultural background. Their paths began to diverge, however, when during World War I Viereck became a leading pro-German propagandist, editing a newspaper known as The Fatherland. By 1920, he resigned in disgust when he comprehended that Phi Epsilon Pi had become an entirely Jewish organization. Periodically he let the press know his feelings regarding the religious-ethnic affiliations of his former fraternity brothers. By 1939 Viereck was, in the words of Maurice Jacobs, “one of the biggest Jew-baiters in America,” and a Secretary of the German American Bund, the representatives of the Nazi Party in the United States. Who would have thought that their early experiments in nonsectarianism would have gone so awry? Still, in this case, as the Phi Epsilon Pi officers pointed out to indignant inquiries, Viereck had long since been struck from their membership rolls and there was nothing else they could do but ignore him.⁴

In the home front war against Nazism, the Jewish fraternities chose to take a firmer stand in some areas than in others. For Phi Ep-
silon Pi, the true plunge into political arena took place in January 1934 when the fraternity as a group threw its support behind Senate Resolution 154, which condemned the German Reich's treatment of its Jewish subjects. On the other hand, a Phi Epsilon alumnus heading the Chicago Committee for the Defense of Human Rights Against Nazism was unable to obtain his fraternity's mailing list for use in the boycott against German-made goods. As Maurice Jacobs replied to his inquiry, an informal meeting of Jewish fraternity officials in late 1933 concluded that the fraternities as a group could not become involved in so controversial and divisive a cause. In addition, none of them looked with favor upon their mailing lists being used for anything but fraternity purposes. The attempt to organize an American Jewish boycott of German goods, as it happened, was not successful in any quarter. Among other factors, no one could be sure that a boycott of German goods might not harm German Jews as much as it helped them. Furthermore, a boycott might play right into the hands of the Nazis, who charged that Jews were pulling the economic strings of the United States.

Community Relations: Dickinson College

"Community relations," or the formation of educational and interfaith programs to promote better relations between Jews and Christians, was a particular area in which the Jewish fraternities could excel in fighting back against Nazism and antisemitism. Their corporate nature made them particularly well suited for it. In addition, it had always been an important goal of the Jewish Greek subsystem to prove that Jewish students were the same as everybody else. In performing such work students became expert in skills that would stand them in good stead in later years working and volunteering for such organizations as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the American Jewish Committee, and other Jewish defense and human rights organizations.

In March 1936, for example, Norman Ranz, a young Phi Epsilon Pi attending the coeducational Dickinson College and head of the Jewish Committee on Religious Affairs there, asked Maurice Jacobs for "programming" and "public relations" tips for an upcoming campus religious program. It was the Jewish students' turn to present the regular religious program that Sunday evening at a nearby church, and Ranz was planning the content with special care. A Sigma Tau Phi student would speak on "various Talmudic tales and how much of the old Hebrew law has been basically incorporated into our American law system," Ranz
reported. Another Jewish fraternity student planned to give a speech refuting the alleged economic dominance of the Jew in the U.S. and Germany, while “one of the co-eds” would “perform and verbally explain certain musical numbers of Jewish tradition such as ‘Eli, Eli,’ and ‘Kol Nidre.’”

All that remained to write was Ranz’s own speech. He wished to end the evening with as “effective and forceful” an address as possible, without “boring the audience.” As the undergraduate put it to Jacobs, “I would like to talk on some topic which is ‘alive’ and of utmost interest to a mixed group of students. That is, I’d rather avoid such topics as might border too much on the question of Anti-semitism, or the oppression of the Jews in Germany and America. In other words, I don’t particularly care for a topic that might be considered ‘stock.’” Ranz was afraid that his Dickinson College audience had reached the saturation point on bad news from overseas, and would not be willing to listen to more. Jacobs, himself an accomplished public speaker, understood exactly what the young man wanted and, appreciating his desire not to make a “stock” talk, gave him a detailed outline of alternative speech topics.

Also at Dickinson College in 1937, the Jewish students’ committee, which included the heads of the various fraternities, decided to confront the idea that “Jewish students have no love for Alma Mater”—a familiar charge since the days of the Harvard affair in 1922–1923—by organizing an annual project to do something “good and appropriate for the university as a whole.” The previous year, as the Dickinson delegate informed his national convention, they had donated a set of books on American history to the library, in memory of a departed professor. That year, they had decided to donate a set of books “on the customs and holidays of the Jewish race, in order to get students acquainted with the race as a whole.” In an arrangement that hearkened back to traditional European communities, the collection was being financed by a mandatory tax of two dollars from every Jewish student at Dickinson, which, the delegate reported, they were trying to collect “in as painless a fashion as possible.”

The Push to End Separate Jewish and Gentile Councils at Penn

At the same December 1937 convention, the Phi Epsilon Pi delegate from the University of Pennsylvania, which had thirteen Jewish men’s national fraternities and two sororities, spoke in a similar fashion at roundtable discussions of the Louis Marshall Society of their school.
The Society's immediate goal was to unite all Jewish fraternity and non-fraternity men in order to "continually combat the Jewish prejudice on campus." "Do you try to combat the Jewish feeling, or just let it ride?" asked the delegate from the University of Michigan, using the general term—"Jewish feeling"—which the undergraduates meant to refer to anti-Jewish prejudice on their campuses. "We try to combat it, as far as we ourselves are concerned," replied the head of Phi Epsilon Pi's Penn chapter. "You have to admit that some of the Jewish students are objectionable." According to his report, the "Big Five" of the Jewish fraternities (that is, the five largest and most powerful men's fraternities in residence there) had recently gotten together and were doing their best to "break that feeling." As proof of their progress, the Penn delegate discussed the ongoing movement to merge the Group A (Gentile) and Group B (Jewish) Interfraternity Councils at Penn, and noted that several Jews were serving on the Gentile interfraternity ball committee for the first time. To Penn in this case was well behind New York University, where Mitchell Fisher had led the struggle to break the Gentile fraternities' exclusive control over the New York University Prom in 1923-25.

To some extent the Jewish fraternities had accepted and even desired the long-standing separation of Jewish and Gentile fraternities at Penn. To be members of the Gentile IFC's and panhellenics also meant being under the jurisdiction of strict Gentile rushing regulations designed to limit cutthroat competition. As on many campuses, at Penn, Gentile IFC regulations forbade rushing students until they actually set foot on the campus. Also, they could not join the fraternity immediately; initiation had to wait until later in their freshman year. By contrast Jewish fraternities, with a wider geographical area to cover and a smaller pool of potential applicants, enjoyed their freedom of rushing members while they were still in high school and then pledging them as soon as possible. Besides, no one expected the day would come when significant numbers of Jews would be rushed by Gentile fraternities or otherwise invited to socialize with them. Therefore, while restriction to Group B meant second-class citizenship, the motivation to end it was not strong.

Nevertheless, the separation irked. As events developed overseas, the perception grew among communal leaders that a major principle was at stake in the Group A/Group B dichotomy among Penn's fraternities. To permit that separation to stand would represent a danger to Jewish rights and the preservation of American democracy. In
February 1938 the national head of Zeta Beta Tau called for a conference of representatives from all the Jewish national fraternities, almost all represented at Penn, for the express purpose of consolidating the two groups. The outbreak of World War II just at the start of the 1939–1940 academic year led further impetus to the effort. “This represents a ‘ghetto’ situation,” asserted Richard L. Lowenstein of Penn’s Phi Epsilon Pi chapter in 1940, “and particularly in these critical times, it is important to break up any such manifestation of discrimination on a campus as prominent in collegiate circles as Pennsylvania.” His chapter joined forces with the independent students and successfully lobbied all the Group B fraternities to change their rushing regulations in conformity to those of Group A. They next enlisted the support of prominent university officials, including President Thomas Gates, Provost William McClellend, and the Dean of Student Affairs.11

These efforts were ultimately successful. It would be many more years before Jews and Christians attending the University of Pennsylvania routinely crossed fraternity lines. However, by the time World War II ended, the two groups at least found themselves in the same local interfraternity council.

The ADL’s Fireside Discussion Groups Project: Success at Nebraska

For self-education in the cause of intercommunity relations, an effective agent available to fraternities and similar groups included the pamphlets of the Fireside Discussion Groups Project. This program was conceived in 1937 by personnel of the Anti-Defamation League and modeled after President Roosevelt’s popular radio speeches. “No greater injury can befall any people than to stand mute to a fictitious charge,” urged the ADL’s Sydney B. Lavine, director of the program. “Avail yourself of all facts, information, and history of your own people so that no slander or libel be permitted to remain unchallenged.”12 Over 50,000 subscribers received a series of twenty or more pamphlets to be read and discussed in groups in homes, lodges, fraternities, sororities, clubs, and temples. The pamphlets provided specific suggestions on how to answer anti-Jewish charges that readers were assumed to encounter each day along with information calculated to bolster their level of self-knowledge and self-respect.

Fraternity house residents and their parents were especially well-suited to the dissemination of the pamphlets and the accompa-
nying discussions. In the case of Sigma Alpha Mu, the national head of the fraternity noted with pleasure in September 1938 that the project had "touched off like a spark a tremendous pool of latent Jewish interest and leadership" among the young men, and that more than twenty-five chapters across the country were making it a regular weekly part of their activities. Leading them all was the Sigma Alpha Mu chapter at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, which had already completed the third subject in the series and was planning to complete the entire project by the end of the school term. In addition, the meetings at Nebraska were open to members of other fraternities and nonfraternity students, as well as members' families. Some of the parents at these meetings reportedly participated in the discussions "with as much enthusiasm as the boys."\(^\text{13}\)

A list of the topics for these Fireside Discussion Group pamphlets reveals well the challenges and accusations that American Jews were facing every day and their need for well-researched material to combat them. "What can I do to alleviate the situation?" was the title of the first pamphlet. The second pamphlet, entitled "The Myth of Jewish Economic Dominance," attempted to refute the idea that Jews controlled the entire business and professional worlds of both the U.S. and Germany. Then came "The Truth About the Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion," the antisemitic forgery that was enjoying renewed vigor and circulation under Nazi support; "The Ritual Murder Accusation"; "Communism" ("authentic data showing conclusively that Jews form a very small percentage of the Communist Party"); "The Aryan Race and the Nordic Myth," in which leading non-Jewish anthropologists condemned "the fallacious reference of the so-called 'Semitic nose' and the 'pure race'"); and "Three Questions Jews Must Answer," an analysis of possible answers to the eternal inquiry whether Jews were a race, a nation, or a religion. Other pamphlets included "Jews as Nobel Prize Winners"; Zionism and the progress of the Jews in Palestine; the debt that Christianity owed to the Hebrew Bible and to Jewish law and ideals; the participation of American Jews in their country's history from the first days of the Pilgrim Fathers up to the days of the Great War; The Jews in Medicine and Science, American Jews in Philanthropy, Jews in Music, Jews in American Literature, the Jew and His Faith, "Reform Judaism: Pro and Con," and finally "The Tragedy of Poland" ("three million corpses and their plight. Facts that will startle even the most casual observer").\(^\text{14}\)
The German Jewish Student Refugee Program

For the actual rescue of European Jews, fraternity houses held within their grasp a response to Hitlerism far more concrete than mere discussion groups. They were ideally suited to supply room, board, and school materials for selected refugee students. Initiated by Phi Sigma Delta and joined by the others, between 1934 and 1941 the German Jewish Student Refugee program brought dozens of brilliant but penniless students who had been forced out of their universities by Nazism to the safety of the United States, where they continued their education from the haven of Jewish fraternity and sorority houses. The project meant extensive and often tense negotiations with university administrators and U.S. immigration officials. In one instance in 1940, two of the German Jewish student refugees, bound for the University of Michigan and Tufts College, were instead detained in New York at Ellis Island. Only the strenuous petitions of the fraternities’ refugee committee before the Department of State protected them from deportation back to Europe.

Not all German Jewish student refugees found their stay in American colleges to be a happy one. Some suffered from feelings of displacement and culture shock at the remoteness of the towns in which they found themselves. Still, many did well enough to go on to academic careers; a few were able to bring their parents and siblings over as well; several served in the Armed Forces during World War II and at least two served in the OSS. Most importantly, many became close friends with their American hosts, wearing their clothes, learning their slang, helping their fellow students with their German, widening their cultural horizons, and in some cases inspiring other students to raise special funds for the refugees so that they could be initiated as brothers and sisters into the fraternities.

Quite unexpectedly, the German Jewish Student Rescue Fund also helped to justify the existence of the fraternities and to bring in the support of adults who might otherwise have dismissed the Greek system. Having a refugee became a valuable rushing point each fall as chapters competed for potential members. Administrations, faculty, and fellow students looked upon a Jewish fraternity house with greater respect, knowing that it sheltered such a person. Alumni who had broken contact for years renewed their tie with the fraternity in order to participate in so worthy a project. Parents rushed to pay house bills on time knowing that their child’s chapter was supporting an exile from the land of Hitler.
“Overcrowded” Professions and Vocational Guidance

Fraternities also responded to antisemitism and to the threat of Hitlerism on American soil by intensifying their efforts in the Jewish vocational guidance movement, already an area of concern because of the Depression. The phrase “vocational guidance,” when used in reference to young American Jews, had multiple meanings and nuances. In its simplest sense, “vocational guidance,” or helping members to find positions after graduation, was an accepted function of any good college fraternity. Indeed, both Jewish and Gentile young men specifically sought out the Greek system in the hopes that the contacts and networks established through them would help in the working world after college.

For Jewish young people, however, the goals of making a living or pursuing professional training presented special challenges. For them, vocational guidance meant help finding jobs when they were barred from many positions and companies, and quotas and restrictions kept all but the most brilliant from achieving their dreams of professional school. “Vocational guidance” also became a euphemism in the battle to convince Jewish families that not all was lost if their sons could not become doctors or lawyers and that other lines of work had to be considered. Among Jewish fraternity alumni and others, the desire also existed to disprove a staple of Nazi propaganda that Jews controlled the world and American economy, and to steer them away from what were perceived as overcrowded professions.

American Jews, as had their predecessors in modern Western Europe before them, did indeed gravitate disproportionately to the free professions. According to an elaborate study on American Jews in higher education conducted by Lee Levinger of B'nai Brith Hillel’s Research Bureau in 1937, although they were 3.5 percent of the U.S. population Jews made up more than a quarter (26%) of all the nation’s professional students in dentistry, one quarter (25%) percent in law, 22 percent in pharmacy, 16 percent in commerce, and 16 percent in medicine. In the last field, they were still represented in vastly disproportionate numbers although their entrance was restricted and most schools imposed a specific Jewish quota. 18

With the gradual implementation of Nazi anti-Jewish racial laws in Germany and the disenfranchisement and disbarment of German professionals there, the rush of young American Jews toward the professions and the traditional fraternity role in such placements became cause for serious communal criticism. In one of the earliest examples, a Phi Epsilon Pi alumnus in the Philadelphia municipal administration,
who for many years had helped to steer medical students in his fraternity to good Philadelphia hospitals, vowed in November 1933 that he would do nothing more to aid any Jewish youth in either law or medicine. Moreover, he claimed that no other Jew should sponsor any other Jew for that purpose, "because of the overcrowding of the field" and fear that American Jewish overconcentration in the professions would lead to the same situation as had happened in Germany. "So there you are, Joe," wrote Maurice Jacobs regretfully to a young Phi Epsilon Pi who was seeking an internship and residency at Philadelphia General Hospital and who could no longer count on aid from his fraternity's accustomed source. "We are not wanted as Jews. The German bugaboo has frightened everyone so that people can't think sanely or clearly and everything is interpreted a la Hitler. . . . Every day we hear more of this coming trouble, which I personally believe is more or less imaginary, but who knows." 19

As the years went by, the fear of Hitlerism increased, and Jewish youth and their families stubbornly insisted on pursuing the free professions in the face of all criticism, more fraternity alumni grew alarmed. "I attended a men's club round table meeting the other day in which the question of saturation of Jews in the professions came up," wrote one alumnus, an insurance broker in Cleveland, in February 1936.

It was agreed that one of the pressing problems of Jewry today was vocational guidance for the young Jews to correct this maladjustment that is harming our cause so much and it occurred to me the college fraternity is in an enviable position to do a good deal along these lines. . . . The future will be filled with this problem of too many Jewish lawyers, doctors, judges, politicians, and whatnot. Isn't that one of the difficulties that led to the Nazi antisemitism? Perhaps Phi Ep as a fraternity can point the way of proper vocations to its members and to Jewish youth as a whole. 20

Jacobs' consistent reply to these numerous, and to him annoying, inquiries was that the question was important, but he did not think the fraternity was necessarily the agent to act upon such a "delicate" subject. "We get the boy after his parents have already decided that he is going into professional work and the damage has already been done," he wrote back to Cleveland. 21

Some young fraternity graduates had no expectation or hope of attending professional school, and would have been happy to obtain any job at all. For these Sigma Alpha Mu in 1938 set up a placement service to cooperate with the local vocational guidance bureaus
of the B'nai B'rith, which specialized in finding jobs for young Jewish men and women in other Jewish or Jewish-run firms and organizations or companies that were known not to have discriminatory policies. A "Jobs wanted" column appeared regularly in the fraternity's periodical, and graduating seniors were directed to alumni who needed workers. When possible, applicants were also given the names and addresses of alumni engaged in the same field in which the student was interested. The Alpha Epsilon Phi sorority, although it did not organize a formal job placement program, regularly ran articles in its magazine with information on various careers, the advisability of different professional training courses, and the achievements of alumnae in such fields as dentistry, law, and chemistry.

In Phi Epsilon Pi, the need for jobs was less immediate, for a questionnaire distributed by Vocational Guidance Committee chairman Albert A. Hutler in 1939 revealed that fifty percent of the respondents intended to go into their family's business. For those without that option, the committee mailed out bulletins on different occupations and trades, published vocational articles in the fraternity's quarterly, set up alumni advisory committees, and sent out notices of civil service examinations—particularly in the area of the federal employment. The latter field employed thousands of college-educated young Jews and non-Jews during the years of the Great Depression and President Roosevelt's New Deal, and their presence helped to change the face of Washington, D.C.

The effectiveness of this vocational guidance movement among the Jewish fraternities in the 1930s was best illustrated by the attendance of all at a special conference for them sponsored by the B'nai B'rith Hillel. At the Park Central Hotel in New York City on October 15, 1939, six weeks after the Nazi invasion of Poland and the beginning of World War II in Europe, delegates from every surviving national Jewish fraternity and sorority gathered. Even Pi Lambda Phi, which normally shunned such gatherings as a way of emphasizing its official nonsectarian status, sent representatives to the event. At this unprecedented conference of Jewish fraternal unity, the delegates voted to form a permanent body, with a standing delegate from each group, solely for disseminating vocational guidance and employment information.

These efforts turned out not to be necessary. With the movement of the United States toward wartime production in late 1940 and 1941, the entrance of the U.S. into the war itself, and the drafting of millions into the armed forces, the employment fears of the Great De-
pression evaporated amidst an acute labor shortage. Still, this did not detract from the surprise of participants and observers that for once, fraternities that normally stood in fierce competition with one another had been able to cooperate in time of crisis in a cause that concerned them all.

**Washing Dirty Linen: Conflict Management at Wisconsin and Ohio State, 1939**

The agreement that characterized the Jewish fraternities' approach to problems of employment was unusual. Unity among groups that during the Depression were competing fiercely for the same pool of potential applicants was the exception rather than the rule under the shadow of Hitler. The president of the University of Wisconsin Phi Epsilon Pi chapter in December 1939 lamented at his annual convention that the hatred and competition between the five Jewish men's fraternities on his campus actually presented a far graver problem than antisemitism expressed by Gentiles against Jews. In the previous three years, he reported, Jewish fraternities against other Jewish fraternities had brought up two serious complaints before the Gentile Dean of Men.²⁶

Traditionally, betraying a fellow Jew, informing on him to Gentile authorities, or bringing him before a hostile Gentile court, was one of the worst offenses one Jew could commit against another. If at all possible, disputes were to be settled by internal Jewish courts of law. Dr. Abram Sachar of the University of Illinois no doubt had this tradition in mind when in 1939 he made a special trip up to Madison to persuade Jewish fraternities to cease and desist from these tactics. At Illinois, Sachar made sure that his students maintained a special forum to settle fraternity disputes among themselves, and he urged the students at Wisconsin to do the same.²⁷

Not all the Wisconsin students, however, could agree with Sachar's proposed solution. The right to join the mainstream interfraternity councils had been hard-won, after all. Suppose Gentiles heard about these modern internal Jewish courts and then made the equally disturbing charge that Jews were sticking too much to themselves and thus deserved to be treated differently? "If you are going to wash the dirty linen out in public, that is bad; Jews cannot get along among themselves, and that does not look good," the Wisconsin Phi Epsilon Pi chapter president noted at his annual convention's roundtable meeting on the matter. Yet the Illinois method was not ideal either: "If you do
that, you are clannish. If there is no barrier, you are making it a dou­
ble one." 28

A lively discussion ensued among the delegates. Near the end,
the Ohio State representative commented that for his chapter the ques­
tion of clannishness was entirely moot. Joint sessions or cooperation
with Gentile fraternities on his campus at Columbus were an “utterly
ridiculous” idea. No Jewish fraternity boy at Ohio State had ever been
invited to a Gentile fraternity party, nor did Gentile students associate
with Jewish students in any way. With no cooperation between Jews and
Gentiles, he advised, one might as well have cooperation between the
Jewish houses. Phi Epsilon Pi Executive Secretary Maurice G. Gurin,
who was moderating the discussion, summed up by agreeing that con­
ditions differed from campus to campus, and that if Jewish students en­
joyed “the pleasure of not having any distinction,” then they should not
try to create one. On the other hand, he concluded, “If there is any dirty
linen, you should get together in a very informal body and wash it.” 29

Greater or Lesser Jewish Identity? The Burning Controversy

When faced with an unknown threat, disunity from within could be as
sharp as disunity from without. By far one of the most sensitive and
controversial sources of disunity in certain Jewish fraternities, or those
officially nonsectarian fraternities that were de facto Jewish, could be
their Jewish identity itself. The question of just how Jewish these frater­
nities should or should not be had been asked at their founding and was
asked anew with each generation. In many ways, the varying answers to
that question throughout the twentieth century served as a barometer
of the changing eras.

In the 1930s, the issue assumed greater urgency. Fraternities
were already under attack for their alleged frivolity and anti-intellectu­
alism. In addition, events in Europe were causing Jewish fraternity
undergraduates to become more aware of their identity and the respon­
sibilities it could impose whether they wished to or not. This led certain
alumni leaders to try adding more Jewish material to their fraternity’s
programming where it did not already exist. By so doing, they hoped
both to help members deal with new pressures and responsibilities and
also prove to outside critics that fraternities were capable of serious un­
dertakings.

Such plans were bound to meet resistance from those under­
graduates and alumni who wished to stress the social aspect of their
fraternities, not the Jewish ones. According to the alternate attitude, if a student wished to pray or to do Jewish organizational work there a were myriad of other groups available—such as Hillel, B’nai B’rith, or the National Federation of Temple Brotherhoods—which were more appropriate outlets. Besides, a period of intensifying antisemitism and encroaching Hitlerism hardly seemed the most propitious time to make one’s Jewish background any more conspicuous than it already was. Under the circumstances, did it not behoove them to keep as low a profile as possible?

Keeping a low Jewish profile did not happen to be part of the worldview of the American-born Maurice Jacobs, University of Maine ’17, long-time secretary and executive leader of Phi Epsilon Pi. In the 1930s, this tendency drove him in an unsuccessful and highly divisive struggle to inject more Jewish programming into his officially nonsectarian fraternity. A self-described rebel from an Orthodox Jewish childhood and a dedicated layman in the U.S. Reform Jewish movement, the Philadelphian was as capable as anyone in the upper echelons of judging the manners and cultural backgrounds of his fellow Jews with special ire, as we have seen, reserved for those originating in New York and Brooklyn.

Nevertheless, in all these pronouncements against individuals it was never the overall value of Judaism or Jewish peoplehood that he judged. Jacobs was a prominent communal leader, active in many causes beyond his fraternity, and a scholar as well. As an indicator of his interests, background, abilities, and working skills in both Hebrew and Yiddish, by 1932, when he was appointed Phi Epsilon Pi’s Executive Director for a small annual salary, Jacobs simultaneously served as director and editor for the Jewish Publication Society of America. Both headquarters were located down the hall from each other in the same Philadelphia office building, and at times he ran both offices at once by working eleven-hour days and keeping five stenographers busy. Jacobs was determined that his Phi Epsilon Pi would serve as a vehicle to encourage active Jewish identification and broad communal leadership among its younger members.

As early as the December 1923 convention, it will be recalled, traveling secretary Jacobs had led the fight for the Grand Council to remove the cross and crescent from the fraternity’s crest. He had also lent his voice to the group insisting that they cease from hobbling expansion through recruitment of then-unattainable Gentile members in the name of an alleged nonsectarianism. When Jacobs assumed the po-
sition of Executive Director in 1932, in line with his previous fraternity policies, he at first arranged for generous portions of reading material—including religious tracts, pamphlets, and copies of a Reform Jewish youth movement magazine—to be sent to the various chapters. Later, he urged greater cooperation between chapters and local Hillel Foundations and rabbis. Soon after, Jacobs also established a close friendship with Dr. Abram Leon Sachar, who was already an honorary member of the Phi Epsilon Pi chapter at the University of Illinois. A professor of history, Sachar at the time was also the National B'ni B'rith Hillel director. (After an early retirement from Hillel, Abram Sachar became in 1948 the first president of Brandeis University, a Jewish-sponsored institution). Jacobs, slightly in awe of Sachar, easily persuaded the academician to serve on the fraternity's Grand Council as its semiofficial consultant on Jewish affairs.

In July 1934, at Jacobs' behest, Sachar composed and presented to the fraternity a "National Service Plan" program, which the other national officers quickly dubbed with his name. The "Sachar Plan" called for an increase in the Jewish content of fraternity life in six ways. These included the reading of Jewish books as part of the pledge period, regular distribution of Jewish magazines and periodicals to the chapter houses, more articles of Jewish interest in the fraternity's quarterly magazine, more cooperation with local Hillel foundations and Jewish congregations, and more direct encouragement of alumni participation and leadership in Jewish institutional life. With Sachar present, delegates at the Phi Epsilon Pi 1934 convention unanimously voted to adopt the plan.

Revolts Against the Sachar Plan

Subsequently, however, none but Jacobs and a handful of supporters seemed eager to implement the plan's measures. Instead, a full-scale alumni revolt against the Sachar Plan broke out, centered in the Reform Jewish strongholds of Chicago and Cincinnati as well as, ironically, the Phi Epsilon Pi chapters at Ohio State University and Sachar's own University of Illinois. At those campuses, undergraduate members possibly resented the overpowering influence of this history professor, Hillel director, and eminent Jewish communal leader. The rebels were appalled at what they saw as an attempt to inject unwanted Jewish religious influences into their purely social/cultural/ethnic organization and demanded that the efforts cease immediately. Sachar suffered the ultimate insult when two undergraduate members of his very own Illinois
Phi Epsilon Pi chapter sent out a national letter condemning both him and his plan and dared to reproduce it on chapter house stationery.

One leader of the revolt, Jean Wertheimer, an alumnus and banker living in Cincinnati, warned against the "rabbinical tendencies" taking over his fraternity. He claimed to be hearing comments among the membership such as, "When our initiation becomes a Bar Mitzvah and our quarterly a B'nai B'rith Monthly, I and many of my fraters are going to take a walk." In an impassioned letter warning that the implementation of the Sachar Plan would tear the fraternity apart, Wertheimer wrote to the Grand Superior of the fraternity Louis M. Fushan on March 28, 1936:

The Grand Council and the Fraternity are both riding for a fall, if this thing continues, and if you continue in your effort to try to make kids swallow a lot of baloney that they do not sincerely accept, and forget as soon a they are out of college and into the world, it is going to kill the Alumni who don't go into the "pow-wows" of Jewish patriotism, worked into a fever heat by Rabbis at a pep meeting and crammed down their throats at conventions in the form of a sweet pill from silver-tongued speakers. . . . You certainly don't see the lawyers preaching and practicing law in the Fraternity, and demanding of the boys that they cooperate with the lawyer's aid society, or read the court index, or worry about what Hitler is doing to the bar and bench in Germany, and all that crap. . . . To be very frank, I don't know if it means anything to you or the other boys or the Fraternity, but I am losing my interest in it, and only because of the "Jewishness" or "Jewish consciousness" in the Fraternity, that I don't like and won't have. . . . An outstanding Jewish social worker or Rabbi tells a Fraternity that it must be Jewish, write Jewish, read Jewish, etc. and a weak-kneed Grand Council groping for a policy, or some plan to use, forgets the college boy, and Alumni, and forgets the principles and purposes of the college fraternity, and grabs a religious strain and tries to go to town with it. I tell you it won't work!

Jacobs' first response to Wertheimer's letter was not to take it seriously. When called upon for an explanation, Jacobs informed the Grand Superior that Wertheimer's fraternal loyalties were suspect because he had in fact once tried to desert Phi Epsilon Pi for Pi Lambda Phi (possibly because of its greater commitment to the ideology of non-sectarianism), and that the Cincinnati circle he headed had never done anything worthwhile for the fraternity anyway. Furthermore, they had allowed the University of Cincinnati chapter to die because they did not want to be associated with Hebrew Union College students (Hebrew Union College rabbinical students were permitted to pursue their BA
degrees simultaneously at the University of Cincinnati and thus were a common source of material for Jewish fraternities there). The comparison between lawyers and rabbis was ridiculous, Jacobs charged, and the Sachar Plan was the only thing that would save the fraternity from oblivion. Finally, he wrote angrily, “if we’re riding for a fall then I say let’s take the fall and go out of business.” 35 Jacobs also insisted that a great fuss was being made over nothing, since little of the proposed Jewish programming had in fact been implemented.

Sachar concurred. In an icy reply to a protest from the president of the Chicago Alumni Association about the “over-emphasis” of Jewish affairs in their fraternity, Sachar wrote back that he “had not been aware of the tremendous Jewishness of the Phi Ep chapters throughout the country.” 36 He furthermore assured the alumni that only one chapter, Cornell, had even bothered to send in a report in hopes of obtaining a new award for the chapter with the best record in Jewish activities. “I do not believe that you have to worry about over-Judaizing the boys who come into Phi Ep. No chapter has been really infected,” Sachar concluded. “I appreciate your writing to me, and I only hope that sometime such a problem will actually arise.” 37

Seeing this reaction to his efforts, Sachar broke contact with Phi Epsilon Pi and retained a lifelong animosity toward Jewish fraternities. None were officially allowed to set foot on the campus of Brandeis University so long as he was President or Chancellor there. To the end of his life, he was hardly able even to discuss the subject of Jewish fraternities without becoming visibly choked with rage.

**Jewish Rituals?**

In addition to supporting the Sachar Plan, Jacobs in the mid-1930s further tried to bring into the fraternity’s national leadership approximately a half dozen young Reform rabbis. These men had joined Phi Epsilon Pi as undergraduates and had later received ordination at the Reform movement’s Hebrew Union College seminary. Since these rabbis knew what the life of a typical American college student was like and were so thoroughly Americanized themselves, their religious input would presumably be more acceptable than that of older rabbis or authorities from more traditional denominations. The group included Rabbi L. Elliot Grafman, who was appointed the fraternity’s National Pledgemaster; Washington and Lee graduate Rabbi David H. Wice; and Rabbi Albert G. Minda, who became the fraternity’s Scholarship Commissioner.
Without consulting other officers of the fraternity, Jacobs commissioned Wice to rewrite the fraternity’s secret rituals in order to inject more Jewish content into them.

For almost two years Wice worked on the quasi-liturgical project, drawing upon Jewish texts, motifs and prayers for his inspiration. He and Jacobs discussed eliminating the traditional skull and bones from the initiation ceremony in favor of a Menorah and other traditional Jewish symbols. The Hebrew Kaddish mourner’s prayer was to be read at the fraternity’s memorial service for departed members. Verses from the Twenty-third Psalm and the Book of Isaiah (“How good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity”) would be recited. The Superior of the chapter, in explaining the mysteries and symbols of the fraternity, would invoke the memory of the Biblical friendship of David and Jonathan, along with the ideals of freedom celebrated in the Jewish holiday of Passover.

The final version of the new Judaized ritual came up for a vote at the annual convention in 1936. It did not even come close to passing. Jacobs, who about that time was deciding on whether to give up on Phi Epsilon Pi and instead go to work for the Jewish Publication Society full-time, thereafter faced the unpleasant task of writing to Wice (then serving as a pulpit rabbi in Omaha, Nebraska) to apologize. “Some of the boys are still afraid of the word Jewish,” he wrote, “and do not want to accept anything smacking of a typical prayer service”—although Jacobs hastened to assure the rabbi that his efforts had merited him an appointment as the fraternity’s Grand Chaplain. “Thanks loads for your letter of the twenty-first,” wrote Wice back, obviously miffed. “I was a little surprised to see Phi Ep go Nordic. Perhaps they think I wear a beard and can’t speak campus English.” At the 1939 convention, four months after the outbreak of World War II in Europe, Phi Epsilon Pi in convention assembled further confirmed a new ritual which deliberately had not a single Jewish reference in it.

When the Wice ritual was rejected, Jacobs received comfort from one of his few supporters, attorney and Chicago Alumni Association member Samuel J. Sherman. Like him, Sherman was a dedicated Reform Jewish layman and a product of a traditional Jewish childhood. As Jacobs had once tried to explain the mysteries of New York Jews to Sherman, Sherman now tried to explain to his Philadelphian colleague why Midwesterners might desire assimilation and feared being too conspicuous as Jews in any way. “There is a situation here which an Easterner like you will find hard to appreciate at all,” he wrote,
and that is that the second and third generation here are entirely disinterested in things Jewish. . . . I imagine some of our boys feel our so-called "nonsectarianism" was a virtue, and the project of making the ritual "more Jewish" and giving the fraternity a Jewish direction is undesirable. . . . Fundamentally they believe in a philosophy which is based on worry, fear, or downright shame because they are Jews. For the fear they can't be entirely blamed these days . . . It's hard for you to picture it because you—like me—have taken the necessity for interest in things Jewish for granted. People here in the mass don't. In fact, they prefer to be not even reminded about it. 42

Jacobs replied with resignation, saying that the problems they faced were not to be found only in the American Midwest: "It is the same problem we have everywhere in the country today with our so-called educated young Jewish men. Where it is going to lead to, I don't know, but evidently we have not learned from the tragedy in Germany and will have to wait until the same thing is given to us here." 43

Jacobs' attitude was shared in part by Arthur D. Schwarz of Zeta Beta Tau, himself a child of the old German Jewish elite. Schwarz by this time had become well-known within his fraternity for penning hilarious parodies and satires of that culture along with other humorous aspects of Greek life in the pages of the Zeta Beta Tau Quarterly. (In 1922 he had entertained his readers with an essay entitled "Rushing as It Wunst Wuz.") In 1936 however, when reviewing a book by scholar and author Marvin Lowenthal that described the situation of the Jews in Hitler's Germany, Schwartz abandoned his customary lightheartedness. Specifically, he lashed out at the tendency of members and their families to disregard the principle of Jewish unity and to scorn the traditions of the East European Jews:

The greatest tragedy to this reviewer of the German situation was that time just before Hitler's election when our smug, self-satisfied German-American families—yours and mine—smiled knowingly and said, "Ach, Hitler isn't worrying about our German Jews—it's those verdammte Polacks we, as well as they, want kicked out of Der Vaterland." Have you ever listened in at a bridge or Mah Jong klatsch and heard Tante Debby say, "I certainly hate that Yiddish jargon—I despise it—where did that language ever start? Where did those kikes learn it?" The answer is they learned it in Germany from the South Germans. Do you have any recollection of remarks like this, "The Jew will never be hurt in Germany; that's the one country where the Jew is respected because he is, like the German himself, a super-mensch, far ahead of Jews anywhere else in the world." Do you remember your rabbi or your father saying, "What the devil do
we Germans need Palestine and Zionism. It’s all right for those Jews of Russia, but we Germans are better off in America or in Germany. They should have their Palestine, those Ostjuden."  

The “Phi Ep Gentleman’s Code”

After the failure of the Sachar Plan and the Wice plan to Judaize the Phi Epsilon Pi rituals, Jacobs learned from his mistakes and turned to young alumnus Rabbi L. Elliot Grafman to transform a different segment of his fraternity’s membership literature. From 1937 through 1941, Grafman developed a new program of pledge training that stressed Jewish identity. This time, however, it eschewed particularistic details of Jewish ritual and stressed wider values upon which all segments of the community could agree.

Grafman was close enough to his college days to understand campus traditions and the teenaged boy’s longing for acceptance within mainstream, Gentile American society. In a series of ten lessons sent to all chapters, Grafman therefore supplied college freshmen with concrete and cautionary explanations of antisemitism along with specific ways to combat it. Most, in an extension of the old Best Behavior Syndrome and Mission of Manners greatly intensified by fear of encroaching Hitlerism, stressed a combination of maintaining unimpeachable standards of behavior and good citizenship. By the 1930s, this had crystallized into a new code of behavior. In a stance not dissimilar to the “pro-Semitism” philosophy of ZBT’s Harold Riegelman in the 1920s, the standards were meant not only to elevate individual lives. If followed properly, it was believed, they could help the entire Jewish community to deflect and prevent lethal manifestations of anti-Jewish prejudice.

These new pledge lessons included what Grafman chose to call the “Phi Ep Gentleman’s Code,” later incorporated into the fraternity’s initiation ritual. It was not an original idea, a “Gentleman’s Code” being part of the lore of some Gentile fraternities. “A Phi Ep is always a Gentleman! A Phi Ep commands respect and gives respect at all times and under all circumstances” read his version. In another lesson, the men were taught that all the Jews on the campus would be judged by their every act and attitude. “It’s truer than most men realize—especially when they are Jews—that they reflect in themselves the demands and achievements of their social group. . . . The man who remembers this is clothed with the necessary armor; the man who forgets or shirks bares the ugly nudity of dishonor of his fellows and thus betrays.” Another
lesson was on the “General Manly Requirements” of fraternity etiquette, including the need to accept correction cheerfully from others.\textsuperscript{48} “It is more important than ever,” he warned his undergraduates from 1937, “that the Jewish student’s loyalty be above reproach! He must in fact be more loyal, more interested, more active, and always, without being promiscuous. For it is an undeniable fact that on many a campus, the Jewish student has to do much better in demonstration of loyalty than his non-Jewish fellow students, in order to be equally acceptable.”\textsuperscript{49}

Phi Epsilon Pi’s alumni could not all agree on the desirability of requiring synagogue attendance or Jewish magazines and books in the chapter houses. All, however, could apparently agree with that final statement. Rabbi Grafman was gratified to see his pledge program enthusiastically endorsed at every Phi Epsilon Pi national convention between 1937 and 1941. After that, the U.S. entry into World War II put a halt to the annual meetings for the duration.

**Response: Fear of Success**

The written Rabbi Grafman pledge lessons of 1937 were symptomatic of the deepest, most widespread, and in many ways the simplest of the reactions and responses of middle-class American Jewry to antisemitism in the shadow of Hitler. The basic rules of the game and the paradigms of the reactions had not changed much since the days of the Harvard affair and Henry Ford in the 1920s. However, now the stakes had become higher and the hoped-for victory smaller. No longer upward mobility but sheer survival and staving off disaster were the main goals. The rules were: watch your manners, behave like ladies and gentlemen, avoid impropriety, keep your head low, be good and loyal citizens, and contribute to the welfare of your community. At the same time, avoid calling attention to yourself and never flaunt or permit other Jews to flaunt their money or abilities in the face of Gentiles for fear of arousing criticism or jealousy.\textsuperscript{50}

Observing the latter section of this code put Jews in a difficult position of daily walking the finest of lines. They naturally desired to do well for themselves and for their families, to increase their own security, to enjoy their hard-earned affluence, to gain credit for the good name of their people, and to win the approval of Gentiles. This goal called for just enough participation in public affairs to prove that they were not clannish or inassimilable, as the antisemites would have the world believe. On the other hand, they did not want to be so conspicuous in their
leadership or so dominant in public or artistic affairs or so financially successful as to lend any credence to the claim of the dreaded *Protocols* that Jews were actually taking over the nation or the world.

Lee Dover of Zeta Beta Tau, as head of a fraternity that ordinarily took pride in the wealth of its members, took the latter aspect of the Code with special seriousness. In 1937 and again in 1941 on the eve of the war he enacted for his chapters something near to the sumptuary laws that had governed the lives of Jews in Europe and the Middle East for hundreds of years. No chapter, he wrote, should collect fees beyond those which were necessary to carry out the programs of the chapter “in a successful manner;” and no chapter, he continued, “regardless of the financial ability of the families of its members should allow its operations to be de luxe or pretentious. ZBT chapters should operate along modest but adequate lines and should provide no reason for their campus associates to consider them ostentatious.”

Beyond simple wealth, conspicuous intellectual or political achievement could also arouse anxiety. Most American ethnic or religious groups, for example, might have been proud to contribute a member to the U.S. Supreme Court. Yet when Felix Frankfurter was appointed to the Court in 1938, a Washington reporter stated that ninety percent of the protests against Frankfurter came on the grounds that he was a Jew, and eighty percent of those complaints came from other Jews. Harold Riegelman, who had led Zeta Beta Tau through the 1920s and never lost the cachet of having been the first Jewish president of the National Interfraternity Conference, angrily denounced what he called the “posture of apology” Jews were adopting regarding the Frankfurter appointment. The premises of antisemitism, he warned, were being unconsciously embraced “by the very people whom it would destroy.” “Is it bad business in these unsettled times for a Jew to make himself conspicuous by serving his government?” he demanded of his audience. “Is it not worse business in these or any times for a Jew to refuse a service which any government has the right to expect of every citizen?”

**Do Unto Others First**

From late antiquity and medieval times bribery and promises of potential tax contributions as ways to placate hostile political authorities had been a technique central to Jewish communal survival. In the United States, for one of the few periods in their long history Jews had for some time enjoyed the luxury of voluntarily choosing to enrich individuals or
communities other than their own. They had invoked that privilege for any number of reasons. In the shadow of Hitler, the hopeful purchase of security and clout through the conspicuous contribution of money toward non-Jewish causes in the name of good citizenship became one more line of defense.

For example, when Jewish fraternity officials confronted the quotas and restrictions rampant at colleges and universities in the 1930s, it was common for them to receive and to accept the explanation that insufficient monetary contributions by their group were to blame. When Sigma Alpha Mu Executive Secretary Jimmy Hammerstein reported to the Supreme Council in March 1935 that Jewish fraternities at McGill University in Montreal faced a fight for their existence because the administration had decided to reduce Jewish enrollment to twenty-five men a year, the only explanation he could give for the reduction was that “contributions by Jews to the Endowment Funds have been proportionately so small.” Similarly, in 1936 the Sigma Alpha Mu alumni of Syracuse University announced their intention of setting up a scholarship to be used by a deserving student of any faith. Their motive was “to prove to the trustees that Jews ARE interested in alma mater. This is important, as there is some talk of cutting down students from the metropolitan district which means, in effect, curtailing the number of Jewish students.”

The second World War and the catastrophe of European Jewry was already in progress across the seas, yet Jewish causes did not rank high on the list when in April 1941 the National Council of Alpha Epsilon Phi debated the topic of what their “National Project,” or chief charitable endeavor, should be. The women eventually decided on scholarships to any deserving college student, regardless of whether he or she was a Jewish refugee. General scholarships were not just an appropriate cause for a sorority; they were a way, as supporters of the motion put it specifically, “to help combat antisemitism.” In the past, they agreed, Jewish groups as a rule had not sufficiently supported educational activities and thus were criticized as being interested only in charities for their own people. Scholarships granted in the name of Alpha Epsilon Phi, a Jewish sorority, might help to erase that impression, and ultimately do their people greater service.

Fear of Political Activity

In condemning the activities of Jewish Communist students at American colleges, Rabbi Max Kadushin, speaking at the annual Hillel di-
rector's conference in Indiana in 1937, at least praised their intelligence, spoke with concern for their needs, and advocated drawing them in to communal activities rather than shunning them.

The alumni officers of Alpha Epsilon Phi sorority, however, along with the Jewish fraternity world’s more conservative elements, were not so forgiving of possible Communist activity within their ranks, especially after the events of 1939 and the signing of the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact. They lived in mortal fear that the political activities of their undergraduates could bring great harm to the good name of their group and to the Jewish people as a whole. Involvement in anything even resembling Communist activity led credence to charges that Jews were inherently a disruptive force that sought to rule the world, and violated parts of the Code calling for Jews to be good citizens and to be as quiet and inconspicuous as possible. They were apprehensive to learn that four members at New York University were active in the American Student Union, an organization that was feared to be a front for the Young Communist League.57

Apprehension turned to horror when the following mimeographed petition, festooned with the Alpha Epsilon Phi logo and signed by the four offending students, was found to be circulating on the NYU campus in December of 1939:

SNOBBERY IS OUTMODED / WE SORORITY WOMEN SINCERELY BELIEVE that discrimination, be it on the basis of race, creed, or color, is highly unbecoming to ladies. America was not built on the principle that one individual is better than another. Americans must work together for a common cause. / WE HAVE SEEN HOW THIS POLICY OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST RACIAL GROUPS AND PEOPLES HAS BROUGHT ABOUT THE DOWNFALL OF EUROPE. IT IS HAPPENING HERE! YOU MUST BELIEVE IT! THESE PEOPLE WHO SIT AT HOME in their arm chairs and say “It can’t happen here,” are fooling themselves to a degree that is unmentionable. IT IS A SERIOUS PROBLEM. / WE WOMEN ARE ALERT to the causal factors and results, and will do our utmost to see that IT WILL NOT HAPPEN HERE! (signed) / Members of the ALPHA EPSILON PHI Sorority / Jenny Braekman / Naomi Bloom / Joyce Grossman / Judith Silverman.

Disapproval of this statement against the selective basis of their sorority paled in comparison, however, to their shock when they heard in early March 1941 that Naomi Bloom (NYU ’42) and six other NYU students calling themselves the Committee for Racial Equality had been suspended from school for circulating a forbidden petition in the NYU
cafeteria, alleging that NYU was discriminating against its Negro athletes by agreeing not to send them to an upcoming track meet with the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. The incident created national headlines. Hundreds of NYU students protested, sporting buttons reading "Reinstate the 7 Fighters Against Jim Crow." On April 3, 1939, Eleanor Roosevelt addressed an audience of seven hundred in a nearby church in order to lend support to the student protesters, though she added a "verbal spanking" that the students had been perhaps too violent and hasty in their methods. For weeks, the NYU student government and prominent public figures appealed to the university's chancellor and dean to reverse their decision, to no avail.

For the members of Alpha Epsilon Phi's National Council, however, their main concern was not the future of race relations in the United States nor the questionable legality of the college's suspension process, but the unfavorable publicity which their sorority had received and the question of what they should do about the errant Naomi Bloom. For six weeks they investigated and debated: should she be reprimanded, put on probation, suspended, or expelled from the sorority altogether? In the end, the Council acted on the side of leniency by voting only to put her on probation during the term of her suspension from the college. The decision came in part because evidence emerged that she was the least responsible of the seven students and had never meant to drag the sorority's name into the controversy. In fact, by all reports she was a dedicated, active, and well-liked member of her chapter. The reasons that those advocating stronger action gave, however, reflected their fear that association with radical student activity of any kind could ultimately destroy them.

"I have always been so terribly opposed to those of our faith taking part in such activity, that I cannot feel that we should be lenient in this case," wrote Field Secretary Florence S. Orringer from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in expressing her original opinion that they should request Bloom's resignation. "Her actions and her suspension from school have done Zeta [NYU chapter] immeasurable harm, and cannot help but reflect badly on the name of Alpha Epsilon Phi." "I do feel strongly in this case that at the present time we as a Jewish organization cannot afford to be tied up in any way with communistic organizations," wrote Irma Loeb Cohen from Shaker Heights, Ohio, in recommending that all Alpha Epsilon Phi members be asked to resign from campus political organizations or else be expelled from the sorority. "We must see that not one of our members has any doubtful political connections. And I
do think refusals should result in immediate disaffiliation. I know we were afraid of just such a possibility when we discussed ASU affiliation at NYU before. And now we have it! So we'd better act now before worse happens.”

Exaggerated Etiquette

Social polish had always been important as a way for fraternity members to distinguish themselves from lower classes of Jews, to build self-respect, and to gain valuable allies among Gentiles. The art of over­coming antisemitic stereotypes by good manners had been part of Zeta Beta Tau’s rationale for existence for many generations. Never before the rise of Adolf Hitler, however, had the subject been such a crucial part of the fraternity’s curriculum. The last pre-war Zeta Beta Tau Manual for Chapter Administration, authored by Lee Dover in 1937 and revised and republished only one week before Pearl Harbor, was permeated with the concept. The esoteric manual predictably dealt with such routine fraternity matters as finances, collection procedures, rituals, meal plans, and descriptions of officers’ duties. However, specific instructions on the maintenance of manners and good behavior, with special emphasis on the desirability of remaining as inconspicuous as possible, filled many pages.

“There are certain conventions in ZBT which are taught to and observed by all undergraduates from the time they are freshmen,” Dover wrote, in describing his fraternity’s ideal. “They eschew extreme styles in clothing, and loud colors. They are quiet in voice and manner. Their table manners are unobtrusive and correct. In short, ZBT’s are gentlemen.” No ZBT undergraduate, for example, was permitted to wear a mustache. Exhibiting intoxication at a university dance or “similar un­gentlemanly behavior” in public would result in a withdrawal of weekend social privileges. Coats and ties had to be worn at all meals and on most campuses any time a young member stepped out the front door of his fraternity house. The chapter president could allow more casual dress on special occasions, but never when guests were present. There was to be no discussion between tables or the passing of food or condiments from one table to another. In short, “Decorum and proper modulation of voices” was the guiding rule, whether or not guests were present. The degree of the real culture of the membership of a fraternity chapter, Dover stipulated, could be gauged in the dining room by a sound meter, reading it in reverse.
Many of these rules were common among fraternities, and had been in force long before the eve of World War II. Yet the tenacity with which some Zeta Beta Tau members clung to their training during these years of anxiety was enough to arouse comment, as in this item by a Kansas City Star columnist appearing on August 3, 1936:

Members and Alumni of the Missouri chapter of Zeta Beta Tau were holding a rush party in the Ambassador Hotel dining room on a recent night. The place was air-cooled, but, nevertheless, in the weather it looked odd to see sixty or more men sitting dignifiedly around a table with their coats on. The only other guests in the room comprised a boy and a girl twosome, some distance away. Both halves of the date were more than surprised when two of the ZBT’s walked up, addressed the girl and said, “We beg your pardon, but would you mind a lot if we took off our coats at our table?” Just a fraternity with manners!

At Alpha Epsilon Phi, an entire office within the sorority’s national roster, known as the “Courtesy Chairman,” was created in the late 1930s. In January of 1938 Joan Loewy Cohn, who had received the appointment, inaugurated a column entitled “Greek P’s and Q’s” in order to school members in the arts of proper dress, good grooming, and entertaining with grace and style. Her articles on giving a formal tea covered in detail such items as setting the table, securing corsages for the guests of honor and the housemother, how to dispense the honor of “pouring,” when it was proper to receive in long dresses, and how to use a pastry tube and vegetable dye to create imaginative refreshments in green and white, the sorority colors.

Charm and attractiveness at all times became a pursuit of the entire sorority. At the University of Illinois chapter, “straggling coiffures, hanging slips and excess pounds have all been banned,” she wrote. Notes were hung on the mirrors of the house to ask offending sorors, “How’s your make-up?” “Are your seams straight?” “How’s your color combination?” and “Where’s that girdle?” Those with weight to lose were seated at a special diet table in the dining hall. At the University of Minnesota, similar criticisms were handled more subtly and impersonally through the use of a “charm box.” Each Monday night the head of the “charm committee” passed out sealed envelopes, and the pointers inside were read by the members in private. Loewy herself cautioned members in her writings: don’t chew gum on campus, don’t dance with any other part of the body but your feet, don’t forget porch etiquette (for neighbors could see and hear), don’t smoke cigarettes while walking down...
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the street, replace nail polish the moment it starts to crack or peel, keep wool dresses dry-cleaned, have anklets that match your dresses and do not sag down into the backs of your shoes, and above all keep cottons and linens “immaculately laundered and pressed.”

Looking “Too Jewish”

Distance from immigrant origins along with money and family background had always been prized in the membership selection process of the upper tier fraternities, but with the rise of Hitler, the stakes became higher. Like chameleons who sought to blend into their environment by the use of protective coloring, members equated propriety, respectability, security, and safety with looking and acting as much like Gentiles as possible—or, at the very least, the way they imagined Gentiles should look and act. The result, as we have seen, is that expressions of intra-Jewish snobbery and the shunning of candidates who were too stereotypically “Jewish” in manner or appearance reached its height during the 1930s.

Saying of someone that he or she “did not look Jewish” had become, over the years, one of the highest compliments any person could pay to a Jew. By the eve of World War II, young college students were apparently taking the attitude to extremes. Lee Dover of Zeta Beta Tau, in the “Membership Standards” section of his manual on chapter administration, found it necessary in 1941 to chide the undergraduates against this tendency:

Some chapters have not pledged men for the sole reason that certain, unintelligent members have offered the opinion that they were “too Jewish.” By this they have meant, although they do not express their real opinion, that the man in question, if known on the campus as a member of their chapter would set it and its membership apart from the rest of the student body. This is a stupid attitude. No Jewish student or organization can masquerade successfully as a Gentile. The matter of honesty and conscience alone should prohibit such an attempt. All Jewish students are known to be Jews by their non-Jewish contemporaries. If the undergraduates in the chapter will take the attitude that being a Jew is a personal thing like being a member of any other faith or racial group, they will not be disturbed in their own minds on this point and their attitude will tend to be accepted by their contemporaries on the campus.

The admonitions of “Mr. ZBT” notwithstanding, some fraternity members continued the long-time quest of looking as non-Jewish as possible, routinely changing their names, resorting to specialized hair-
dressing, and occasionally submitting to plastic surgery—especially rhinoplasty, colloquially known as “nose-fixing.” This option had first become available in the early 1920s and dozens of Jewish entertainers and movie stars, beginning with Fanny Brice, had already availed themselves of it.  

Avoiding Jewish Women

The desire to escape one’s Jewishness had its effects on relationships between young Jewish men and women. If a young Jewish man could not make himself look like a Gentile, then he could still aspire to the goal of being accepted by a Gentile woman, helped along perhaps by vast expenditures of money upon his date and liberal application of his most gentlemanly behavior. The Zeta Beta Tau men of Alabama had been so eager to have compatible Jewish women attend their school that they had supplied Alpha Epsilon Phi sorority with a ready-made rushing list; this eagerness, however, was not always matched by ZBTs at other campuses.

In the case of Zeta Beta Tau’s chapter at the University of Missouri, consistent reports from the Anti-Defamation League, community rabbis and ZBT alumni were continually surfacing throughout the 1930s that older members were either discouraging or outright forbidding the younger ones to date Jewish girls. When confronted, the chapter officers had always denied it, and the national alumni officers had always backed them up in responding to the fraternity’s accusers, but as time passed, the mounting accusations could no longer be ignored.

The matter came to a head in October 1941, when Rabbi David Jacobson of Temple Beth-El in San Antonio, Texas, reported that a Jewish senior at Stephens College—a women’s school also located in the city of Columbia, Missouri—claimed to have discovered that the chapter levied a fine against any member who brought a “Jewess” to the spring dance. The amount of the fine, depending on the importance of the social occasion, allegedly varied between five and ten dollars. If they were indeed using this technique, then the young men of Missouri’s ZBT did not conceive of it themselves, but had learned it from the Gentile world. Certain restricted country clubs that did not outright forbid Jews from joining were known to levy fines against members who brought Jews onto the premises as guests.

Lee Dover responded to the charge by writing to the undergraduate officers to demand an explanation. He also alerted the ZBT alumni directors of the chapter in Kansas City that they had better go
in to see the students and to set the matter straight. "I do not feel that any of our chapters should tell their members who they shall or shall not date," he wrote, and warned of the undesirable repercussions that such stories could cause among the community:

The matter which he brings up is not a new one as you will remember. Although Omega [University of Missouri chapter] has denied in the past that it has a rule which prevents its members from dating Jewish girls, at least on certain occasions, I am not convinced that it does not have some sort of a rule which the fraternity cannot countenance . . . I am probably one of the few members of the Fraternity who has understood Omega's attitude relative to mixing freely with the Gentile students. I do not desire to eliminate this as a chapter policy, but I do feel that we must definitely get rid of the chapter's policy which causes the constant comment throughout the country that Omega is antisemitic towards Jewish coeds and that it forces its freshmen to comply with its ruling in this connection. 77

The president of the Missouri ZBT chapter insisted that the allegations were "utterly ridiculous" and the product of jealous troublemakers. "In the past we have ignored such foolish accusations and intend to do so in the future," he wrote. 78 Dover passed the denial on to Rabbi Jacobson with the mollifying comment, "From time to time a few young ladies, who go to the University of Missouri and who do not have an enjoyable social time there have, through the past years, taken to their home cities similar trouble-making reports . . . There is no way that either you or I can control the preferences of the young Jewish men in college as to feminine company." 79

To the undergraduates at Missouri, however, Dover did not take nearly so indulgent a tone, nor did he accept the young men's protestations of innocence. "It is my knowledge that your chapter has, in the past, had certain rules, call them traditional customs, if you will, which have caused freshmen pledges to feel that they have to date Gentile coeds," he wrote.

If this policy still exists, I believe it is unwise. It is one thing to tell freshmen that they should not confine their associations to Jewish students on the campus (no one has advocated more than the writer the breaking down of ghetto lines on the American campus) but it is quite another thing to lead such pledges to suppose that they are encouraged to avoid association with their co-religionists at the University be they male or female. 80
He promised personally “in the very near future” to visit the chapter to discuss the allegations. In the meantime, in order for the chapter to do what was “best for it and for American Jewry,” the young men would have to do a “public relations job with the Jewish coeds” at Missouri. “Your chapter must handle itself so well on this particular point in the future,” he threatened, “that there will be no opportunity for troublemakers to misinterpret its policy, or if you like it better, lack of policy relative to dating Jewish and Gentile girls.” They must go out of their way, at least once a year, to “entertain and make friends with the Jewish coeds, not only those who are ‘Hedy Lamarrs’ but also those who are not so fortunately endowed.” Finally Dover refused, in answer to the Missouri president’s demands, to divulge the name of the Stephens College senior who had betrayed them, since doing so would “serve no purpose—and if you do discover this later, I advise you against reprisals.”

Fear of “Out-of-State” Students: 
Vice Charges at Iowa State, 1935

The old fear of bringing shame upon campus Jews by ill-bred behavior in public could also turn to terror if a Jewish fraternity was caught in violation of campus rules, which in the heyday of the *in loco parentis* philosophy completely governed student movements and contacts with the opposite sex. In such cases Jewish fraternity men might discover that the rest of the world did not look with favor upon their forays into relationships with non-Jewish young women. Regulations were stricter and far more difficult to circumvent in those days. Simply violating the traditional midnight curfew or having female guests in the house without a chaperone present was grounds for trouble. No more did being caught besmirch only the integrity of Jewish college students or the Greek system in general; now, the entire good name of Judaism appeared at stake. When the Phi Beta Delta chapter at Iowa State University made national headlines in April 1935 for allegedly “maintaining a disorderly house” by “housing two juvenile girls within their quarters for immoral purposes,” (the members insisted that they were innocent) Anti-Defamation League director and Phi Epsilon Pi alumnus Richard E. Gutstadt immediately demanded that all Jewish fraternity chapters in the country meet to discuss the situation.

The entire Jewish student migrant movement that had served as such an important outlet for American Jewry appeared to be endangered by the charges. Gutstadt was clearly upset that the Iowa newspa-
pers had published the obviously Jewish names of all the chapter members. The paper had also not failed to point out that Phi Beta Delta's headquarters were in "New York," and had published on the front pages a photograph—full-faced and untouched—of the fraternity chapter's president. Furthermore, the mayor and local authorities were grasping at the exposé as an opportunity to declare a war against vice in the town of Ames. "The unhappy publicity which attended this breach of morals and of university regulations will indubitably produce very undesirable repercussions," Gutstadt, whose own son was a Phi Epsilon Pi at Illinois, wrote in a warning letter to the heads of all Jewish fraternities on April 10, 1935:

The Anti-Defamation League has for many years concerned itself with the good name of American Jewry. For the last several years, with the increase of antisemitic sentiment throughout the country, it has striven mightily to counteract all false propaganda and to secure the position of the American Jew. . . . All of the aspects of this specific problem [i.e. vice charges against fraternity houses] should be placed before your groups and they be urged to exercise every possible precaution. It should be made clear to them that their individual and collective conduct should be above reproach and that the utmost care should be exercised to maintain such aspects of Jewish dignity and Jewish rectitude of conduct as to afford no basis for criticism.  

At issue, apparently, was also the ADL's fear that charges of "immorality" against Jewish fraternity houses located in small midwestern towns might arouse antisemitic stereotypes of Jews as white slavers, pimps, and prostitutes, and thus result in the state universities closing their doors to Jews—or at least to out-of-state students, since the two groups were often one and the same. It was beside the point, Gutstadt wrote, "in view of the tenor of publicity which accompanied the expose," to insist that members of Jewish fraternities were most certainly not alone in violations of campus rules prohibiting unchaperoned women in male student quarters. Revelations in one Jewish area could easily lead to investigations of Jews in others, he wrote. Unless Jewish fraternity men scrupulously guarded their contact with women and avoided even the appearance of violating regulations, further investigations could turn up ample material "which could be used to heighten anti-Jewish sentiment." "How this may be exploited for the purpose of evoking prohibitions against extrastate admissions to State Universities can easily be discerned," Gutstadt warned.
No one in the Jewish fraternity world seemed to think that Gutstadt might be exaggerating the gravity of the situation. In fact, so impressed was Maurice Jacobs of Phi Epsilon Pi with Gutstadt’s handling of the Iowa vice charges, that he offered the ADL director free Life Membership in the fraternity as a tribute. Throughout the rest of 1935, the Anti-Defamation League, Jacobs, and community rabbis worked “tactfully and quietly” in tandem to educate their young charges in the realities of just how much trouble their foibles might cause. Jacobs himself ordered the closing of all of Phi Epsilon Pi’s fraternity houses during the summer so that no unauthorized and unsupervised personnel might wander in and harm the fraternity’s name, a policy which Gutstadt agreed should be mandatory for every national Jewish fraternity.85

Their worst fears were realized in the first week of July, when another Jewish fraternity was “raided”—this time Sigma Tau Phi, a small national with a chapter at Temple University, although the administration claimed that none of the names of the people taken to the local police station were of registered students. “Some organizations are not taking their responsibilities seriously and we must do something about it,” wrote Jacobs to Gutstadt, upon reading about the incident in his newspaper. He urged more stringent education among the undergraduates about the responsibility their groups held for “the protection of the Jewish name.”86

“What if It Happens Here?”

When Nazism began making inroads into Austria in 1934, delegates from all the Jewish men’s fraternities met to appoint a committee to draw up a plan of action in case the movement spread to the United States. The committee reportedly met, drew up a plan, and distributed copies to all the groups, although fortunately there was never a need to refer to it.87

Whatever plans were made or discussed, the first line of defense in the shadow of Hitler was that most close at hand: personal behavior. In the middle of a routine presentation by the Grand Superior on fraternity finances at the December 1937 Phi Epsilon Pi convention, a member interrupted by handing the speaker a newspaper with headlines proclaiming Rumania’s revocation of the citizenship of its Jews. “I see in the papers that another country has announced a campaign to liquidate the Jews,” the speaker announced to the assembly. Then, without long pause and without expressing shock or outrage, the fraternity’s Grand
Superior immediately connected the events in Rumania with possible similar events in the U.S., and cautioned that good manners would go far toward averting such evil decrees in their own land. “There are sufficient bigots in this country to take any excuse at all to carry on such a campaign,” he warned. “The Jewish student body on the campus is the most important element of the Jewish people as a whole in combating the sort of thing that is attempting to ruin us. Let’s go back to our various chapters and see that we keep our own houses in order. . . . See that all the men in your chapter always conduct themselves as gentlemen at all times.”

Over a period of six weeks, from December 1938 to January 1939, in her investigatory travels to six colleges—Illinois, Northwestern, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Syracuse, and Cornell—Reba B. Cohen, by then the national president of Alpha Epsilon Phi sorority, noted with gratitude the genuine interest and concern of some Gentile college officials as they asked her questions about religion, Germany, Palestine, and Jewish refugees. At the same time she expressed her apprehension for the future and concern that poor public behavior was harming the position of Jews on campus. She called for unity among all the Jewish women’s groups and for a special sorority conference to address these concerns:

The more I talked with deans, community leaders, and college leaders both Jewish and non-Jewish—the more convinced I became that steps should be taken for better understanding between all Jewish fraternity women. . . . Present world-wide conditions should make us realize that it is not sufficient to give a secret handclasp and talk about high ideals. . . . So many gigantic world problems face us at present that the pettiness of wholesome competition plus the incompatibility of Jewish groups fills the average person with disgust. Much criticism and censure has been heaped upon us in connection with rushing, cliquing, and arousing unnecessary attention in public places. Unethical rushing is certainly a problem for all sensible fraternity women to consider; but at present we must also concentrate on proper conduct and proper dress. We can shout from the house tops that it can’t happen here, but personally, I think we should do less shouting and more acting so that it WILL be less apt to happen here.

“We can, as college women,” she concluded, “best serve our people by creating better understanding between Jews and non-Jews, by paying special attention to our dress, manners, and speech, and by cooperating among ourselves.”
In time, American Jews would learn that proper dress, good manners, quiet speech, and gentle behavior alone would not be sufficient to protect the Jewish people from great tragedy. It says worlds about them, however, to see from the records on the eve of World War II, just how many of them believed that it would.