Going Greek

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Chapter 8

Fighting Back and
Keeping Up Standards

With the onset of the Great Depression displays of the previous “rah-rah” collegiate culture, as contemporaries referred to it, declined in popularity. When Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of all Germany in January 1933, the event added an edge of external anxiety to politically aware American Jewish college students. In the 1930s, in addition to economic concerns, anti-Jewish demagoguery filled the radio waves, and isolationists accused Jews of fomenting war. A lack of faith in the elder generation that had permitted both the Depression and the rise of Fascism to happen led formerly quiescent young people to embrace radical ideologies. At the same time the divisiveness of radical politics ruptured friendships and sowed fear in the hearts of the more conservative segments of the Jewish community that they would all be branded as revolutionaries and traitors because of the affiliations and actions of a portion of their people. The German annexation of Austria and the Czechoslovakian crisis caused grave apprehension and left the more politically aware students and their families glued to their radios for much of 1938 and 1939. Soon the military draft would be revived and male U.S. college students would be facing the interruption of their studies for the sake of a second world war that was already consuming the rest of the globe.

Business as Usual—Wealth and Social Life

Fears that hard times might destroy Jewish fraternity life, however, proved to be unfounded. Officers everywhere reported, to their surprise, that
the loss of students who could not afford tuition or fraternity fees was soon balanced by others who decided to begin or to prolong their schooling. In normal times, such students might have managed well without college or departed without their degree. Now it made sense to ride out the economic storm in the relative shelter of academia rather than form businesses or face bleak employment prospects. The value of degrees and formal credentials was also rising in a tight employment marketplace. Contrary to expectations, surveys revealed that the number of students doing undergraduate, graduate, or professional work in the United States actually increased during the Depression. After the initial shock of the Crash, both Lee Dover of Zeta Beta Tau and Elizabeth Eldridge of Alpha Epsilon Phi noted that their pledge classes of 1931 were equal or larger than they had been in 1929.1

Life went on. Although they lived in the shadow of economic difficulties and international instability, the average member of Zeta Beta Tau in 1938 was probably more preoccupied with the cheering example of one of their own, William S. Paley (University of Pennsylvania '22.) A former president of his chapter who had entered the infant radio business right out of college, Paley made the cover of Time magazine in September of that year as president and principal owner of the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS).2 (ZBT’s star quarterback Sid Luckman, Columbia '39, made the cover of Life magazine in October). ZBT men also thrilled to the example of Leslie Alan Epstein ’35 (he later changed his name to Falk), former president of the University of Illinois chapter and a second-year student at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, Missouri. In 1937 he became the second of their number and one of the few Jews ever to win a coveted Rhodes Scholarship for two years of study at Oxford University. Among the first had been James Goodfriend, Jr. ’34, of ZBT’s University of Missouri chapter.3 Phi Sigma Delta members in those years also enjoyed reading about the successes of their own alumni, including movie producer Joseph Mankiewicz, composer Lorenz Hart, and the industrialist Walter Annenberg.

The men of Sigma Alpha Mu thrilled to the exploits of track star Marty Glickman, Syracuse ’39, who made the Olympic track team and traveled to participate in the 1936 games in Berlin. In his autobiography The Fastest Kid on the Block, Glickman, who also excelled in football, basketball, and baseball, recalled how five Sigma Alpha Mu Syracuse alumni had offered to pay his first year’s tuition and all of his house fees if he would come to their school. More Jewish athletes
at Syracuse would loosen quotas and make it easier for other Jewish students to be admitted, they told him. Unfortunately, Glickman and his Jewish teammate Sam Stoller never got the chance to run in their Olympic event, the relay race, which was scheduled after Jesse Owens had already shredded the myth of Aryan racial superiority by winning three gold medals. The American coach and Olympic officials, perhaps thinking that the almost certain victory of these athletes on the track would be too much of an insult to their Nazi hosts after the previous display, pulled them off the team and substituted two other runners. 4

Not all in the upper tiers lost their funds or had to drop out of college. Alpha Epsilon Phi members from 1930 through 1934 traveled to Europe, attended finishing school, studied French at the Sorbonne, summered on the Jersey shore, and took part in yachting parties. 5 Fewer ships were crossing the Atlantic, but the traditional Grand Tour of Europe continued for fortunate ZBT men. 6 “When Better Times are Had, ZBT’s Will Have Them” became a fraternity slogan. Their June 1935 magazine alumni news columns carried the evocative engagement notice of Arnold G. Buchsbaum (a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania chapter) to a Miss Isabelle Hecht of New York City, a graduate of the Alquin School and Les Allièrè of Lausanne, Switzerland. They were to be married in the fall and would continue living in New York where the husband was “in the bond business at 25 Broad St.” At the same time, Edward Lasker of Chicago and Yale announced his recent marriage to a Miss Carol G. Gimbel, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Bernard F. Gimbel of Port Chester, NY (of department store fame). The ceremony took place at the Chieftains, the Port Chester estate of the bride’s parents. 7

Zeta Beta Tau may have lost five chapters during the decade, but it added twelve, and the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Missouri were able to build new houses through a combination of endowments, member assessments, and alumni contributions. The final list of furnishings at the house in Columbia, Missouri in 1938 included red damask draperies, French doors, and Chippendale sofas. 8 The ZBT chapter at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia was renovated during the summer of 1937 under the direction of the house mother and her staff of servants. Also in 1937, the University of Nebraska chapter in Lincoln issued an invitation for visitors to stop by and enjoy a meal in their newly furnished dining room equipped with a complete set of ZBT-crested china. 9

Concern for social life did not waver. When the men of ZBT’s University of Alabama chapter in 1935 longed for a congenial group of
Jewish women on the campus to keep them company, they personally invited Alpha Epsilon Phi sorority’s Elizabeth Eldridge to visit them at their house in Tuscaloosa. Presenting her with a list of young women they wanted to see attending the university (presumably high school juniors, seniors, or first-year college students from Jewish communities in Alabama or from other adjacent states throughout the South), they promised to help the sorority with their rushing if Alpha Epsilon Phi would establish a chapter there. “This list caused amusement in New Orleans,” (at the time the sorority’s national headquarters) Eldridge later reported, “for it read like a dance list or a house party of a debutante gathering. The Zebes know cute girls, if nothing else . . . . They will rush for us during the summer and when they make a rushing tour of the state for their own fall rushing, they will interview girls for us, persuading them to come to Alabama. They will guarantee the chapter that does transfer the best time any girls have ever had at Alabama.”

The amenities were not limited to the oldest, upper-tier fraternities. The passage of time and intracommunal associations were doing their work in the acculturation and homogenization of American Jewry, as was the Depression itself, which tended to have a leveling effect. Times being what they were, the accident of having money left was more important than the accident of having old blood. The world of banking and high finance that had produced the legendary “Our Crowd” of German Jews had now been discredited in the wake of the Crash and no longer commanded the same automatic deference that it once did. In time, social, class, and ethnic differences between the different Jewish fraternities were destined to fade if not to disappear altogether.

Sigma Alpha Mu, the highest-ranking fraternity founded by “Russian” Jews, had displayed a relatively informal and low-key fraternal persona during the 1910s and 1920s. In the 1930s, however, the terms “desirable” and “undesirable,” previously almost unknown in their records, began to make a frequent appearance. By 1931 the fraternity was rejecting as many petitioning chapters as it accepted. In addition, a review of advertisements, invitations, brochures, and reports of their social events indicates that the quality of the hotels and country clubs that they frequented reached a level not far below that of Zeta Beta Tau or Phi Epsilon Pi. Full evening dress became de rigeur for their formal affairs, a fact evident both in the invitations issued for the events and the fraternities’ own photo files from the period. In 1932, even Alpha Epsilon Pi for the first time held a convention dance at the Standard Club in Atlanta, previously an unbreachable stronghold of the German Jews.
It is possible that had it not been for the prevailing economic conditions either the operators of the club would not have permitted it or the group could not have afforded the usual fees. Whatever the reasons, the event represented a giant step forward socially, and afterward there was no turning back. The report of the dance in Alpha Epsilon Pi’s minutes read: “a most beautiful place—but the corn liquor was terrible.”

The annual conventions and conclaves of the men’s fraternities continued throughout the Depression, along with the organized search for eligible Jewish women with the cooperation of mothers, family friends, members of the extended Jewish communal network, and the fraternity’s own social chairmen and committees. Fraternity documents in general did not record what the women thought about their blind dates. The men were apparently not always satisfied and might be tempted to skip the process altogether, as is clear from a short promotional piece entitled “Blinding Dates” that appeared in a 1934 Phi Epsilon Pi convention newsletter. It also reveals, incidentally, how prized a place on that date list could be in those days and how it could be used as a form of ingratiation in extended family relations and in the business world:

Inmates of the House of Good Shepherd, daughters of clients and customers, hideous hags and toothless crones, sisters, nieces and cousins will not this year grace the date list for visiting fraters. Chicago Convention Committee stands ready to defend its contention that these individuals are not necessary to the success of the Convention. Too often in past years have visiting men been subjected to needless pain. This year, unbounded pleasure, instead.

Another advertisement for Phi Epsilon Pi’s 1937 convention headed “Come to Cleveland!” tried to motivate readers to register promptly with photographs of movie stars and the famous “Goldwyn Girls” on the borders of the page. Those who wanted dates had to supply their age and height. This was no time to economize, the ad writers claimed. A small investment in the convention and the feminine companionship they might find there was just the antidote for low spirits caused by the Depression:

COME TO CLEVELAND! For here in the Convention City we have the epitome of your desires, the balm for your rejuvenation, the tonic for your jaded senses. We have GIRLS—femininity, pulchritude, naivete, sophistication—girls, girls, girls. At this writing they are stacked four deep outside
the door, breathless with anticipation, each tiny heart apitty-pat with eagerness. Can we disappoint them? No! Will they disappoint you? No! So why delay? Let’s put all three of our minds at rest and make certain that every moment of your stay in Cleveland will be perfect.\textsuperscript{14}

As a semiofficial social service agency and matchmaking bureau, a Jewish fraternity conducted its activities the entire year, not just at convention time. The work was multigenerational. In one instance Mrs. S. F. Kiely of Kansas City, Missouri, wrote to the Midwest regional director of ZBT in the same city to request the names of all the young, unmarried Zeta Beta Tau alumni in the vicinity. The director immediately obliged by sending her the names of seventeen men.\textsuperscript{15}

In 1935, Lee Dover remarked to an observer on his work with “old-timer” ZBTs who graduated and then had no contact with their fraternity for years. They would then resurface, seeking to reestablish themselves in the organization’s good graces by letters, phone calls, volunteer work, belated dues-paying, or donations. The cause was inevitably a young marriageable daughter or a son coming up for membership in some chapter. “Eventually,” observed Dover, “Every ZBT comes back.”\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{Student Migrants to State Universities: Illinois, Massachusetts, Penn State, and Others}

The search for a college education in the face of all odds, which had become such a marked feature of American Jewish life in the post-World War I period, only intensified during the Great Depression. The bad economy did nothing to dampen their ardor. In their own version of the “geographical distribution” maxim that limited their numbers in elite eastern institutions, young Jews, primarily men, were willing to “redistribute” themselves geographically over vast distances in order to go to school. With the blessing and support of their families, they sought academic and professional opportunities that would be as high in quality and as low in cost as possible. Their sons and their grandsons and granddaughters might someday storm the gates of the nation’s most elite colleges and professional schools back east and amass tuition bills running well into six figures. At this stage in the American Jewish journey, however, such schools were beyond their reach.

The destinations of these migrant students included land-grant colleges that were just beginning to outgrow their status as purely technical and agricultural institutes along with geographically isolated
schools of lesser prestige and doubtful accreditation. Wherever these students went Jewish fraternities of all backgrounds and income levels had to follow, taking up anywhere from a quarter to half the Jewish students. Through this movement, new concentrations of Jewish students developed, and with them the rudiments of a traditional communal Jewish life.

The large state schools of the Midwest continued to admit thousands of Jewish students, some from nearby and others from hundreds of miles away, particularly from the overcrowded New York City metropolitan area. A 1937 B’nai B’rith Hillel report estimated that the number of students migrating from the New York area was reaching approximately 5,000 each year. As in the 1920s the largest populations were centered at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, Ohio State University at Columbus, the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis-St. Paul, and the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Some of these schools in the 1930s claimed a thousand or more Jewish men and women among their students.

It was at the University of Illinois in 1923 that the first Hillel Foundation to serve the religious needs of Jewish college students was established, led by recent Hebrew Union College graduate and Phi Epsilon Pi alumnus Rabbi Benjamin M. Frankel. Illinois history professor Abram L. Sachar continued the tradition after Frankel’s premature death. By April 1940, Hillel had become a major American Jewish organization with foundations serving college students at campuses across the country. Still at the University of Illinois, where he had served as Hillel’s National Director since 1933, Sachar led a first night Passover seder for over 150 Jewish students. While purported tensions between the Hillel foundations and the Jewish fraternities would remain a theme on American campuses for generations to come, relations were apparently quite good at Illinois in April 1940. The national Hillel publication for the following month, which reported mass seders at colleges across the country for students who could not go home for the holiday, reported that the second night seder at Illinois had been conducted by the leaders of the Jewish fraternities.

Closer to the northeast, sharp growth in the number of Jewish students took place at the Massachusetts State College in Amherst and at Pennsylvania State College in State College, Pennsylvania. Massachusetts State had begun as the Massachusetts Agricultural College in 1863, under the provisions of the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862.
In 1931 it was renamed Massachusetts State College, becoming the University of Massachusetts only in 1947. "The Jewish enrollment has grown by leaps and bounds," wrote Maurice Jacobs of Phi Epsilon Pi in his report on the campus in 1932, just two years after it ceased being an agricultural school. "There are approximately 75 men on this campus and but this one [local] fraternity to handle them... In the matter of a very few years, this group can be developed into a strong organization as there is no question that with the liberalizing of the curriculum, will come a very much larger Jewish student body." Sigma Alpha Mu's executive secretary Jimmy Hammerstein was similarly optimistic about Massachusetts in 1937. It was growing rapidly, he noted, and would soon be able to grant the Bachelor's degree. By that time, the total student population consisted of 800 men and 200 women. Fully ten percent were Jews, with forty-one having entered in the freshman class of 1936 alone. With eleven national fraternities represented on the campus and with 65 percent of the students affiliated with them, the college represented a fertile Jewish fraternity field.

The rapid growth of Pennsylvania State College as a center for Jewish student life was even more notable. When Phi Epsilon Pi began sponsoring a new chapter of only four active men taking agricultural courses there in 1915, Penn State was considered, in the words of one officer, "a rough, uncouth, back-woods school" which nevertheless "has splendid possibilities." By 1925, when a Sigma Alpha Mu representative visited the campus, he noted that State College now had well over one hundred Jewish students along with two Jewish fraternities. In 1927, Phi Epsilon Pi officers noted with pleasure how their chapter house at Penn State was being filled by a sudden and large influx of "good New York and Brooklyn men." Seven years later, along with the burgeoning of the total student population, the number of Jewish students at Penn State had more than doubled to 250 and was still growing. Penn State was an especially popular destination for young Jewish women, as Alpha Epsilon Phi investigators noted when they visited the campus in 1935. The Dean of Women informed them that the college was doing everything it could to increase the female student registration by building new dormitories as well as taking other measures to encourage them to come.

For Pascal A. Greenberg, Phi Epsilon Pi's executive secretary in 1939 and himself a 1935 graduate of the school, the devotion and loyalty of their Penn chapter was nothing short of remarkable, as he observed at the celebration of their twenty-fifth anniversary in April
of that year. Present were 112 alumni and their wives along with fifteen past chapter presidents—even though only four of the alumni were “town” men and most others, as he noted, had to travel “hundreds of miles to get to State College.” Maurice Jacobs had earlier observed that an unusually strong level of Jewish identification and cooperation with the Hillel Foundation matched strong fraternity consciousness at Penn. Possible factors, in his view, were the personal popularity of Hillel director Rabbi Ephraim Fischoff, the campus’s isolated location, the religious background of the men and women who went there, and the willingness of the Penn State administration to excuse Jewish students from classes falling on their holidays. In 1936, the Phi Epsilon Pi chapter voluntarily turned its house over to Hillel to be used as a synagogue for the High Holy Day services. Jacobs reported proudly that a standing-room only crowd of 150 students had attended for the Jewish New Year services and over 200 for Yom Kippur. For any college this was an excellent turnout, and he and his fellow officers considered it especially good at Penn State since the Jewish student population totaled 350, and many of these had gone home for the holiday.

Penn State’s Phi Epsilon Pi furthermore was responsible for building in October 1939 what was billed by Hillel journalists as “probably the first Succah in Jewish collegiate fraternity history.” The actual design and construction of the Feast of Tabernacles ritual booth, which measured twenty feet long, eight feet high and eight feet wide, was done by Ralph Madway and Arthur Jaffe. In keeping with the agricultural nature of the holiday festival, students decorated the booth with appropriately collegiate drappings of ivy, along with Chinese red peppers, apples, deep green fir branches, carrots, turnips and other fruits and vegetables. The Hebrew biblical inscription “How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, thy dwelling places, O Israel,” greeted visitors as they walked in, and on one wall hung a solid blue Star of David, trimmed in white, flanked by two tapestries. The sukkah reportedly became a place of pilgrimage not only for Jewish fraternity members but also for students, faculty, and townspeople for miles around.

Other state colleges also showed sharp rises in their Jewish student population. According to a survey of 120 universities conducted by Maurice Jacobs of Phi Epsilon Pi in Fall 1932 these included the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, which showed a Jewish male student population in 1932 of 75, up from an average of 30; Louisiana State, 40, up from an average of 28; the University of New Hampshire, 30, up from an average of 20; Indiana University, 70, up from an average
of 50; and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 200 Jewish men, up from an average of 140. The Jewish student population at the University of Florida in Gainesville was also "consistently growing," according to Jacobs. There were already 139 Jews in attendance there in 1935 and chapters of two Jewish fraternities and he was convinced that a Florida chapter of Phi Epsilon Pi might attract a number of men who did not wish to join the chapters of Tau Epsilon Phi or Phi Beta Delta already there. "This would be an ideal place for us and will tie in our Miami chapter with another group in the State," Jacobs noted in his 1935 investigation report. "The University of Florida has changed tremendously in the past five years and is a good school. Any opinions we formerly held on this score should be forgotten and the decision should be based on the evidence submitted."

The South as Haven: Mississippi, Georgia, and Alabama

In a pattern startlingly similar to the age-old Jewish Diaspora experience, expulsions or restrictions in one area of the United States were often followed by invitations to settle elsewhere. For potential Jewish college students and their fraternities, the welcoming arms of large state schools were nowhere wider or warmer than in the American South. The contrast with other areas of the country was so great that after Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933 at least one national officer of Alpha Epsilon Phi sorority seriously wondered if within fifteen years the South might be the only region in the United States where Jews could attend college freely. This possibility might justify their acceptance of petitioning southern chapters that normally would not make their grade. "For the sake of the future growth of the fraternity in southern fields, which to my mind are going to be the fastest growing ones as the restrictions in the number of Jewish students allowed is more rigidly enforced in the eastern colleges, are we going to establish chapters of material we know to be of lower standard than we desire?" wrote Louise W. Wolf to Elizabeth Eldridge in November 1933, "Or are we going to abandon these fields to other Jewish sororities altogether? . . . Now we are forced with Hitlerism and it is surely going to have its influence on this country, believe it or not, and we have therefore, a problem to look out for." 31

Maurice Jacobs had no such qualms when he attended the installation banquet for the new Phi Epsilon Pi chapter at the University of Mississippi in Oxford in 1936, headed by undergraduate president
Moses Wander. He was stunned and proud at the top brass sent to welcome his organization. The University administration was represented there by no less than the Chancellor himself, several Deans, prominent members of the faculty, and the heads of all sixteen Gentile fraternities already on the campus. "At no university in the past," Jacobs wrote, "have we been greeted as royally as has been our greeting at 'Ole Miss.'"

Nor was "Ole Miss" the only school in Mississippi that actively extended hospitality to Jewish students. In 1938, Sigma Alpha Mu officials found themselves in the odd position of actually being courted by the Dean of Men at Mississippi State University in the town of Starkville. Primarily an engineering and agricultural school located in a remote area, the school drew very few Jewish students. Those who wished legal or pre-medical training in their own state much preferred to attend school in Oxford, which was more than 100 miles away. Otherwise, young Jewish men from the area tended to go to the University of Alabama, Vanderbilt University in Tennessee, or Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. SAM's Sigma Psi chapter, the single Jewish group at Mississippi State, was established in Starkville that year with only seven active students. The school's Dean of Men expressed his delight at their presence to SAM's traveling secretary and promised that as soon as the boys were ready for a house of their own, he would see that they got one.

The University of Georgia in Athens was another possibility for Jews seeking higher education in the 1930s, although it was not as popular a destination as others for northerners and its reputation as a campus prejudiced against "Yankees" was particularly strong. The Phi Epsilon Pi chapter there apparently participated in this prejudice. Maurice Jacobs sharply criticized the group in 1932 for flatly refusing to take in any Jewish men originating from north of the Mason-Dixon line. Such men, according to the campus social code, were restricted to the more plebeian Alpha Epsilon Pi. Jacobs also criticized them for their consistent snobbery in preferring residents of Atlanta to residents of Savannah or any other part of the state of Georgia. On the other hand, he noted in his report, the strength of their Jewish identity was to be commended. It was a pleasant surprise to discover that without any external compulsion the chapter had joined the local Jewish congregation in Athens en masse. "This is the first example I have found of this interest throughout the country," Jacobs announced at the fraternity's December 1932 convention, "and I heartily recommend Mu [University of Georgia] for its acceptance of its Jewish responsibility."
As in the previous decade, it was the state of Alabama, however, which provided the most noticeable southern shelter for beleaguered Jewish university students in the 1930s, with Tuscaloosa a most popular destination for both men and women.\textsuperscript{35} By 1935, when Elizabeth Eldridge of Alpha Epsilon Phi visited the campus at ZBT's request, she found 43 Jewish women in attendance and hundreds of Jewish men. In expressing her hesitation to establish a chapter there, Eldridge revealed clearly what a haven Alabama had become for Jewish students unable to attend school anywhere else. “The Jewish student body is a conglomerate one,” she reported to her fellow officers. “Alabama raises no barriers and has no restrictions. It is also known as a campus with little Jewish prejudice. Accordingly, it attracts to it many Jewish students from New York who cannot get into schools elsewhere and who are ‘undesirable.’”\textsuperscript{36}

In time the University of Alabama became so saturated with Jewish fraternity activity that when Maurice Jacobs of Phi Epsilon Pi scouted the state in 1937, he was able to recommend the reactivation of an old chapter at the Alabama Polytechnic Institute (soon to be Auburn University), but he had to conclude that his fraternity had missed the boat at Tuscaloosa. “There is no possibility of a chapter at the University of Alabama,” he reported to his fellow national officers, “because the ghetto of American colleges has more Jewish fraternities than it has any right to have.”\textsuperscript{37}

**Small Colleges: Pennsylvania, Ohio, and New York State**

Large state schools were not the only institutions that welcomed Jewish students and Jewish fraternities. Especially in Pennsylvania and Ohio, small private colleges sometimes went out of their way to attract Jews. As was sometimes the case in larger schools as well, the attitude of a single president or dean could make a significant difference one way or the other. Dickinson College in Carlisle, PA, which was expanding and building up its law school in the 1930s, enjoyed a favorable reputation for its treatment of Jewish students and hosted what Maurice Jacobs considered one of Phi Epsilon Pi’s better chapters. In 1934, along with five men from the Dickinson chapter, he investigated Gettysburg College, in the southern part of the state, which then had an enrollment of 12 Jewish men and had just seen the formation of a small Jewish local society. “The college has openly stated that it is anxious to have Jewish students there,” Jacobs reported, “and contacts have been made
with some of the better high schools in the northern cities." The college administration promised immediate recognition of any Jewish national fraternity that would have them. 38 Muhlenberg College, a Lutheran-sponsored institution in Allentown, PA, also welcomed Jewish students, and Phi Epsilon Pi established a chapter there in 1932. 39

Other relatively friendly spots for Jewish students and Jewish fraternities to help feed, house, and supervise them during the years of the Great Depression included St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, where in 1934 fully ten percent of the enrollment of 250 men were Jews from Maryland, New Jersey, and New York. 40 At Colby College in Waterville, Maine, Maurice Jacobs of Phi Epsilon Pi found more than 50 Jewish male students in 1932, and the administration appeared happy to have more. Half of these belonged to a local Jewish fraternity. Colby was then in the process of relocating to a new campus, expanding to a total student population of 1,000, and building uniform fraternity houses, with one reserved specifically for the Jewish fraternity. 41

Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, which had a strong fraternity tradition, became through word-of-mouth a popular destination. The Jewish student body at the relatively small and obscure school jumped from "next to nothing" in 1927 to more than 150 Jewish men in 1932. Miami University at Oxford, Ohio, also had a rapidly growing Jewish student population of 55 in 1931, and the administration there made it clear that it welcomed chapters of Jewish fraternities in order to encourage Jewish students to come. 42 Wherever Jewish fraternities went, sororities followed. In 1932 an investigator from Alpha Epsilon Phi sorority noted that the number of Jewish women at Miami had doubled in the past year "due to the Depression and the fact that one is spreading the good news about it to the next and there is no question about it being a first-rate school. . . . The number of men no doubt attract the girls there." 43

During this same period, the Jewish student population of Bucknell College in Lewisburg, PA, doubled to 50 and Sigma Alpha Mu established a chapter there. 44 Union College in Schenectady in 1932 had a growing Jewish student population of 81 and chapters of no fewer than four national Jewish fraternities—Zeta Beta Tau, Kappa Nu, Alpha Mu Sigma, and Phi Sigma Delta. Other private colleges showing significant gains in Jewish student population included Clark University in Worcester, MA, Lafayette University in Easton, PA, Franklin and Marshall in Lancaster, PA, and Alfred University in upstate Alfred,
NY, where more than 60 Jewish men in 1932 made up one fifth of the school's enrollment.45

The Unwanted: “Depression-Product”
Commuter Schools: Butler, Newark, Akron

Despite or even because of hard times, the value of “keeping up standards” remained strong for fraternity officers eyeing potential material. No one wanted to fall into the trap of grabbing every potential member or chapter that came along. The student migrancy movement was an advantage because residential colleges away from urban centers had always been the main targets for chapter expansion anyway. But what of the opposite geographical case, also a frequent occurrence in Depression times? Groups of desirable students who normally might have left home for college were being forced to attend comparatively poor urban commuter schools near their homes and were applying for Greek membership from there. Their dues, initiation fees, and infusion of good blood would be welcome. But in the view of the national officers of the elite groups, adding such chapters to the permanent fraternity roll was risky. Some day the Depression would end, they reasoned, and this superior material at nonsuperior schools would be gone. If they admitted these chapters now, they might sully their rolls forever in the future.

In one such example of avoiding a “Depression-product school,” Alpha Epsilon Phi’s national council, after eight months of consideration, finally refused to consider pledging a group of young women at Butler University in Indianapolis. The social acceptability and desirability of the women was not an issue. Investigators rated several of the potential members “A-1” by the highest sorority standards. A chapter at Butler, they believed, would go far to challenge the traditional strength of Sigma Delta Tau in the Midwest, while AEPhi was confident of its prestige in the American South. The school itself, however, was a source of concern, as were the reasons why such high-ranking young Jewish women were attending it in the first place.

As Lillian Newman of Chicago described it in 1932, Butler University in Indianapolis was a “second or third rate school” which “would lend no prestige.”46 Others observed that it was “4th rate scholastically,” a Presbyterian school “with not a Jewish member on the faculty and therefore very prejudiced,” and “that it is only because of the depression that the Jewish girls of A-1 material are probably at Butler.”47 From 1500 students, not more than 24 were Jewish, and the women
outnumbered men two to one. Most importantly, interviews revealed that the most desirable girls in attendance there had either transferred from Wellesley College in Massachusetts for financial reasons, or were attending Butler hoping to go on to Wellesley once their families' financial conditions improved. 48 (There was no hope of ever having a chapter at Wellesley or any other Seven Sisters school, since these schools had long ago abolished all college sororities on principle). It was the final opinion of investigator Roz J. Silver in October, 1932, that the group would not continue to draw the best material after potential members from the “better-connected families” were able to realize their dream of going away to school. 49 In the end, the young Jewish women of Butler University did not make it onto AEPhi’s chapter roll, although some probably did make it to Wellesley eventually.

In 1938 Alpha Epsilon Phi’s National Council made a similar decision to reject a desirable petitioning Jewish local sorority at the University of Newark, New Jersey, which they saw as another urban “Depression product” school. 50 Similarly, in 1939 Phi Epsilon Pi decided to reject the petition of the Phi Kappa Rho local Jewish fraternity at the University of Akron in Ohio. The Akron group was a substantial one by local fraternity standards. With twenty-one active members and sixty-five alumni, it had been in operation for sixteen years and maintained its own small house, where the commuting students could gather for lunch and for meetings. And yet, diligent though the Akron students might be in their studies and dedicated though they might be to their fraternity, the chapter apparently had not and was not drawing members from the upper brackets of the American Jewish hierarchy. As the Phi Epsilon Pi investigator reported, “The boys attending Akron University come from low income bracket families and practically all are forced to work while attending school in order to help defray expenses.” This made them unsuitable as a potential Phi Epsilon Pi chapter. 51 They were, however, acceptable to the national fraternity Alpha Epsilon Pi, which placed the University of Akron on its rolls in early 1941. 52

The informal rule that chapters within driving distance of one another ought to be roughly of the same class and income level also continued to hold despite the bad economy. Here the New Orleans Sophie Newcomb chapter of AEPhi, though it was the pride of the national sorority, actually hampered expansion in the area because it was so difficult to find enough Jewish college women of equivalent status and appearance in any other school nearby. Similarly, in 1934 Maurice Jacobs of Phi Epsilon Pi expressed his desire to pledge an “excellent” pe-
tioning Jewish local at Temple University in Philadelphia. However, he concluded with regret, it was "an utter impossibility" to establish a chapter at Temple "as long as we have a good chapter at the University of Pennsylvania." The problem was similar to the tension that had existed in the 1920s between Carnegie Tech and the University of Pittsburgh. Both the Ivy League Penn and the more plebeian Temple University offered their students an excellent higher education. For purposes of socializing, however, the gap between the two schools and the class of students in attendance was too great for fraternal peace to prevail between them.

Rejection Rhetoric

The old lessons equating desirability with long residence in the U.S., "Gentile" appearance, wealth, and attendance at campuses of established status, were not lost on the officers of Alpha Epsilon Phi sorority. If anything, against the background of economic and world events in the 1930s, they began to apply these criteria even more stringently in their investigation reports. If a state school was poorly funded or drew too many students of undesirable background, other fraternities or sororities might be interested; but for the elite they were relegated to a thick folder of reports labeled "Petitioning Groups Not Accepted." The reasons given for rejection paint a vivid picture of Jewish class, religious, cultural, and geographic divisions, Jewish absorption of general social standards of the period, and an acute anxiety of what the Gentile world would think of their organization's members.

These reports, usually labeled "confidential," had to be written in detail and mimeographed for distribution. The feelings they reveal could not be relegated, as they might be in later generations, to whispered face-to-face conversations behind closed doors or furtive home telephone conversations. The sorority's national officers lived scattered throughout the country. The parameters of these discussions in those days were considered a legitimate part of any sorority's rushing business, Jewish or Gentile. The cost of long distance telephone calls in the 1930s was prohibitive, and all business and discussion had to be conducted by post. Thus, every nuance of attitude was committed to paper. There was little reason to hesitate in any event. As every Jew had reason to know who had ever applied for entrance to a college, a club, or a job in a competitive company, this was an era when letters of reference written by Gentiles routinely made reference to a person's religion, general
appearance, race, ethnic background, mannerisms, anatomical features, and semitic or nonsemitic appearance. Neither law nor custom dictated otherwise.

For example, in recommending that they reject a petitioning Jewish local at the University of Maine in Orono in late 1930, the sorority's field secretary reported that the girls were good scholastically, "rated" in activities, were accepted socially, were charming hostesses, and were "beautifully organized." However, the university, the state, and the social class and finances of the girls it drew were not acceptable, and the group would never be considered "AEPhi material" by any other chapter. The school itself, with 1700 students including 500 women (25 of them Jewish) was small and geographically isolated, and for the past two years had been supported only by a millage tax from the state. With only two cities of any importance in Maine and no industrial centers, the girls had "no particular money or social ranking," and were also too close for comfort to poverty, immigrant origins, and Orthodox Judaism:

The cities are Portland, with 75,000 people and one Reform congregation; the smaller is Bangor, which has three Orthodox congregations and no Reform one, although the Reform Jews there import a rabbi for the holidays. Having the opportunity of meeting the parents of several girls, I found that with the exception of one family, most of the parents were foreign born and spoke with an accent, some Russian, the majority of German descent. . . . The girls live in these old-fashioned houses, chromos, tin types, seashells, ugly, non-descript old-fashioned furniture, etc. They, themselves, reflect a small provincial atmosphere—as a group they don’t know how to dress and probably don’t need it. There are some Jewish types among them—but while being Jewish, they are not the loud, cheap, Jewish type—they reflect . . . probably the community, certainly the best of Maine—they are countrified, provincial, and as Jewish as such a background would suggest.54

In the end, Alpha Epsilon Phi did not accept the group, although their competitors Sigma Delta Tau did.

Elizabeth Eldridge, who served as the national head of Alpha Epsilon Phi in 1931–1937, was capable of expressing the most merciless anti-Jewish judgments against young women who failed to meet her standards. This could occur even while she was pouring her energy into defending her people and trying to convince the Gentile sororities to admit Alpha Epsilon Phi into the National Panhellenic Congress. The two phenomena, while seemingly paradoxical, may not have been unrelated. As part of her job as Panhellenic Chairman, Eldridge, then
in her mid-twenties, was being exposed year after year to the prejudices of Gentile representatives and to their smooth excuses that only the bad behavior of other Jews was ruining AEPhi's chances for full acceptance. In one of her earliest visits to their George Washington University chapter in Washington D.C. in 1933, her comments were favorable with one exception: “Only one of the girls fits the description ‘greasy’ (forgive me the use of the adjective). She is a Phi Sigma Sigma transfer from Iota [Syracuse University] and their pledge problem. I was left to lecture her, etc. but I could do it only half-heartedly, for I hope she depledges . . . Such a girl should have been blackballed emphatically.” The following year she described the members of a petitioning local at the University of Iowa as “ill at ease. . . . small town girls, no poise, complete lack of background and a bit pathetic,” and that they would be good material for “Fleishigmaigma, ha ha!” (her derogatory term for competitor Phi Sigma Sigma, based on the Yiddish word for “meat.”)

However, Eldridge’s strongest words were for a local at Indiana University at Bloomington, which she visited two days later on March 9, 1933. To her horror, the group had already been officially pledged to Alpha Epsilon Phi while she herself was away visiting the West Coast. Apparently a nervous national officer, upon hearing that competitor Sigma Delta Tau was after the group and had issued them with an ultimatum, telephoned the leader of the local and pledged them to Alpha Epsilon Phi without doing the customary background check (the campus at the time had 180 Jewish students, 140 men and 30 women). “Indiana has no place in AEPhi,” Eldridge protested, “and the problem now is not how we got it but what shall we do with it?”

According to her evaluation, most of the members of the local were lower-middle-class Jews from traditional or immigrant backgrounds. The group was furthermore burdened by several New York City women who were out of the question as AEPhi material, as Eldridge pointed out in her confidential individual evaluations. (The full names were used in the original source; these are omitted and the initials changed here.)

U: is the dean and most unattractive. No family background, a gross personality, would not be pledged AEPhi at any other chapter . . . V: (Gary): Absolutely impossible. In appearance a typical fat largehipped, heavy breasted, greasy-haired Jewish mama with offensive mannerisms and a slight suggestion of a foreigner in her speech. Apparently had money. I simply cannot see her wearing an AEPhi pin. Forgot to say she wears tight-knitted suits and loose brassiereos to complete the picture. W: I understand she has a presentable mother. Father a jeweler in Richmond,
As a group, Eldridge continued, the Indiana women failed every possible standard, including the religious one:

They are not physically an attractive-looking group of girls. Some are unpleasantly semitic in features. They are not collegiate. They dress poorly. They are not worldly but represent the product of Indiana farms... They are not a wealthy group of girls. They do not come from homes of much background. They are still superstitious. They would not let me sit on the floor because one sits so for the dead, or mend clothes on myself without chewing a piece of bread, etc. They are not socially desirable by any standards of judging Jewish communities by the European countries from which they came.

Finally, the house was unlivably dirty and cluttered, and their food inedible. Eldridge's vote was to depledge the group, refund their money, "and then I want a one-way ticket to Siam."59

In succeeding investigations, the investigator showed a tendency to focus on candidates' "Jewish" or "Semitic" features when presenting evaluations. Even in Eldridge's highly positive report of the ill-fated William and Mary chapter later that month, the terms intruded: "Alberta Alperin: Junior... very popular with gentile girls... Petite, cute, not Semitic looking..." and "Hannah Steinhardt: Freshman in charter group—very good-looking in Semitic way, extremely refined."60 Signs of traditional Jewish observance were also considered a drawback. In May 1933 Eldridge strongly advised against taking the petitioning local at the University of West Virginia at Morgantown, saying that the only reason the girls were there was that they could not afford to go to Ohio State, where most of the "best" material from that part of the country went (the total student population at the time was 2500, including 120 Jewish men and 25 Jewish women). Besides, she and Reba B. Cohen had found "only eight girls at the most who are presentable and possible material," and it would not be possible to separate out this desirable material for the following reason:

The difficulty lies in the fact that the group could not be split because Goldie somebody-or-other's mother runs a kosher boarding house for the girls and they could not think of leaving her for a house. Goldie is quite
impossible; and a look at her foretells the worst about the boarding house. In conversation with the Dean of Women, she mentioned conflict about the dietary laws as a reason the girls could not live together happily in a sorority house. Do not misunderstand me; I am not writing a brief against orthodox Judaism or stating that a girl is undesirable because she lives according to the dietary laws. However, in a small-town state like West Virginia, Iowa, Indiana, etc. you are apt to find that the orthodox Jews are the unassimilated element in the population. It is a poor beginning for a charter group.61

In this case, as Eldridge pointed out, the attitude of their main competitor Sigma Delta Tau was the same: apparently a representative from that sorority had already visited the campus “and offended the girls by discussing desirability and letting them know that they were not interested in families who spoke Yiddish.” Her own overall impressions was that “they would make an excellent chapter of Phi Sigma Sigma . . . and in ten years might develop into a borderline AEPhi chapter” but for now, she “emphatically” recommended against rushing them.62

When Ruth Eldridge followed in her older sister’s footsteps as a national Alpha Epsilon Phi officer, perceptions of Jewish appearance as a detriment similarly colored her report on a Jewish local sorority at the University of Arizona in Tucson in 1936. There, the student population totaled 2000, and 50 of 900 women students were Jewish. Arizona was booming at the time because of the growing popularity of Tucson as a health resort, and increasing numbers of Jews were settling there, either temporarily or permanently, for the sake of a sick member of the family.63 In her individual evaluations, she made the following observations:

Lillian Brill: She doesn’t look particularly Jewish to me . . . Juliette Kruger: Vivacious personality, attractive. . . a great favorite with everyone. Has four very popular brothers, all of whom are Zebes. . . She’s a dance major and her family is Orthodox, interestingly enough. Irene Marion Rosenblatt: Helen F’s first cousin, same age. Not as pretty as Helen, small, more Jewish looking but quite refined. Nice personality . . . Tillie Farber (El Paso Texas): . . . She has a very nice personality but is quite Jewish looking . . . Has a brother who is SAM at Yale, a brother-in-law who is a Zebe at Arizona, and her sister’s husband owns Levy’s, one of Tucson’s department stores . . .64

While women from department store-owning families were considered highly desirable, those who belonged to the small business or merchant class were not. The evaluation of Marion Diamond, in reporting on a small Jewish local at Penn State in 1935, was that it decidedly
did “not rate” socially, financially, in campus activities, or in any other way. A major source of the trouble seemed to be the economic position of the girls’ families, who were mostly engaged in storekeeping and who violated the middle-class value that a married woman should not work outside her home:

The largest percentage of the girls come from small Pennsylvania mining towns, and their families own small merchandise stores. I say “families” because the entire family works in the stores and consequently have time for nothing else. Lack of outside interests and culture are noticeable and affects the interests in college. Main topic of conversation among the girls is the happenings in the stores. I enlarge upon this because the presence of the mothers in the business rather than the homes has produced in the girls an absolute lack of knowledge as to how to run a home, of how to plan a social event, no charm—no interests outside their small world. A few of them know how to meet and converse with outsiders but most of them cannot carry on a conversation and are always ill at ease. All of this was evident at a tea given by them for me. Many of their remarks were ill chosen and tactless and would, if I had been a visiting officer of AEPhi to a chapter, have embarrassed me considerably and caused a lecture at a later meeting.

The latter part of this passage suggests, incidentally, why the social education in upper-middle-class American Anglo-Saxon manners and mores within the Jewish fraternity system was so effective. Outside the intimate circle, it might be considered the height of rudeness to draw a person’s shortcomings to their attention. Within a fraternity chapter however, and certainly among a semifamilial group of young Jews, no such reservations existed. Perceived errors received immediate admonishment from officers or older members. This type of learning could be painful, but it was swift, and it was unlikely that pupils would soon repeat their mistakes.

During investigations to evaluate potential members for the sorority, the Gentile Dean of Women on each campus was an important potential partner. When contacted, she could be rude or dismissive, as was the Dean at the University of Oklahoma at Norman in January 1932, who scoffed at the idea of there being any difference between Alpha Epsilon Phi and Sigma Delta Tau. All Jews were alike, she insisted, including all 30 young women then attending the University of Oklahoma, and “one sorority is good enough for them.” Or, the Dean of Women could be a cooperative ally. In the case of Alpha Epsilon Phi’s investigation of the petitioning local at the University of Maine,
their field secretary was able to write with obvious pleasure in November 1930: “The Dean understands Jewish problems very well. She told me frankly that she had eliminated the offensive Jewish type by personal interview and that the 25 girls on campus were all acceptable. Only one, H., in the local, was disliked because of her pugnacity about grades.”

At Randolph-Macon College in 1932 investigator Virginia D. Frolichstein reported

Miss Whiteside, the Dean of Women, was very cordial and quite frank. . . . She’s eager to have the right type of Jewish student and seems completely without prejudice. . . . The townspeople of Lynchburg send their offspring to R-M but they are not, in the words of Miss Whiteside, what we would want. There is one family, the Guggenheiners, who are outstanding. They have nothing to do with the other Jews and are the family to sponsor AEPhi.

Similarly, Aline Lazard Roos, the sorority’s National Ritualist and investigator of a Jewish local sorority at the newly-built Duke University in North Carolina, was pleased but cautious when she reported in January 1934, “The Dean of Women, Miss Baldwin, had only good to say of them. She interviews practically every Jewish or Eastern or Northern person who applies to Duke, therefore ruling out undesirables, but am afraid her standard is just so they aren’t flagrantly unrefined and do have good scholarship records. They want the university to retain its southern flavor.”

The New York Jewish Problem

When it came to social distinctions and the elimination of “undesirables,” few Jews suffered more both at the hands of Gentiles and of other Jews than the denizens of New York City and its environs. The reluctance of the best Jewish fraternities to pledge Jews from the New York area presented a significant problem, since they represented easily one-third to one-half of the American Jewish population. However, if one feared loud, pushy, vulgar, unrefined Jews, then with few exceptions, Jews from New York were considered the epitome of loudness, pushiness, vulgarity and coarseness. The big city had an unfortunate tendency to breed college students with a taste for radical politics and ignorance of or disrespect for the preferred local norms of behavior.

It was also widely acknowledged that New Yorkers did not make the best fraternity material. The Greek system as a whole had never
flourished in greater New York City. Its natural environment had long been the small college towns of the South, Midwest, and West, where college students were completely dependent upon it. In states and cities with a relatively small Jewish population, as in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, Jewish fraternity houses could easily become a focus of Jewish communal activity and financial contributions. In New York City, however, with its millions of Jews and thousands of Jewish institutions, fraternities were a leisure-time club at best and a curiosity at worst. Too many other attractions competed for time and attention. In addition, as in any large urban area, in New York too many students could live at home and thus avoid the communal discipline and correction that was the ideal of fraternity life. Furthermore, the price of real estate in Manhattan made maintaining a house, clubrooms, or guestrooms for out-of-towners difficult for the wealthy fraternities and impossible for those less well off.

Consequently, although all but two of the original twenty-five Jewish national fraternities and sororities had been founded in New York State, by the late 1920s the focus of Jewish fraternity life had shifted in other directions. One might call this phenomenon the “de-Newyorkization” of the Jewish fraternities, and it was illustrated well by statistics compiled for the 1932 directory of Zeta Beta Tau. By that year, less than one quarter of the fraternity’s 4,452 living members resided in New York City. A significant number of these had not been born or raised in New York, but had migrated there after college graduation for the employment opportunities it offered.

An additional challenge to maintaining strong fraternity organizations in New York City was also what might be called the “Alpha Problem” (“Alpha” being the first, or founding, chapter of a fraternity). In the case of the Jewish groups, this was most likely to be City College, Columbia, New York University, Barnard, or Hunter. At the turn of the twentieth century, the City College of New York still maintained an aristocratic tone, and Greek and Latin were an important part of the curriculum. Within a decade, however, the tuition-free school was becoming the proverbial “Harvard of the poor.” Hours of classes, a long subway commute, and work at outside jobs left little time for fraternity activities and the cultivation of gentility.Intellectually and academically, by the 1930s City College men felt themselves to be far superior to their Jewish student counterparts across the country, and indeed CCNY was distinguished by its high admissions standards and demanding academic program. However, serious class and cultural differences became
painfully obvious when members from across the land gathered in New York City for annual conventions and rubbed shoulders with men from City College.

New York University in Washington Square did charge some tuition, but the social and economic position of most of its male students was perceived as being as low if not lower than their City College counterparts. City College at least put its students through a rigorous training in sciences and the liberal arts, whereas students at NYU’s downtown campus for the most part studied business administration. This unfortunate development had resulted in the virtual excommunication of Phi Epsilon Pi’s downtown NYU chapter in 1922. Phi Epsilon Pi was willing to consider establishing a chapter at NYU’s uptown or “Heights” liberal arts campus, located in an attractive, semisuburban section of the Bronx, but no more than one or two potential student members ever materialized there before the end of World War II. National fraternity officers outside the metropolitan area also became aware of the vast rivers that separated the actual island of Manhattan from the boroughs of the Bronx and Brooklyn. “I am absolutely not interested in any group of students at NYU downtown,” wrote Philadelphian Grand Secretary Charles H. Fleishman of Phi Epsilon Pi in the summer of 1930, when other officers suggested that Depression-time economics dictated taking another look at the downtown school. “It is in the mercantile section of the city where the students have as their campus the business section of the city without the possibility of any campus activity or fraternity life. You can also well imagine the nature of the students who attend such a school. About eighty percent of the group with whom we are negotiating reside in Brooklyn. Such a fact is extremely unfavorable.”

As for finances, the situation reached its nadir during the Depression, when the majority of City College or NYU students could barely afford their carfare, much less fraternity dues and fees. In fall 1932, for example, when the initiation fee at Phi Epsilon Pi’s “Mother” chapter at City College was $85.00, the chapter’s Superior Morton Francis Bickart found himself forced to write to the national office that of seven men initiated only two had been able to pay in full. The office responded by lowering the fee down to $50.00 and again down to $30.00, but it was still too much for “the chapter which gave birth to Phi Epsilon Pi” to pay. In the case of Sigma Alpha Mu in 1934, not one of the four pledges was able to pay his fees in full, and none could be initiated until a group of alumni had taken up a collection for them.
On the evening of their June graduation dinner in 1935, members of Phi Sigma Delta chapter at New York University's "uptown" or semi-suburban University Heights campus in the Bronx are photographed outside their chapter house. (Zeta Beta Tau Archives)

While other schools were tightening their restrictions on Jewish enrollment in the 1930s, the administration of Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, was encouraging Jewish students, along with chapters of their fraternities, to come. Here the charter members of Zeta Beta Tau at Miami University gather on the day of their chapter's installation into the national fraternity by a visiting alumni team, Feb. 22, 1936. *Front row, left to right:* Arnold D. Swartz '37, Seymour Weisberger, Samuel E. Mendelson '36, David K. Leshner '37, Irving D. Robinson '37. *Back row:* Arthur B. Aurbach '36, Sanford R. Katz '37, Robert W. Reis '38, Benjamin J. Weiss '38, and Morton W. Weingart '36. (Zeta Beta Tau Archives)
The interior of the Alpha Epsilon Pi chapter house at Emory University in Atlanta in the 1930s. (Alpha Epsilon Pi Archives)

Billed as “The First Succah ever built in an American Jewish fraternity house,” this Feast of Tabernacles ritual booth, designed and constructed by class of 1942 Phi Epsilon Pi chapter members Arthur H. Jaffe and Ralph Madway (pictured here), attracted students, faculty, and townspeople for miles around when it was erected at Penn State in October 1939. (Zeta Beta Tau Archives)
Sigma Alpha Mu regional conclave held in Bloomington, Indiana, 1935. (Sigma Alpha Mu Archives)

At the University of Iowa, Sigma Delta Tau sorority members and their housemother gather on the steps of the library to be photographed during the 1934–1935 academic year, the second of the chapter’s existence. (Sigma Delta Tau Archives)
At the University of Iowa in 1933, the first chapter of Sigma Delta Tau. (Sigma Delta Tau Archives)

The 1934 national convention of Alpha Epsilon Phi in Colorado Springs. Elizabeth Eldridge (in dark dress) is seated in the center front row. She served as traveling secretary and then national head of the sorority from 1929 to 1937. (Alpha Epsilon Phi Archives)
Members of Sigma Delta Tau sorority from across the country gather for their seventh biennial convention in December 1934 at the Hotel Statler in Buffalo, New York. (Sigma Delta Tau Archives)

Sigma Delta Tau sorority at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana, in 1940. (Sigma Delta Tau Archives)
Alpha Epsilon Pi’s national convention Dec. 31, 1940, held at the Hermitage Hotel in Nashville, TN. *Standing in the back row, from left:* Arthur Pick, Sidney Steinberg, O. C. Carmichael (Chancellor of Vanderbilt University), I. E. Goldberg, Morris Davis, Rabbi Julius Mark, and Leon Traub. (Alpha Epsilon Pi Archives)

At the University of Connecticut at Storrs in 1942, Joseph Kruger (holding book), the executive head of Phi Sigma Delta, formally pledges a local group of Jewish students to the national fraternity. (Zeta Beta Tau Archives)
At the University of Michigan, c. 1940s. Outside Stockwell Hall, then the women's dormitory, men give their dates a goodnight kiss on a snowy winter's evening as the 12 A.M. curfew and school regulations force them to separate at the door (the curfew could be extended to 1 A.M. on Saturday nights). Housemothers were known to stand guard outside dormitories and sorority houses, blinking the lights or otherwise making sure that the farewells were not too prolonged. On a typical American residential college campus before the late 1960s, two married couples were supposed to serve as chaperones at official university social events and visits between male and female students in their rooms were either forbidden or regulated. The most common rules called for limited visiting hours with "both feet on the floor and the door open at least a book's width." (Zeta Beta Tau Archives)

The Sigma Delta Tau pledge class at Penn State in 1942. (Sigma Delta Tau Archives)
The founding chapter of Sigma Delta Tau sorority at Pennsylvania State University in 1943. 

Top row, left to right: Betty Berman, Eileen Ershler, Ruth Constad, Roz Dulberg, Jeanne Eisenberg, Ruth Cohen Freed, Mimi Kraungold Robinson, Flo Marcus, Libby Peters. 


Third row: Nina Rabinowitz, Dottie Leibowitz, Mae Schultz Leuchter, Melba David, Dotty Robinson, Raisa Robinson Poser, Norma Poster, Irene Klein, Joan Miller, Lucille Rosenblum, Clavie Kahn, Bobbie Grosshart, Arlene Freedman Rabinowitz, Sybil Peskin, Jean Labell. 


(Sigma Delta Tau Archives)
Mrs. Margaret Rossiter, for decades the administrator of Zeta Beta Tau's national office in New York City, works at her desk during World War II next to the fraternity's service flag. The numeral "2024" indicates the number of the organization's members serving in the armed forces. Gold stars at top indicate those killed in action. (Zeta Beta Tau Archives)

As the alumni of Zeta Beta Tau celebrate the end of World War II in the fall of 1945, a large banner on the wall announces their "Victory Convention" to be held in Los Angeles the following summer. The customary annual gathering had not been held since 1941. Approximately one-third of the living membership of ZBT served in the armed forces during World War II, and 121 lost their lives. (Zeta Beta Tau Archives)
Hasty snapshot of a bouquet of flowers lying at the foot of a Star of David in a field of crosses at a military cemetery in Margraten/Maashricht, Holland, in 1945. Pvt. Jerome C. Cantor, NYU and Phi Sigma Delta Class of 1941, age 25, fought in the infantry in the Battle of the Bulge. He died in a German prison camp on March 15, 1945 and was buried in this grave on June 6. He was survived by his parents, Dr. and Mrs. Jacob A. Cantor of 21 West 86th Street, New York City. (Zeta Beta Tau Archives)
Annual formal dinner dance of the Marquette University chapter of Alpha Epsilon Pi fraternity in Milwaukee, WI, 1947. The chapter's new officers that year included Harry Katz, Elliot Shafton, Seymour Solomon (Master), Laury Spitzer, Jay Werner, and Herb Wischnia. (Alpha Epsilon Pi Archives)

A song leader leads Phi Epsilon Pi members in the traditional singing of “Alouette” at the formal dance of the University of Pittsburgh chapter held October 10, 1948, at the Jackson Hotel. (Zeta Beta Tau Archives)
“Parisian Night” at the Wayne State University chapter of Alpha Epsilon Pi, c. 1952. This photograph was taken and saved by Mitchell Tendler of Detroit. (Zeta Beta Tau Archives)

Formal initiation dinner dance at the Hotel Syracuse, April 6, 1940. (Zeta Beta Tau Archives)

Junior Prom weekend at Rutgers University, Phi Epsilon Pi chapter house, March 1962. (The housemother is seated at the center.) Within a few short years campuses such as this would be convulsed with riots and student unrest; proms, fraternities, and related student rituals would be branded as “irrelevant.” At Columbia University in 1968, the Phi Epsilon Pi house was abandoned and turned over to the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society). The national fraternity itself could no longer function independently and had to merge with an older and larger organization in 1970. (Zeta Beta Tau Archives)
Meet Some of the Girls . . .

••• They’re Your Convention Dates!

The girls here, plus Margie Album on the front page, are just a dozen of the beautiful, fun-loving girls the convention date committee, under the chairmanship of Dick Firestone, has rounded up exclusively for you Paul Bunyan Convention-goers.

And when will you meet them? Before your first date, of course!
Those of you arriving in time for the pre-convention open house at Alpha Delta Chapter may find your date there. If not, you’ll meet the girls at a special cocktail party and reception held following the first day’s business sessions in the Garden Room of the Deadman Hotel.

So Get Your Date Request In Now!

Advertisement in the October 1950 Phi Epsilon Pi convention newsletter urging unattached members to send in both their reservations and their “date requests” for the upcoming annual December convention in Minneapolis, hosted by the University of Minnesota chapter. The young women pictured here and others have been chosen by the fraternity’s “date committee,” assisted by the sororities and the local Jewish community, to be matched up with visiting convention-goers. The traditional social and matchmaking functions of the Jewish Greek sub-system had been powerful motives for the support of parents, rabbis, and communal leaders against the many who opposed college fraternities. With the end of legal sectarianism in the 1950s and 1960s, that support waned or disappeared. (American Jewish Historical Society)
As time went on, the "Alpha" chapters became more and more of a financial drain and a social embarrassment to the fraternities' names, and thus reluctance to support them increased. By 1937, the Phi Epsilon Pi City College chapter was down to only two active members. Zeta Beta Tau, which had not truly been founded at City College and was less troubled by sentiment toward it, had already jettisoned their chapter there in 1936.

For the Jewish fraternities, New York Jews posed an even greater problem outside the Big Apple than inside it. When quotas, admissions restrictions, limited finances, family pressure and undistinguished grades sent thousands of them into America's hinterland, officers were pleased to see the beds in their houses being filled. Yet they were not pleased with the unpopular reputation that New York Jews always seemed to garner for themselves. "This boy seemed to be excellent material," wrote a Kansas City alumni officer in explaining why a certain student should not become affiliated with the Zeta Beta Tau chapter there. "My only objection to him was that he is from New York. I do not say that facetiously; most of the boys who come out here from the east do not make good fraternity men." 78

Maurice Jacobs, as a graduate of the University of Maine and a Philadelphian, made the same observation in 1932 when he reported on the health of Phi Epsilon Pi's chapter at Cornell University. "At Cornell we have always had two different elements in the chapter, which for the sake of a better name I shall call the Brooklymites and the non-Brooklymites," he wrote. "These elements . . . seem to represent two distinct types of men in that institution. I want to be entirely fair in the matter and say from my own observation that the men who have come from places other than Brooklyn have been a much better element in our chapter." 79 In 1937, Samuel J. Sherman, a close friend and fellow national officer from Chicago, wrote to Jacobs asking him to comment on a new "menace" that his Midwestern fraternity associates kept mentioning. "Since my school days, a dread spectre seems to have descended on campuses—N.Y. Jews," he wrote. "What's it all about, and what does it mean? . . . They're beginning to appear at Northwestern, and other campuses where they were formerly unknown. If you have time, could you enlighten me?" 80 Jacobs wrote back:

The matter of the problem of New York Jews is one which I would rather not discuss with you in a letter, but when I see you next time, I will give you a real harangue on the matter. That is a very serious problem and one
which I have talked about privately before many groups. It is the biggest problem we have in our American colleges today and one which will not be solved in five minutes. The New York Jewish men can't get along by themselves in a Chapter composed only of their own men, and they can't get along in a mixed chapter since they take that very supercilious attitude that the Hinterland begins where the subway ends. They are the typical wise guys, are the product of America's worst environment, and just don't fit into the picture in most places.  

Without a doubt New York Jews had an impact on a fraternity chapter's status and social standing. In general, in the large state universities and most certainly in the South, the more local area Jews a chapter could draw, the more prestige accrued to it, and the stigma of not attracting local Jews could be felt keenly. In 1937, for example, the undergraduate officers of Sigma Alpha Mu's University of Kansas Chapter in Lawrence, Kansas, lamented that all ten of them were "easterners," and that their chapter did not seem to attract any of the Kansas or Missouri students. At the University of Georgia, it was already a long-established pattern that only true southerners (preferably from Atlanta) were accepted at the upper-tier Phi Epsilon Pi, while middle- and lower-tier Tau Epsilon Phi and Alpha Epsilon Pi took in the New Yorkers.

New York's size and social anonymity also detracted from its suitability as a source for good Greek material. Fraternity and sorority leaders were accustomed to shooting telegrams and telephone calls across the country and instantly receiving the full family background of a prospective member. But they could never get used to a city so large that no one could keep track of the status of various addresses, and even among the Jewish community no one seemed to know anyone else.

Lee Dover of Zeta Beta Tau's New York City national office was completely bewildered when the Irvin Fane, the Midwestern regional director in Kansas City, wrote to request a background check on several New York City area men who were up for membership at their University of Missouri chapter. Since Dover had grown up in western Canada and Seattle, the social and physical geography of New York City was a mystery to him, as his reply to the request indicates:

With reference to the three men who live in New York City (including Brooklyn) I also must score a goose egg. Some parts of Brooklyn are nice, and others are ghetto. I cannot even find anybody that ever heard of Dahill Street or Avenue. The chap that lives on Schenectady Avenue lives in
close to downtown Brooklyn. East Fourth Street in Manhattan is down in Greenwich Village—some homes are extremely nice and others are shanty. We have about 2,000,000 Jews in New York City, as you know, and it is extremely difficult to get a line on any family, including some that may live the same apartment building as a ZBT. Omega [University of Missouri Chapter] will have to judge these boys on their own impressions, and use the pledge period as one of probation. 

The officers of Alpha Epsilon Phi faced similar challenges when investigating the ill-fated Jewish local sorority at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, in 1933. Of the twenty young women in the petitioning group, ten were from the greater New York area, including Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, the town of Lawrence, and Newark, New Jersey. Of the others, eight were from various towns or cities in the state of Virginia, one was from West Virginia, and one was from Baltimore. The requisite background and family checks went with far greater ease for the non-New Yorkers. “You will, of course, appreciate that it is difficult to check Newark, Brooklyn, and New York girls,” Elizabeth Eldridge wrote to the members of the National Council, apologizing that their information was so incomplete. “My checking was done by wire and phone calls to Alpha Gamma [George Washington University chapter] and by wire to Alice Greene [a resident of Manhattan].” Eldridge included the text of Greene’s return wire, which read: “Leona Kanangeiser of Iota [Syracuse] Alumni in Newark rates three Newark girls well good family well recommended I don’t know them nor anyone who knows them. Bea trying to get information on Brooklyn and Lawrence girls. She will wire you if she gets any. Looking up NY girls virtually impossible.”

In the Midwest: Hillel Rabbis Confront New York Communist Jewish Students, 1937

Hillel rabbis also feared socially careless and disruptive New York Jews, along with what they perceived as their tendency to fill the ranks of the political radicals and rebels. As in the case of the leaders of the Menorah societies of the 1920s, the nature of the rhetoric of these religious and communal leaders—particularly those who themselves did not originate from anywhere near the New York area—was not always dissimilar from that of their secular Greek contemporaries.

At their annual meeting held in Martinsville, Indiana, in 1937, an address entitled “The Migratory Student and His Adjustment” given
by Rabbi Max Kadushin, Hillel Director at the University of Wisconsin, opened a spirited discussion on the subject between rabbis from across the country. The discussion incidentally does much to reveal the depth of antisemitism which Jewish students as a whole suffered on American college campuses during those years. This included restrictions on acceptance into medical school and the special difficulties and suspicions experienced by single Jewish female students trying to rent rooms in college town boarding houses. It also suggests how fear and resentment of New Yorkers coalesced into an attitude of fear and resentment of all those Jews who would not conform to accepted standards of behavior and thus might bring great danger down upon the entire people.

By the 1930s the term “migratory student” had become synonymous with New Yorkers, who for the communal leaders responsible for them had become synonymous with “trouble.” As Rabbi Kadushin explained to his fellow Hillel directors:

The term “New Yorkers” has, unfortunately, become a term of opprobrium on our campus. It designates the Jewish students who come from the east generally, of whom there are about three hundred. . . . The Eastern Jewish student, sophisticated by reason of his life in the large city, has a tendency to look down on the mid-westerner, whom he regards as a very simple sort. The Eastern student is often doctrinaire as a result of his radical political and economic sympathies. . . . In the classroom, too, the Eastern Jewish student is regarded with some disfavor. His fellow-students declare that, because of his loquaciousness in discussion, he takes up too much class time; and his professors complain that he is more apt than his fellow to wrangle about grades. It is enough that these things be true of only a proportion of the Jewish students from the East. . . . for the entire Jewish student-body to be stigmatized. Latent anti-Semitism finds in these qualities an excuse to come out in the open.

According to Kadushin, the Eastern Jewish student contingent not otherwise indistinguishable from his or her midwestern counterpart consisted of a shrinking number with “Hebraic backgrounds” who wished to continue with their Jewish interests, along with Ethical Culture school graduates who tended to maintain social bonds among themselves. However, the largest group “by far” he noted, were “members of the Young Communist League and their sympathizers,” and it was this group of “New Yorkers” who represented their most serious problem on the campus. His Wisconsin campus alone, he noted, contained sixty members of the YCL and another 75 to 100 sympathizers, and most of these were “Eastern” Jews. (In the course of the discussion that fol-
lowed, Abram Sachar of Illinois contributed that he had a “problem” of at least forty Communist Jewish students on his campus.) Even though the Communist students scorned Judaism or indeed any religion as an opiate of the people, Kadushin observed, it was a major effort for the Hillel Rabbi to prevent the activities of the Communists—admittedly, many of them of fine minds and great intellect—from bringing disfavor upon the entire Jewish student body. 

Kadushin also revealed a characteristically fearful American Jewish attitude in the 1930s toward public activism when he criticized the Communist students for undertaking campaigns on behalf of Jews. These included attempts to publish clear proof that the medical school discriminated against them, or speaking out against the exclusion of young Jewish women from private roominghouses. To have publicly attacked the medical school, in the rabbi’s opinion, would only result in out-of-state Jewish students being excluded altogether.

As for the rooming house problem, Kadushin declared:

This evil is, of course, not confined to our campus. I have been occupied with mitigating it in various ways, and much can be done with the cooperation of the university authorities. . . . The great error which the Communists make is this: They believe that by calling a case of anti-Semitism to the attention of the public the public conscience will be aroused. I am convinced that in this case the effect will be the opposite. Very many Gentile girl-students simply refuse to live in the same house with Jewish girls, and these will only take courage when they find how widespread their prejudice is.

On the other hand, Rabbi Kadushin advised against pleading with the communist students to keep silent out of consideration for the Jewish people. This, he conceded, would violate the precious values of free speech and conscience and would only further convince such students that organized Judaism was a reactionary force. Instead, he advised, it was better to pay attention to these students’ pressing economic needs, to give them a place on the Jewish student governing councils, and to attempt to draw them in to Hillel classes. Precisely that thoughtfulness and social conscience characteristic of those drawn to Communism made these students, in his opinion, potentially the greatest leaders in the Jewish community.

In the discussion that followed, Kadushin’s fellow rabbis did not even refer to the case of Wisconsin’s medical school or the current residential discrimination against single young Jewish women, which was
worse than that against Jewish men. These incidents were apparently far too common in 1937 to be worthy of special attention. As early as 1925 the Dean of Women at the University of Michigan had informed a visiting Alpha Epsilon Phi representative that “the problem of housing Jewish girls becomes harder every year.” By September 1936, at the University of Illinois, Abram Sachar reportedly had found himself at the start of the school year confronting an outbreak of antisemitism in town so severe that fifty young Jewish women were forced to leave school because they could not find a place to live. Nor did Rabbi Kadushin and his fellows discuss methods of dealing with student communism or concrete ways of fulfilling the students’ needs. Instead, the topic of conversation shifted quickly toward general criticism of “Eastern” or New York Jewish student behavior, as indicated by the verbatim transcript:

*Rabbi Max J. Merritt (California)*: In our Foundation we do not find the New York Jew repellant and obnoxious. However, because of the greater distance, we have but few New York Jews in California and I imagine we get a better type of New York Jew . . .

*Rabbi Maurice Pekarsky (Cornell)*: The New York students are obnoxious only in mass and therefore we cannot generalize on the basis of California.

*Rabbi Martin Perley (Illinois)*: I may say in defense of these obnoxious New York Jews that they come to Illinois primarily because the tuition is cheap. They come from poorer families, under-privileged families. They come to school in September and do not leave until the middle of June.

*Rabbi Bernard Zeiger (North Carolina)*: At North Carolina the feeling is so intense that when a signpost of New York is flashed on the screen in a moving picture theatre, there is a hiss . . . This is the indictment: The New York Jew is loud, vulgar, a chiseler for marks . . . The Hillel cabinet visited the Northern boys and pointed out to them what was expected on a Southern campus. I sanctioned a letter going out to prospective students telling them the don’ts, such as being loud, shaving, and dressing properly . . .

*Rabbi Bernard Heller (Michigan)*: Doesn’t [this] antagonism . . . reveal a psychological weakness on the part of students—something in our nature that we hate, give vent to it by hating New York students? Isn’t that feeling the result of stereotyped judgment? . . .

*Rabbi Zeiger*: On the whole I think that the metropolitan Jew is obnoxious and repellent and believe that the indictment is justified. At North Carolina it is a practical problem and the question is how to deal with it.
The Greater Threat

Life and death issues lay behind the sharpness of fraternity and sorority rhetoric, and the fear and revulsion of the Hillel rabbis. For all, the economic difficulties of the Great Depression could be overcome or at least endured. Not all were equally affected, and if many were forced to drop out of colleges or chapters for lack of funds, others came to take their places. As for campus prejudice, quotas, and other limitations, these were already a familiar story. If Jews were shut out from some schools, they could still go to others. If Jewish students could not find rooms in one or the other boarding house, they could find a place to live somewhere else, or rely on their own fraternity system.

The worst problems of the 1930s, however, stemmed from those factors over which Jewish college students and those responsible for them exercised no direct control. These were the lengthening shadow of Hitlerism and Fascism in Europe and the terror that it would engulf them in the United States. The new generations and their mentors could not help but fear that hopes for safety and success in America were in jeopardy as they scrambled to respond to this new threat from across the seas.