The golden age of the American college fraternity was followed all too soon by some of the system's most precarious years. For thousands of young Americans the chance to attend or to finish college was jeopardized by the spiraling economic disaster set into motion with the New York stock market crash of October 1929. For seniors or recent graduates, the insecure situation of their fraternity houses was among the least of their worries. The sight of millions of able-bodied Americans out of work and the fear that school did not guarantee them any job caused bewilderment, despair, disillusionment, and demoralization.

Faith in the value of a college education inculcated from childhood could be shattered. One recent ZBT graduate in 1931 referred to it all as a "four-year loaf." College, he wrote in the fraternity's quarterly, was a useless enterprise, and did nothing to train students to take on real jobs. All it promised was a four-year break before being flung out into the world to compete with others for survival. Others accused their contemporaries of not making the most of a precious education. "At this writing 8 million young people in the U.S. are unemployed, and 35 percent of college graduates between 25 and 29 have no jobs," wrote Missouri undergraduate Kalman B. Druck in the spring of 1936. "Yet too many students in college are there just for the ride, interested only in movies and social affairs. . . . Is it any wonder that graduates need diplomas to drive trucks or to get ten-dollar-a-week jobs?"

The bitterness and disillusionment of the Depression years, along with the formative experiences of its college-age youth, were es-
pecially well documented in an impressionistic autobiography entitled “We Grow Up, 1915–1938.” Jerome L. Schwartz, a 1937 Ohio State ZBT graduate, recalled as a toddler in 1917 being told that his papa and older brother were “going away across the sea to make the world safe for democracy so that when you grow up there won’t be any more wars for you to face.” In 1918, the boy played at being a soldier, watched the Armistice Day parades from his perch atop the shoulders of adults, and, thought happily, “everything was going to be fine now. The war was over. The reign of evil was past.” In 1919, the little boy played with mud pies while others talked about Progressivism. In 1920, while “white-hooded men burned crosses in the South,” he and his friends munched popcorn and watched the “magical movies.” Next came memories of the Roaring Twenties, the awkward entrance into adolescence, and the call to success.

Following the stock market crash, however, the teenager came to fear that all his elders had been telling him all these years was nothing but lies:

1929—The great American balloon burst. Suicides, bankruptcies. But this is still the land of milk and honey! Punch harder. . . .

1931—No, the high school officials said, your class can’t have dances, you can’t have an annual. People are starving they said . . . You can’t dance when people need bread. . . .

1932—Was this never going to stop? We heard all about the glories of the last generation. But you and your generation must bury your heads in your pillows . . . you must drink in the darkness. 1933—a pounding in our veins, a longing in our hearts, but the world was cold. . . .

1934—The bank failed. No big Eastern University for you, son. Go to the State University. You’re lucky. Many boys are starving. 1935—Crawling into a warm, academic cloister, feeling the soft touch of books, a desire to lull yourself into forgetfulness of the world outside. . . .

1936—Moonlit nights and a girl. . . .

1937—the firm clasp of friendly hands, and the desire never to let go. . . .

Upon graduation, Schwartz found himself facing a life for which he had been neither prepared in college nor reared for by his family. “1938—You had been a success in college. . . . They patted you on the back, gave you honors, handed you a Phi Beta Kappa key that was excellent to clean your fingernails. They poured more success down your throat. They fashioned you in the image of a lost generation. Then they shoved you into a world that had changed. So pound the pavements, fellow! Slave away! You and your generation have been kicked in the face.”
Hard Times and the “House” Plan

For the executive secretaries and officers of the Jewish fraternities in the early years of the Great Depression, the outlook for their organizations and their dependent institutions at first appeared bleak. Even the academic giants Northwestern University and the University of Chicago were seriously considering consolidation into a single “Chicago Northwestern University” in the fall of 1933 as a means of remaining solvent. Fewer men could now enter college because of restricted family budgets, fewer jobs were available for students who needed to work, and fewer students who made it to campus could afford the relative luxury of membership in a fraternity. Many of those who were already members faced the prospect of being forced to drop out and go to work in the hope that they could save up enough to resume their education later.

Membership and real estate were the most urgent problems facing all college Greek-letter groups, as payments became due for large houses purchased in more prosperous times. At the University of Michigan, one of the most important fraternity schools in the country, the problem was acute. With sixty national fraternities represented on the campus, at least 1,150 new pledges were needed just to fill the existing houses. However, in the fall of 1933, only 400 applied during the customary rush week, and the top ranking twenty fraternities snapped up more than half of these.

Bad economic times also led, directly and indirectly, to other changes in higher education that were to the detriment of college fraternities. For example, during the formative years of the subsystem in the 1910s, it had been possible to enter certain professional schools directly from secondary school. Long Island Medical College had thus supported active chapters of both Zeta Beta Tau and Sigma Alpha Mu, while the Columbia School of Pharmacy, and not Columbia College, was technically the founding place of the Jewish college fraternity Tau Epsilon Phi. By 1934 however, professional schools were both reducing their Jewish enrollments and requiring a BA for admission. These changes brought about the extinction of SAM’s Long Island Medical Chapter. Those fraternity-minded students able to get in either already belonged to another undergraduate social fraternity or else joined one of the several Jewish medical fraternities upon their matriculation. They did not join SAM.

An additional Depression-era peril for all fraternities was the growing unpopularity of the Greek system among college officials, even
those who had themselves joined fraternities as undergraduates. The forces that denounced fraternities as agents of class and religious divisions, a detriment to the development of academic life, an endangerment to life and limb because of hazing practices, and a loss of room and board income that might better be paid directly to their institutions, were gaining ground. In a pathbreaking speech before the twenty-third annual session of the National Interfraternity Conference in New York in November, 1931, Henry Suzzallo, then president of the prestigious Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, warned the assembled Greek officials of this new development. Unless fraternities became more “intellectual,” raised their cultural and academic standards, and cooperated with their colleges more, he declared, the “house” or residential college system that had long marked English universities would soon replace the collegiate Greek system across America.  

Indeed, from the late 1920s and through the rest of the century the predominant trend in American higher education was to discourage or weaken the power of Greek-letter fraternities. This could be done by building dormitories and house plans, feeding students in common halls, and requiring that students who wished to join chapters defer for either a term or an entire year. The American educational elite took the lead in this process at Harvard and Yale where, as ZBT’s Lee Dover noted in 1936, “the introduction of the House Plan at these universities has practically eliminated the fraternities and most of the clubs.” Jewish fraternity officials expressed their displeasure that Jewish philanthropy sometimes played a major role in making this abolishment of fraternities possible. In a discussion between Maurice Jacobs and the president of Phi Epsilon Pi’s Chicago Alumni Club, both agreed that “Chicago was a good fraternity school in the past until Julius Rosenwald [president of Sears, Roebuck, and Company] foolishly gave them money for these new dormitories.”

Making Do

Jewish fraternities were, and would remain, more vulnerable to such external challenges than the non-Jewish fraternities. At the time of the stock market crash, all but one group in the Jewish Greek subsystem were less than thirty years old. The size of their endowments and membership rolls, as well as the quality of their housing, could not approach that of the older Gentile groups. For example, the leading Gentile college fraternities Beta Theta Pi (founded 1839), Phi Delta Theta (1848),
Sigma Chi (1855), Sigma Alpha Epsilon (1856), and Alpha Tau Omega (1865) all enjoyed endowments approaching or surpassing three million dollars. Their membership rolls ranged from 25,000 to 40,000 members, many of them individually more than that of all the Jewish fraternities combined. By contrast, of the fourteen national Jewish men's fraternities that were members of the National Interfraternity Conference in 1933 only Zeta Beta Tau's endowment reached seven figures ($1,800,000). Three (Pi Lambda Phi, Sigma Alpha Mu, and Tau Epsilon Phi) were worth between half and one million, while the remaining ten were worth half a million or less. Two of the youngest ones, Alpha Mu Sigma and Sigma Lambda Pi (neither would survive the Depression) had initiated fewer than a thousand members.\textsuperscript{13}

Consequently, chapters of Jewish fraternities were especially susceptible to dissolution or the need for mergers or absorption by stronger groups in order to survive. At the beginning of the 1930–1931 academic year, for example, twenty percent of Zeta Beta Tau's original chapters and twenty-five percent of Phi Epsilon Pi's were listed as “inactive.”\textsuperscript{14} By 1934, Phi Sigma Delta had had to withdraw from Boston University, the University of Vermont, and Lehigh University. It was also on the verge of losing its Columbia chapter, where the institution of selective admissions had sharply decreased the number of Jewish students. In the same year, Phi Beta Delta had closed its chapter at the University of Colorado, while officers of their University of Denver chapter were planning to surrender their charter.

Tau Delta Phi, itself a small and relatively young Jewish fraternity founded in 1910 at City College, absorbed most of the remnants of the even smaller and younger Omicron Alpha Tau, a fraternity known for its adherence to traditional Jewish dietary laws in its houses. The remaining OAT chapters absorbed into Tau Delta Phi included Rutgers, NYU, Marquette University, and Cornell, while chapters at Syracuse and University of Pennsylvania were absorbed by Phi Epsilon Pi and Phi Beta Delta. Zeta Beta Tau, after some struggle, finally gave up on its “Alpha” chapter at City College, while Alpha Epsilon Pi was discontinuing its University of Virginia chapter. Also in 1934, the tiny University of Rochester-based Kappa Nu, with over a quarter of its original chapters gone, was dropped from the NIC for its failure to pay a $35 bill due since 1932.\textsuperscript{15}

For those chapters of modest means that did remain, economizing became the order of the day. Having members wait on their own tables, do laundry, and keep the house and yard clean was one way to
“make do.” At the Sigma Alpha Mu chapter at Indiana University in Bloomington in April 1935, for example, the president dismissed all employees except “Mrs. Barton, a Jewess,” who received $27 per week as their cook. One outside student received free meals for dishwashing, two members got rebates for waiting tables and pledges and freshmen made beds and cleaned the rooms. Twenty-seven boys lived with inadequate shower facilities in what was meant to be a private family dwelling, and the basement served as their dining room. The members bore their burdens with few complaints, the chapter president reported to the national office. In addition, he voiced his gratitude for the tax exemption on fraternity property granted by the State of Indiana as well as the university’s insistence that fraternity bills be paid if members wanted to avoid having their grades held up.16

Other Jewish local fraternities during the Depression never even considered “going national” and were content to render service to their members within the confines of one campus. On these lower levels of the Greek-letter hierarchy, members lived on the edge of physical survival. A member of Kappa Beta, a Jewish local at New York State College for Teachers in Albany, recalled in the early 1930s riding up to school the evening after Yom Kippur in a friend’s chicken truck, with only $25 in his pocket. Only the fellowship of Kappa Beta, he recalled, allowed him to stay for four years. Members pooled their resources and lived together in a rented house on Western Avenue in Albany, where they maintained a kosher kitchen. A Jewish woman from the town cooked a kosher dinner for them each day, while the sisterhoods of the local synagogues donated old furniture. Members made it through the Depression by finding jobs for one another, whether as shoe salesmen, waiters, day laborers, or anything else available. Kappa Beta continued as a Jewish fraternity until after the end of World War II, when it dissolved. Its alumni, however, continued to gather for reunions for decades afterward.17

Mad Rush

The problem of too many Jewish fraternities chasing too few potential members caused the old techniques of “rushing,” or recruiting new members, to reach new levels of intensity during the Great Depression. At the University of Illinois for example, Sigma Alpha Mu’s chapter appealed to the national organization for help in the spring and summer of 1939 when it discovered that only 14 upperclassmen would be returning in the fall—half the number required to maintain their house. Declar-
ing that the outlook was “serious but not hopeless,” the national officers responded with a series of Illinois alumni rushing parties held in June around the country. These included events at the Mt. Vernon Country Club sponsored by the fraternity’s Westchester and North Shore of Long Island Alumni Clubs. This location indicated the importance of the New York metropolitan area as a source for Jewish students at Champaign-Urbana. At these gatherings, SAM officers directed outstanding candidates toward Illinois with the understanding that the fraternity would accept them once they got there. With these extra efforts, SAM’s Illinois chapter was saved for another year. 18

Also at the University of Illinois, in 1937 Phi Epsilon Pi chapter members reported keeping lists of boys from “feeder” areas who would not be ready for college for another ten years. At the University of Pennsylvania, members reported getting one of their numbers to date the secretary of the admissions office in order to obtain unofficial information on the Jewish students of the incoming freshman class. 19 The Penn chapter officer’s manual of 1938 called upon members to mobilize their prep school, city club, country club, and Jewish summer camp contacts. Freshmen from such backgrounds would fit the fraternity’s social profile and presumably be able to assume its financial obligations. Young men who had been counselors in Jewish summer camps were considered especially good material. 20 As soon as the new class was sent its acceptance letters, a list of the new students was obtained either directly from the registrar’s office or through the good offices of a sympathetic Gentile dean. Thereupon, alumni and undergraduate members combed it for Jewish names. 21 If investigation revealed that these men were of “fraternity caliber,” then they would be sent the organization’s literature and invited for local rushing parties and house visits.

If a suitable candidate did not agree to join the fraternity at that point, then the window of opportunity was still open during his first day of arrival at a new school. The Phi Epsilon Pi national Rushing Manuals for 1937 and 1941 suggested that as many rushees as possible be brought to school by active members and alumni and assisted through the red tape of registration. To ferry students back and forth from the train station and also to make a good impression, Phi Epsilon Pi’s University of Illinois Rush Chairman in 1937 stressed the importance of members begging, borrowing, or stealing cars to be used during rush week. “Get that car—somewhere, somehow,” he wrote. “If your car doesn’t have an engine in it, we can at least set it out in front of the house for appearances’ sake.” 22 If candidates needed a place to stay, the Manual
warned, under no circumstances should a good prospect be allowed to sign a rooming house lease. If he later joined the fraternity, it would cost too much for the chapter to take the lease over and besides, as one sample letter put it, "there are always plenty of good rooms these days."  

Jewish sororities used similar tactics, although since there were many more young women eager to join (often at the urging of their families) and far fewer places for them within the Greek system, the intensity of the courtship of prospective members was far less and the necessity of having a personal recommendation by a member, preferably a mother, aunt, or sister, much greater. There were never more than four truly national Jewish sororities in the entire United States and Canada, and by long campus custom and National Panhellenic rules chapters were smaller and thus had to be more selective in their membership. Rushing for the Jewish sororities was more a matter of eager young women donning their best dresses and attending a weeklong course of teas and dinners. Those who did not pass muster would be cut from consideration.

Economic crisis or no, the national sororities still had their pick. In its own rushing manual for 1937, for example, Sigma Delta Tau suggested a coding system of three different flowers to be drawn on the rushees' name tags pinned to their dresses: a rose was for girls who were definitely wanted, a violet was for those whose desirability was doubtful, and a jonquil meant that they knew almost nothing about the girl and that all active members should do what they could to find out as much about her as possible. 24 Still the competition between sororities for the most desirable candidates, especially between Alpha Epsilon Phi and Sigma Delta Tau (whom the former referred to as "Cedars"), could become heated in the 1930s.

In Alpha Epsilon Phi sorority, national officers considered the technique of "colonization" as a way of beating their competitors to a particular campus. The national sorority would pay a young woman's tuition and fees on the condition that she attend or transfer to a certain school and gather members of a new chapter around her. In one such case, Elizabeth Eldridge, National Dean (or President) of Alpha Epsilon Phi urged in April 1935 that a paid colonizer be sent to the University of Alabama before a rival chapter of Sigma Delta Tau could take root. 25 In June 1936, she similarly recommended paying a colonizer as well as using alumnae to divert southern women toward Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge. LSU, she reported, had recently enjoyed spectacular growth under the legislative support of "Kingfish" Senator Huey P. Long as part of his plan to get revenge against New Orleans's
Tulane University, an elite bastion of political opposition that he despised. LSU, she pointed out, was a logical haven for young Jewish women who wished to join Alpha Epsilon Phi at Sophie Newcomb College, Tulane’s sister institution, but who had little hope of finding a place there. Even through the darkest years of the Depression AEPhi’s Newcomb chapter was so selective and drew so many legacies—that is, daughters, sisters, and other relatives of older members—that it constantly turned applicants away.  

The oversupply of suitable young women at Newcomb College was also a factor in the suggestion of Eleanor G. Reinach of St. Paul in 1938 that someone be sent to colonize the University of Minnesota. As director of the sorority’s midwestern province, she knew of a member at Newcomb who was originally from Minnesota and might be persuaded to leave and to return to her home state. In addition, she knew of another Alpha Epsilon Phi student at the University of Illinois who might be willing to transfer to Minnesota to finish her education if the sorority were willing to give her financial aid for doing so.  

**Quotas and Anti-Jewish Discrimination: Dartmouth, Syracuse, McGill, Lehigh, Duke, and Purdue**

In all, despite the need for belt-tightening everywhere, the Great Depression did not cause immediate harm to the overall structure of the Jewish Greek subsystem. Both Jewish/Jewish and Jewish/Gentile discrimination continued to feed its expansion and maintenance throughout the 1930s. Exclusion from a normal campus life and the need for Jews to have their own portal of access to the Greek system was as great as ever, if not greater. In a 1932 survey of campuses with more than five Jews where Phi Epsilon Pi did not yet have a chapter, Maurice Jacobs reported that out of seventy colleges responding, fifty-one did not admit them to “general” fraternities under any circumstances. In eight schools—Alabama Polytechnic, Brown, Kansas, Kentucky, Purdue, Washington State, and Williams—Jews were accepted “seldom” or “occasionally.” In only nine cases was the answer an unqualified “yes”—Amherst, Buffalo, Colgate, University of Chicago, University of Denver, Marquette, Nebraska, UCLA, and the University of Washington.

On individual campuses, the introduction or arbitrary intensification of Jewish quotas and admissions restrictions did not help the subsystem expand and, as they had in the 1920s, could cause havoc when the number of potential fraternity initiates was reduced suddenly and unex-
pectedly. Jewish officials in the early 1930s reacted with special alarm in the case of Dartmouth College, an important and prestigious fraternity school. In the past it had supported three national Jewish fraternities (Phi Epsilon Pi, Pi Lambda Phi, and Sigma Alpha Mu) and had 186 Jewish men in its student body in 1932. However, in the fall of 1934 its Dean of Freshmen, perhaps wishing to reassure Dartmouth's Gentile alumni, stated in the Dartmouth alumni magazine that the unusually large “Jewish delegation” of 75 men who had entered in the fall of 1930 was now “back to normal.” “Back to normal,” as it turned out, meant cut in half to 37 freshmen, a number further reduced in 1935 to thirty. By that point, with all its upperclassmen graduating, Sigma Alpha Mu was no longer able to compete with Pi Lambda Phi, and the “Sammies” were forced to close their Dartmouth chapter.

The rushing outlook at Dartmouth was also complicated, ironically, by the unusual willingness of the Gentile fraternities to accept some half-dozen of the Jews’ most outstanding Greek-letter candidates. These included football team captain Philip Julian Glazar ’34, who was accepted into Alpha Delta Phi, and star ice hockey player John Benjamin Wolff Jr. ’32 of Hempstead, New York, who was offered membership in the well-known “Dekes,” or Delta Kappa Epsilon.

In 1937, the Jewish enrollment at Syracuse University, another strong fraternity school with a sizable New York area contingent, was also being drastically reduced. There the SAM chapter was so entrenched, enjoying such loyal alumni backing along with free and clear alumni ownership of the house, that it was able to persevere in the face of competition. Other chapters were not as fortunate. At McGill University in Montreal, where five Jewish fraternity chapters—Zeta Beta Tau, Pi Lambda Phi, Sigma Alpha Mu, Tau Epsilon Phi, and Omicron Alpha Tau—had flourished in the 1920s, the authorities reduced Jewish enrollment to twenty-five students per year. ZBT desperately fought to stay on campus by abandoning its customary selectivity and pledging every available Jewish male. At the University of Toronto, fortunately, fraternity officials were relieved to report that the Jewish enrollment was undiminished. Even so, the high cost of coal was too much for the members of Toronto’s Sigma Alpha Mu chapter to bear. National alumni officers criticized the younger members for their weakness in surrendering their house and meeting in local members’ homes rather than enduring the discomfort of gathering in an unheated building during the winter.

In another such case of sudden reduction, Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, which had formerly supported five Jewish
Challenges during the Great Depression

fraternities, so limited the number of entering Jewish freshmen in 1934 that two chapters were forced to close their doors. At Duke University, where in 1932 Maurice Jacobs reported the Jewish enrollment was being restricted to three percent, the faculty assembly actually voted to allow no more than one Jewish fraternity on campus. At Purdue University in Lafayette, Indiana, the Sigma Alpha Mu chapter faced a fight for its existence. Only fifteen Jewish men were entering in the fall of 1935, and their competitor Tau Epsilon Phi (the “Teps”) would be rushing the same incoming students. At Purdue direct quotas were not as much of an obstacle as the perception that engineering, the school’s specialty, had become a hopeless profession for Jewish men.

Despite these difficulties, SAM Purdue alumni in the Lafayette, Indianapolis, and Dayton, Ohio, areas eagerly agreed to do what they could to support the dying chapter. “The idea of quitting at Purdue is abhorrent to them,” reported James C. Hammerstein, SAM’s executive secretary, in May 1935. “Only five years ago there were eighty-five Jews at that university and Sigma Eta [their Greek-letter name for the chapter] was sitting on top of the world.” As in the case of Phi Epsilon Pi’s Illinois alumni, the loyal Sammies alumni of Purdue contributed funds and threw rushing parties throughout the area, encouraging good candidates to apply to the school with the promise of membership to Sigma Alpha Mu if they got in. Through these efforts, the chapter was saved for another year.

Presidential Refusal at the College of William and Mary

Aside from declining numbers, presidential or senior administrative opposition, as had been the case at Brown University, could still prevent Jewish chapters from establishing themselves on a campus at all. The “small Ivy” was as resistant as ever. Twenty-five Jewish students at Bowdoin College in 1932, for example, were reportedly eager to form a chapter of Phi Epsilon Pi. However, as Maurice Jacobs reported with regret in his December 1932 survey, President Kenneth C. M. Sills of that campus “at the present time does not care to have a Jewish group on his campus.” Amherst and Trinity Colleges, he observed, also “have made it quite plain that they will not harbor Jewish fraternities,” and the officially nonsectarian Pi LambdaPhi reportedly had not been successful in its efforts to maintain even clandestine chapters at Amherst and Bowdoin.

Another small and eminent institution, the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, had a student body of 3,000 in
1933, including one hundred Jewish men divided between two fraternities and twenty unorganized Jewish women. The campus was ripe for the formation of a national Jewish sorority chapter, and when the president did not raise any major objections, Alpha Epsilon Phi moved in to help the young women form one. Yet they and the sorority's national officers were in for a grave disappointment that year when President Julian A.C. Chandler unexpectedly withdrew his support.

The relative autocracy that President Chandler enjoyed at William and Mary presented a special problem when protesting his decision. There was no recourse to a Board of Overseers, an alumni association, or some other body that could serve as a counterweight to his authority. Much of the campus was Chandler's personal property and he ruled it with an iron hand, coming down with special severity on the women students, who had been admitted only since 1918. His authority extended to every aspect of college life. In her 1933 investigation of William and Mary, Elizabeth Eldridge noted with surprise that conventional dates and even visits between male and female students were either forbidden outright or strictly regulated by the president himself. With rare exceptions women students could walk with men students only along two specified paths that led not more than one block from the campus. 38

With only one theater, no dances, no business district beyond the “first block,” and dormitory curfew at ten, the sorority houses, in Eldridge’s opinion, were the only things that kept the young women of William and Mary from “dying of boredom.” 39 At least, as she observed, the rule of William and Mary’s personal “Mussolini,” as she described him, had some advantages for the students’ religious development. A visit to Sabbath services at the local Reform Temple revealed every Jewish female student there, most with dates. The cause, Eldridge surmised, was not overwhelming piety but the chance to escape the suffocating confines of the campus and to interact with members of the opposite sex. “It is something to do, it is an excuse to walk past the ‘first block,’ it is a chance to date,” she reported to her fellow officers. “Unpopular rabbis, consult Dr. Chandler!” 40

At first the college president had granted his verbal approval to the sorority—on condition that he also have final approval of its housing arrangements. Lucille Fritz, the William and Mary undergraduate slated to become the AEPhi chapter president, thereupon inspected the home Chandler offered them and requested two improvements: first, an outside paint job and second, an additional shower, since the build-
ing had only one bathroom. The President’s reaction revealed that his earlier verbal agreement had been deceptive. His college was financially unable to provide these “numerous repairs and additional equipment,” he insisted, nor could it provide the young women with another, better-equipped house. Furthermore, he could not “dream” of making “the Jewish sorority” so unhappy and discontent as to deny them physical quarters when all the other women’s groups had houses. Therefore, Alpha Epsilon Phi could not come to the William and Mary campus at all. 41

Protests that they did not need an actual house to begin operations at William and Mary only increased the firmness of his refusal. “I am not willing that you should organize a group at the College, because there is no house available for them,” President Chandler wrote. “I do not mean to assume an unfriendly attitude in this matter, but I know conditions so well here, and I feel that you would see the wisdom of my decision if you knew conditions as I do.” 42 Lucille Fritz expressed her discouragement and anger to her national officers and confirmed their suspicions that prejudice, and not finances, were at issue. “The demands made were not numerous nor unjust, as you know,” she wrote in May 1933. “The fact that the college is not ‘well off’ financially has nothing to do with the house, for it is Chandler’s personal property. It seems that he just won’t tolerate a Jewish sorority on campus—he could have said so immediately without getting us so excited. What steps are to be taken next?” 43

President James L. McConaughy of Wesleyan University

Wesleyan University located in Middletown, Connecticut, was another venue where the force of presidential opposition to Jewish fraternities and the distress that it caused was especially notable. It was, as Maurice Jacobs noted in a report to Phi Epsilon Pi’s national governing body in December 1932, “in every sense a fraternity school, with the independent man out of the running.” More than eighty percent of its all-male student body lived in some of the most spacious fraternity homes in the country. Yet the Gentile fraternities categorically excluded Jews, while the administration forbade the establishment of any Jewish Greek-letter organizations or clubs. Maurice Jacobs recalled his own student days when he was president of his Phi Epsilon Pi chapter at the University of Maine in 1917. A group of boys attempting to form a Jewish fraternity chapter at Methodist-sponsored Wesleyan were promptly “paddled by vigilantes” and told that Wesleyan was a Protestant college. In all
the time since then the only permissible organized Jewish activity on campus was a weekly Sunday meeting in place of the required chapel service.  

Simmering discontent erupted in mid-February of 1932 when Austin M. Fisher '32, a senior, submitted a column to the biweekly *Wesleyan Argus* entitled “Is Wesleyan Fair to the Jews?” He protested the fraternity exclusion and called for Wesleyan to exercise “greater honesty” in its admissions practices. Officials, he insisted, should frankly inform Jewish applicants either verbally or in the college catalogue that they would find no admittance to the fraternities and virtually no social life on campus once they matriculated. Austin himself, it developed, was Jewish on his father’s side only and had suffered the indignity of being depledged from the Gentile fraternity Alpha Delta Phi in his freshman year when his origins became known. He had finally been accepted by another well-known Gentile fraternity, Sigma Chi, and had spent most of his years at Wesleyan not associating with the Jewish students. However, in his senior year, about to leave the school behind, he felt compelled to take a public stand on the issue.  

Such blatant accusations by a student on a subject most often treated in a hush-hush manner invited media attention, and the story spread quickly to the Hartford and New York City newspapers. Ever alert to any opportunity to organize at Wesleyan, Phi Epsilon Pi’s Connecticut alumni read the stories and determined that the time was ripe for another attempt. They gambled that in the face of such adverse publicity, Wesleyan’s administration would not dare to take a public stand and bar all Jewish groups. The following Sunday, the fraternity’s local alumni association openly invited the entire Wesleyan Jewish student body for a meeting in the basement of Middletown’s YMCA to discuss the formation of a chapter. Eighteen potential new members showed up. Possibly the alumni had already begun quiet, renewed organizational activity that term, and Fisher’s letter was prompted by it.  

In public the controversy continued, drawing immediate administrative reaction from President James L. McConaughy, who served as the head of Wesleyan from 1925 to 1943. Replying to Fisher’s letter in both the campus and local newspapers, he insisted that the student was exaggerating his university’s responsibilities. Wesleyan could neither pledge boys to fraternities nor regulate student social life. Moreover, the president himself had “often intimated to prospective students of the Jewish faith, or to their parents, that the boys are not likely to find satisfactory social contacts in Wesleyan fraternities.” Three-quarters of
Wesleyan’s Jewish students in 1932 lived at home, he pointed out, either in Middletown or its surrounding cities, and thus were “scarcely in a position to be affected by the conditions of which Mr. Fisher speaks.” “The remainder,” McConaughy wrote, “I believe are well acquainted with the facts as they exist here, and do not come here with any expectations of entering fraternity life.” His statement concluded with a reference to Wesleyan’s significant concession in exempting Jewish students from Sunday Chapel services.  

On the campus itself, not all Wesleyan’s Jewish students were happy with Austin Fisher’s outspokenness. M. M. Resnikoff ’34, who had attended the Phi Epsilon Pi alumni organizational meeting, condemned Fisher in the pages of the Argus as a “false prophet who tries to cleanse his own soul without remembering the welfare of his campus brethren” and who “stirred up the forces of prejudice and flung Wesleyan Jewish hearts into the flames.” More public advertisement of Jewish woes was the last thing they needed when their woes were already public enough, he wrote. Resnikoff claimed that he spoke for the majority of his fellow Jewish students when he counseled patience and a spirit of reconciliation. “The constitutions of some fraternities are not fair,” Resnikoff agreed. “Remember, though, both Jew and Gentile have clannish prejudices of their own. Give time a chance. In the meantime, we shall be patient, and we shall forgive those, real or imaginary, who wound us.” Ultimately, he concluded, both Jew and Gentile must “learn to laugh at the prejudices of each other so heartily that the heavens will fall in shame and the common Apostle of Peace shall come forth, bearing the scroll of Tolerance.” “This is no occasion for War,” he observed. “This is an occasion to learn how to laugh!”

President McConaughy, however, was in no mood to laugh. Following publication of Resnikoff’s letter, he invited the writer for a personal interview, having in the meantime gotten word of the Wesleyan Jewish students’ attempts to organize a fraternity chapter on his campus. According to Resnikoff’s account of the meeting in March 1932, McConaughy stated that Jews were at Wesleyan only by tolerance and that his university would not permit the establishment of any distinct Jewish group. Any attempt to establish a fraternity or club under any guise, he warned, would result in Wesleyan cutting down the number of Jewish students admitted. Furthermore, McConaughy claimed that while he was willing to meet with rabbis or Jewish representatives to discuss the general situation, “Wesleyan did not need any outside advice or suggestions as to how to treat or handle their individual problems.”
According to another student’s report on the president’s ire, Herman E. Colitz ’34 (a Phi Epsilon Pi transfer from Miami University in Ohio), McConaughy allegedly threatened not only reduction but outright expulsion of the Jewish students if external interference did not cease immediately.52

The student members of the abortive Phi Epsilon Pi chapter, fearing the possible consequences of their actions, fled for protection and counsel to Phi Epsilon Pi alumnus and Hartford attorney Louis B. Rosenfeld. Along with his associates, Rosenfeld agreed to intervene on their behalf and to confront Wesleyan’s president on his alleged threats. At the resulting meeting, Rosenfeld reported to his fraternity’s executive secretary, McConaughy tried to mollify these Jewish communal representatives with a promise that at the university’s upcoming 1932 commencement an honorary degree would be bestowed “on some outstanding national Jew to show that we have absolutely no ill feeling against members of the Jewish race.” The president also reminded his critics that at least one Jew sat on Wesleyan’s Board of Trustees—“although,” as the Hartford Jewish attorney confessed, “I am not familiar with the name of the person who holds that distinction.” Afterward, having reassured the Jewish students that their college careers were not in jeopardy, Rosenfeld concluded that it would be too dangerous to go directly contrary to the president’s wishes and to continue organizing any fraternity activity at Wesleyan.53

Almost two years later, in November 1933, Herman E. Colitz ’34, one of the original eighteen men, made another attempt to aid Phi Epsilon Pi by calling for a student referendum on the issue of admitting Jewish fraternities. McConaughy responded by calling a meeting of all the fraternity chapter presidents—Colitz himself was not invited—in order to discourage them from such a vote. Shortly thereafter the Wesleyan student government “flatly refused” the call for a referendum.54 “To attempt anything at your Alma Mater seems to be an impossible task,” responded Maurice Jacobs, upon hearing Colitz’s description of the incident. “Time and time again, Jewish students have been rebuffed in the same manner. Wesleyan definitely does not want our boys to have equal rights and will not move from its position. The University is in the saddle and what can be done?”55 The experiences of Jewish students at Wesleyan would change significantly with the new administration of President Herbert Butterfield, who served from 1943 to 1967.

Responding to criticism and controversy, as well as an honest desire to serve the unaffiliated and socially rejected, college administra-
tions such as Wesleyan's that did not permit Jewish fraternities began to establish alternative university dining facilities. At the time of the original controversy in the spring of 1932, Wesleyan had recently set aside a furnished building known as the “Ivy Club” for non-fraternity men who wished to have a place to live and to eat. Practically all the men, according to reports, were Jewish or Catholic.\(^{56}\) In the case of Amherst, the college established a “Commons Club” with fraternity privileges for the non-affiliated students; again, this included virtually all the Jewish men.\(^{57}\) Similar institutions existed at other schools, including Williams and Harvard. None, however, provided the sense of first-class citizenship that membership in one of the dominant selective student societies could provide.

**Interfraternity Council (IFC) Recognition:**

**Maryland, Penn, and Berkeley**

Even when administrations accepted the presence of Jewish fraternities at a particular college, the hurdle of full corporate recognition remained. In the world of the Greek system the local interfraternity councils (IFC's) and their female counterparts, the Panhellenic associations, made up of delegates from each of the member organizations, set rules and regulations for rushing and fraternity activities. Through their influence, they also ended up governing much of campus life. Exclusion from these de facto organs of student government meant exclusion from the campus corridors of student power. The fight for full IFC or Panhellenic recognition was often, therefore, in the 1920s and 1930s the second item on the agenda once a Jewish fraternity established itself anywhere.

For example, at the University of Maryland, where Jewish Greek organizers in the 1930s noted unusually strong anti-Jewish prejudice from both students and faculty, repeated attempts by the Jewish fraternities and sororities for equal representation were to no avail. According to reports filed by Alpha Epsilon Phi investigators Marion Diamond and Florence Orringer in 1939, Maryland President H. C. Byrd met complaints with the suggestion that “Jewish students could form their own councils.”\(^{58}\) At times, a local IFC might offer membership to one Jewish fraternity while denying it to another one of allegedly lower social status. In that case, Jewish students faced a painful choice — submit to the rule of “divide and conquer” or else deny themselves for the sake of ethnic and religious solidarity.
The men of Sigma Alpha Mu at Maryland in 1935 had faced such a choice. Approximately one hundred Jewish men and women attended the university that year and they supported three men's fraternities — Sigma Alpha Mu, Tau Epsilon Phi, and Phi Alpha. The Maryland IFC then offered full membership to Sigma Alpha Mu while declining to offer it to the two other groups, which they considered to be of lower caste. After some deliberation, the Sigma Alpha Mu chapter voted to reject the offer. Although at the time and on that particular campus TEP and Phi Alpha indeed were smaller, younger, and ranked lower in the internal Jewish Greek hierarchy, the Sammies did not wish to break ranks with their fellow Jewish students over the issue—nor did they wish the disadvantage of being subject to restrictive official IFC rushing rules and regulations while their competitors were not.

At the University of Pennsylvania, another administrative tactic theoretically granted Jewish students “separate—but-equal” status while keeping them a safe distance from the Gentile fraternities. There were no apparent restrictions on Jewish enrollment there in 1935, and no fewer than thirteen Jewish men’s fraternities and two sororities flourished on the Philadelphia campus. On the other hand, there was no equal IFC representation either. Gentile fraternities were organized into a “Group A” while the Jewish fraternities were organized into “Group B.”

The granting of “associate” membership status, where a Jewish fraternity or sorority’s delegates might attend the main meetings but not vote or hold office, was another possible concession that Gentile groups might grant. Still, when such status was offered to the chapter of Alpha Epsilon Phi at the University of California at Berkeley in 1934, the national officers considered the offer unacceptable and sent in their leader Elizabeth Eldridge to confront the situation. Eldridge described for her sister officers her introductory meeting with Mary B. Davidson, Associate Dean of Women. The Dean insisted to this Jewish woman’s face that the decision to exclude her sorority from full admission to Panhellenic on both the local and national levels had been a “wise one” and that she “emphatically” would not recommend any of the other Jewish sororities (including Sigma Delta Tau, Delta Phi Epsilon, and Phi Sigma Sigma) for admission. The reason? “She told me that if they granted the privilege to us they would have to grant the same privilege to the Japanese, Chinese, and Negro sororities if they wanted it,” wrote Eldridge. “I thought several things, but I told her that they were not considering petitioning and at the time they did, they could be
handled as a separate problem . . . but if it was a state university, everyone should have equal rights in an organization under the university's jurisdiction."

At Berkeley in the winter of 1934, powerful outside contacts, Jewish philanthropy, and good relations with the university's president in the end effectively counteracted the Dean's influence. Eldridge described enlisting the aid of an unnamed but "prominent" male member of the local Jewish community as a witness and dropping in unannounced to repeat the entire episode to Berkeley's acting president, Dr. Monroe E. Deutsch. He listened to the story without comment and then asked her to come back a few days later. When she did, Eldridge reported, a chastened Associate Dean Davidson was also there. She meekly nodded her assent to the president's claim that he could not tolerate even the "suspicion of injustice" while he was president of the institution. The Dean also promised that she would "do her very best" to ensure that the young women of Berkeley's local Panhellenic council saw things "President Deutsch's way." She then departed without a backward glance.

Surprised and pleased at the result of this meeting, Eldridge stayed behind to speak to the president. What assurances could they have, she asked, that Mary Davidson would continue to behave in so cooperative a fashion once she was no longer within earshot of her boss's office? "I spoke to her much more emphatically before you came in," President Deutsch replied, as he invoked the family name of some of the most prominent Jewish philanthropists on the West Coast. "I told her that Fleishhacker money and Fleishhacker generosity had built this university and kept it open, were even now paying her salary and that if the Jews were discriminated against, it would be a sorry state of affairs." By the beginning of the Spring 1935 semester Alpha Epsilon Phi sorority had been admitted to full membership in Berkeley's Panhellenic association.

**Jewish Sororities and the National Panhellenic Congress**

Beyond the local level, the most important achievements for an aspiring national college fraternity or sorority included admission into the umbrella or suprafraternal National Interfraternity Conference (NIC), founded in 1909, or its female counterpart, the National Panhellenic Congress (NPC), founded in 1902. Here also Jewish groups faced obstacles to full recognition, although at this level the battle waged by the
women's groups was far more serious and took far longer to win than the battle waged by men.

For the men's NIC, official criteria for admission were straightforward and relatively simple—a minimum number of chapters and a majority or two-thirds vote of assembled delegates. The body's president was similarly elected annually by majority vote. As they grew, the largest national Jewish men's college fraternities were admitted in due course to the NIC beginning with Zeta Beta Tau in 1913. In addition, a Jewish man—ZBT's Harold Riegelman, Cornell '11 — was actually elected by his fellow delegates, albeit not without some comment, to wield the gavel at the annual December assembly in New York City as the NIC's president for 1927–28.

In comparison to the men's group, however, the women's National Panhellenic Congress (NPC) in the 1930s was still not able to take the first step in admitting the national Jewish sororities to its membership. Smaller (less than one quarter the size of the NIC) and more socially exclusive in its membership criteria and governing structure, the NPC still operated under the blackball system. A single negative anonymous vote from any delegate could bar a candidate's admission. In addition, National Panhellenic officers were not elected; instead, each delegate served in turn through a set system of rotating chairs. Thus, the right of equal admission for Jewish women also meant their automatic right to serve in positions of power over the non-Jewish women. Under these conditions, from Alpha Epsilon Phi's first application in 1917 until after World War II the four Jewish national college sororities waged a losing battle to be accepted into the National Panhellenic Congress. "Associate" membership came only in 1946, and full membership not until 1952.

The usual official explanation for refusing to admit the Jewish sororities to the National Panhellenic was that they did not rank as truly national sororities because of their "restricted" or "limited" membership. This criticism apparently did not apply, as AEPhi's officers pointed out repeatedly, to such Gentile sororities as Phi Mu or Chi Omega. The former required candidates to be "professing Christians born of two Christian parents," while the motto of the latter was "Hellenic Culture and Christian Ideals." A second explanation, usually unwritten but often expressed in conversation, was that if the NPC lowered its barriers to Jewish women it would have to also accept the sororities of Catholics, Blacks, Japanese, Chinese, and so on. Hence, the essential character of the organization would be endangered. Other objections came from in-
individual National Panhellenic Congress delegates who claimed to represent strictly Christian organizations. If Jewish people were admitted to the NPC, they said, then they themselves would feel compelled to withdraw from the organization. 68

The ladies of Alpha Epsilon Phi refused to take no for an answer. Elizabeth Eldridge, who from 1929 to 1937 traveled from one end of the country to the other as the sorority’s field secretary and then its national leader, was also designated as its “Panhellenic Chairman.” A San Antonio native and professional writer whose German-born grandfather had fought in the Civil War, she was responsible for writing the applications, soliciting letters of recommendation and endorsement, lobbying for support at official sorority functions, forming alliances, and in general coordinating the campaign for admission into the NPC. 69

Gradually, these efforts brought success. By April 1936, at an NPC regional conference reception in Columbus, Ohio, Eldridge discovered from helpful and sympathetic delegates that the ballot to admit them at the last national meeting had failed by only two votes. Eight Gentile national sorority delegates had come out strongly in favor of the measure and two had made persuasive speeches from the convention floor. It was only AEPhi’s “restricted membership,” confided Phi Mu delegate Cora Rader (an ally who had voted for them) that had kept the vote from being unanimous. Eldridge began to sputter in anger that the supposedly “restricted” Alpha Epsilon Phi was no more restricted than Phi Mu, which only admitted born Christians. At that point, as she reported the scene for her sister national officers, L. Pearle Green of Kappa Alpha Theta (who had also voted in AEPhi’s favor) appeared. The resulting exchange of words at this most genteel of gatherings revealed the depth of the attitudes Eldridge was confronting:

At this moment, Pearle Green joined our conversation. Mrs. Rader said “I’ve been talking to Miss Eldridge about Alpha Epsilon Phi’s admission to NPC and she wonders if there is prejudice. I say no. What do you think? Pearle?” And Miss Green replied: “Well, no, unless you’d call that argument of that one sorority, Cora, prejudice. You know, the one that says that if we admit the Jews, we’ll have to take the niggers.” I laughed and said, “Well for purposes of argument, we’ll call that prejudice.” And Mrs. Rader, meaning to salve my feelings, I’m sure, said: “You know how fond we’ve all been of you at this meeting. You know, too, how much we have in common. You and I could go off for a weekend together and enjoy ourselves thoroughly. It’s just too bad that all people are not so broadminded!”

“So, in the last analysis,” concluded Eldridge in her report of the Columbus, Ohio, National Panhellenic regional meeting, “I’m afraid that it is still a matter of ‘some of my best friends are Jews,’ though I’m sure she meant it kindly.”

In October 1938, more than two years later, Elizabeth Eldridge was able to obtain a luncheon meeting with the influential and sympathetic Harriet Williamson Tuft, national president of the Gentile sorority Beta Phi Alpha and the immediate past president of the entire National Panhellenic Congress. For two hours, she pleaded her case before her. “Suppose you were in the Panhellenic, theoretically,” came the cautious answer from the NPC leader. “What would your attitude be toward the other Jewish sororities? Would you press their admittance? Would you vote for them?”

Here, subtly phrased, came once again the choice being presented to select American Jewish men and women as they approached the gates of exclusive social institutions, clubs, and neighborhoods across the United States: if we accept you, will you promise not to bring in any more? “Reading between the lines,” Eldridge reported to her sorority sisters, “I believe that Phi Sigma Sigma (another Jewish college sorority that had been founded by women of predominantly East European origin) is one reason among others that we are not in NPC and that if Panhellenic could see its way to letting us in and excluding others, our chances would be better.”

The temptation to say “yes” to such a question was powerful. Eldridge was as capable as anyone in her social class of voicing contempt for other Jewish women whom she considered beneath her own and her sorority’s standards. Nevertheless, at that moment and afterward, she could never bring herself to make that promise. She could not accept the idea of admission for Alpha Epsilon Phi only at the cost of betraying the other national Jewish sororities. Here lay a line she would not cross, then or later. Alpha Epsilon Phi would not take up its place as a full member of the National Panhellenic until the other three major national Jewish sororities did as well in the early 1950s.

At that moment in October 1938, however, hearing Eldridge’s refusal, the NPC past president advised her Jewish colleague to embark on yet another goodwill tour among all the Congress’ delegates. Eldridge thereupon lobbied one last time for NPC acceptance of Alpha Epsilon Phi during receptions at the Congress’s December 1939 meeting. She did not succeed. A rejection letter came back the following week, this time announcing “with real regret” that their petition had
not received the necessary unanimous vote. Alpha Epsilon Phi’s secretary was directed to send out a letter acknowledging the nonacceptance, which she did on January 3, 1940. By then, the Second World War had broken out and had been raging for four months. It would be long over before Alpha Epsilon Phi and the other Jewish sororities received the full NPC recognition they longed for.

By then, it would be a hollow victory, coming so delayed and after such a cataclysm. It also came at a time when the United States was poised to undergo a series of social, political, civil, and legal changes far beyond anything that Eldridge, Harriet Tufts, or anyone at that December 1939 NPC gathering could have envisioned. The foundations that supported a system of separate Jewish and Gentile fraternities and sororities in the first place would already be starting to crumble. In the 1930s, however, with or without full social acceptance, young Jewish Greeks continued to work hard within the system to get their educations and achieve success and happiness in the face of whatever obstacles stood in their way.