Going Greek

Marianne R. Sanua

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Chapter 4

The Golden Age

College Fraternities in the “Roaring Twenties”

What might be called the “Golden Age” in the history of the American college Greek-letter fraternity came in the decade between the end of the First World War and the onset of the Great Depression. The Jewish Greek subsystem enjoyed its full share in that age. Fed by mass immigration, the American population and thus its pool of college-age youth had expanded. Postwar prosperity permitted more individuals and families to postpone their children’s entry into the workforce. A growing network of public secondary schools was preparing more Americans for college-level work than ever before. Higher education became more desirable and necessary as training for new jobs openings in the fields of science, technology, finance, and the corporate world. The result was a veritable explosion in the number of young people and potential fraternity members making their way to the nation’s campuses.

As late as 1910 there had been only approximately 150,000 undergraduates in the United States. By the end of 1929 there were well over a million and more than two-thirds of these were enrolled in coeducational residential colleges, precisely the type of campus where the Greek system was already strongest.\(^1\) The existing collegiate infrastructures could hardly cope with this onslaught alone. The Greek system, however, was ready and waiting to provide large segments of the student body with food and shelter. The system also provided face-to-face contact and personal guidance now otherwise unavailable on campuses so large that no one person could ever hope to learn everyone else’s name.
Leaders throughout the Greek system exulted in their popularity. Between 1912 and 1930, according to the latter year’s edition of Baird’s Manual, the number of fraternity chapters in the country more than doubled and the reported value of fraternity property increased more than five fold. The number of national fraternities and sororities reached had reached a high of seventy-seven organizations, with a total initiated membership (including adult nonstudents) of over 740,000. Furthermore, of the more than 2,700 chapters for undergraduates, over 1500 owned their own houses, which were valued all together at close to seventy-five million dollars. By the mid-1920s, an estimated thirty-five percent of all the college students in the country belonged to chapters of fraternities or sororities, while on some campuses the proportion ran as high as forty to seventy percent. The relative prestige of each group served as an indicator of its members’s status and popularity. Merely being a college student was no longer automatically an indicator of high social status. For access to the best social life, the best food and living conditions, or the best chances for success in student politics, sports, and most extracurricular activities, an ambitious student on a campus with a strong fraternity system was considered lost if he or she did not “pledge a good house.”

The influence of this youthful, frequently idealized, collegiate fraternity culture also passed far beyond the college campus in the 1920s through the new mass media. Even those Americans not attending college could listen to popular college fraternity songs broadcast coast-to-coast on their radios. They could also view the alleged scandals of fraternity life portrayed on silent movie screens in such Hollywood films as The Freshman (1925), starring Harold Lloyd, or The Wild Party (1929), starring the decade’s “It” Girl, Clara Bow. Collegiate life, clothing and traditions in general and fraternity activities in particular were also an increasingly popular subject for paperback novels, magazine articles, and advertising.

The Triumph of Jewish College Fraternities

Along with the Gentile groups, the membership rolls of Jewish fraternities swelled as American Jews, who overall represented less than 3.5 percent of the U.S. population, fast approached the point of becoming ten percent of the nation’s entire college population. The proportions rose much higher in schools located near large urban centers. Moreover, it was during the 1920s that Jewish Greek subsystem emerged triumphant
over other types of Jewish organizations such as the Menorah societies or Jewish religious congregations. When left behind, these groups therefore sometimes recapitulated their people's ancient history by forming an antagonistic attitude toward the Jewish "Greeks." A 1927 survey published by the American Jewish Yearbook found, to the displeasure and dismay of many rabbis and communal synagogue leaders, that a minority of American Jewish college students chose to affiliate with a Jewish organization of any kind. Of those that did, over eighty percent chose affiliation with a chapter of a Jewish fraternity or sorority.

Naturally, not every Jewish man or woman attending college in the 1920s either desired or could afford the "Jazz Age" collegiate lifestyle portrayed in the movies and popular magazines. Private bootleggers, elaborate parties, and all-night drunken revels were beyond the reach of the one-half to two-thirds of the student body who lived at home and rode the tram to school, or who held down demanding part-time jobs while struggling to maintain their grades. Nevertheless, Jewish fraternity records indicate that a good number from this group were able to enjoy their college years by participating fully in all aspects of the new, popular collegiate culture in the 1920s, including "dating" (a new term), mixed dancing, necking, petting, drinking, smoking, listening to jazz music, traveling around the world, savoring the new mobility and privacy offered by automobiles, and displaying the same patterns of conspicuous consumption as their middle and upper-middle class Gentile counterparts.

The Ideal College Man

The members of Zeta Beta Tau, the oldest, largest, and still wealthiest of the Jewish fraternities, sought to epitomize the prosperity of the decade along with the new social and recreational opportunities it offered to American youth. The ideal "college man," according to one profile published in the Zeta Beta Tau Quarterly in 1928, could be identified by the following signs: "He disdains hats and garters; he plays the saxophone or banjo; he smokes a pipe or has a blind-fold cigarette technique; he knows at least one version of Frankie and Johnny; he wears jeweled badges on his vest or watch-chain [a reference to fraternity pins] and conversation always turns to football. . . . He also has a way of talking to a girl by phone, and a facile slang." Coats made of raccoon or bearskin, the article reported, were a popular fashion item for collegiates of both sexes, particularly at the ubiquitous games of college football.
A University of Wisconsin 1924 ZBT graduate purportedly described the typical fraternity man's day in an article humorously entitled "Ulysses Universitatis, or Four and Twenty Hours from the Life of a College Youth." The author described a college man's experiences of waking up, washing and shaving in the communal bathroom, dressing, fighting with fellow members for the morning paper, enduring fraternity house breakfasts and dinners, and then professors, classes, exams, and the perennial "bull sessions" where students sat down together in the evenings and held heated discussions lasting hours on end.

The author also described the college man's continual search for new trysting places (unchaperoned young females officially were not permitted within the walls of the chapter house), carrying blankets out to the chosen spot, romancing one's girl by the strumming of a ukulele, and the ultimate joys of a "canoe date." The latter diversion, preferably undertaken at night under a full moon, was popular in the 1920s at any coeducational university located near a sizable body of water. Since the dates obviously took place without the wearing of flotation devices and in disregard of every principle of water safety, it may be assumed that the universities took steps to discontinue them at some point. However, until then a young fraternity man could enjoy placing a pile of pillows in the canoe, paddling with his date out into the middle of the lake, and passing a romantic interlude under the stars before paddling back and seeing his date to her front door.  

Prohibition

The popularity of alcoholic beverages among both sexes was also characteristic of college students in the 1920s, despite the existence of the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, in force between January 1920 and December 1933, which prohibited the sale or transport of intoxicating liquors in the country. From numerous references in their publications and those of other groups, it is clear that Jewish college men and women participated in the underground "speakeasy" culture that came to replace legal drinking. In one pseudonymous article covering the history of Prohibition at American colleges "John B. Quigley," a 1924 ZBT graduate of the University of Missouri who was himself a victim of the legally dry collegiate years, longingly recalled stories told by older fraternity brothers of all-night springtime revels in the country when chapter members, "filled with the spirit of brotherly love," would sing and drink around iced kegs. In those days before Prohibition, his
elders told him, custom dictated that men drink in male company exclusively. Women would refuse to dance with a man if, "through a camouflageing clove," they detected liquor on his breath.\textsuperscript{12}

Then came his own college days and Prohibition, the author continued, and a paradoxical escalation in college student drinking along with a severe decline in the quality of the alcohol consumed. At the very beginning of Prohibition in 1920–21, he recalled, students drank lemon extract, orange peel concoctions, patent medicine, or whatever was available at the local pharmacy. Then came back-alley bootleggers selling a poor grade of gin or white corn whiskey, which was "vile, stinking, and filled with pieces of charcoal"—but "it got results." Students would drink it at parties, killing the taste with gum, oranges, or grapefruit. Somehow, Prohibition also altered the males-only status of acceptable public drinking. By 1923 "bolder co-eds began taking a nip or two" and going out on late night dates; the phenomenon became so common that universities stopped expelling them for it.

By 1924, he recalled, "we entered a period more cosmically wet than any that had gone before." Students with the inclination and adequate funds could simply pick up the telephone and have their corn whiskey delivered. Its quality had even improved since the bootleggers had begun straining the charcoal out of it, and it now came in "fancy bottles with stamps on them." By 1929, guests were welcomed to drink at every party, including coeds "from the shyest families who wouldn't let their daughters drink coffee." "There she stands doing 'Bottoms Up' with the best of them," the author mourned. "The lips that touch liquor belong to both sexes."\textsuperscript{13}

Some fraternity elders felt compelled to take care that younger members during the dry years in America were not deprived of an important part of their social and cultural education. The liquor available to United States college students in the 1920s might be limited to bathtub gin and corn whiskey, but once a Zeta Beta Tau gentleman traveled beyond the bounds of Prohibition, he was expected to know the correct beverage to order. A 1921 graduate of the University of California at Berkeley, "viewing with alarm the bootleg tastes being forced upon the younger drinking set by the ginger-ale manufacturers," proceeded in 1929 to write for the undergraduates a detailed treatise explaining the mysteries of different wines, the importance of matching them to different foods, proper serving procedures, and the merits of various kinds of Burgundies, Bordeaux, Champagnes, Sauternes, sherries, and liqueurs. The author concluded with the assurance that he could have gone on for
much longer, but “I’ve said enough to last until Prohibition is modified. Or if you can’t wait that long, clip this out and carry it with you the next time there’s a ZBT meeting of some kind in Montreal. Or take it along when you win that European scholarship.”

**German-Jewish Heritage**

In the early years of the century, being a “gentleman” in the fullest American Jewish sense of the word usually meant being a member of the German Jewish aristocracy. It was not unheard of in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for Jews of Russian or East European Jewish background who could not or would not aspire to being Gentiles to change their recognizably Russian Jewish names to recognizably German Jewish ones. Zeta Beta Tau’s membership in the 1920s was still largely German-Jewish, drawing heavily from the proverbial “Our Crowd,” although wealthy East European Jews—particularly “Litvoks,” the name for those whose families were originally from the Lithuanian lands—were beginning to make inroads. This is especially evident from the words of a humorous poem and toast recalling details of chapter life that was presented by Robert E. Segal (Ohio State ’25) at the chapter’s twenty-fifth anniversary celebration:

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Late Monday and the chapter is in session down below,
The Litvoks fight the Germans, they can give ‘em blow for blow.
The kid that came from Cleveland is one that’s hard to beat;
But golly me, he’s blackballed; the reason is his street.
We ought to go to Temple more; we’re slipping bad, by gosh.
Well Sunday next we’ll send them half a dozen frosh . . .
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Within the records of the fraternity from those years modern words—slang and phenomena of the Jazz Age—coexist with evidence of traditions dating from the much earlier era of members’ parents and grandparents. These elders would have been products of the German-Jewish migration to the U.S. of the mid-nineteenth century. German phrases, expressions, and slang (including “n.f.k. beverages,” a euphemism for liquor taken from the German words “nicht für Kinder”—not for children) and such terms as the “400 Verein” were still used occasionally in the Quarterly’s pages. One parody that took aim at the mothers of ZBT men referred to a fictional “Vorschlag,” or resolution, passed at a special meeting of the Hirsch Liska Sick, Benevolent, and Krankerunterschutzung Society. A bouquet of flowers was to be sent
to the funeral of the group’s recently departed Treasurer, Mrs. Hymie Benefsky (this a characteristically East European Jewish name—among ZBT-associated women the “Litvoks” were apparently penetrating also). The meeting itself was said to have taken place on January the thirty-first at the Harlem Palace, 25 West 115th Street, and was led by Mrs. Minnie Farfelzoop and Mrs. Henna Itzelfuss.16

The same author, a manufacturer of handkerchiefs who had graduated from Columbia in 1920 and was a frequent contributor of such humorous articles and parodies to the Zeta Beta Tau Quarterly, offered the following version of a rush letter from “the good old days” in a humorous feature entitled “Rushing as it Wunst Wuz.” Filled as it was with insiders’s jokes, it poked good-natured fun at “Our Crowd’s” cultural markers. In those days, the author recalled, it was said that most men waited for bids from ZBT from the time they entered high school, that all girls were crazy about them, and that the fraternity could claim more Supreme Court Justices, Presidential candidates, and football captains than any other group:

Dear Fraters: I am one of the charter members of the old Zeta Beta Melucha fraternity which in 1886 joined with the Free and Liberated Liederkranz out of which eventually grew the present splendid organization we now have. Sid Shepsel, Chaim Witzelfuss (now Warren) and I organized the first chapter at the Packer Soap School (no longer in existence) and we have never missed a convention since our first one was held at Max Schwarz’s “Hanging Gardens” on First Avenue ... The true reason for this letter is that Joe Hickelplatz, a cousin of ours, is planning to enter your college in the fall (provided he passes his Biology). Joe is one of the finest youngsters in the world and Wilkes-Barre, and I know you will find him fraternity material of the best caliber. He will surely be a valuable addition to your chapter.

At high school he was the captain of the literary society and spoke first in all baseball wrangles. He got “A’s” in his studies several times and was the most popular Jewish boy at the “Y.”

I trust you will show him the hospitality worthy of our loyal “K.K.P.”

Fraternally yours,
BROTHER BIMBO HIRSCHORN,
Old Alpha, 1889.17

Social Standards

Humor aside, within ZBT the process of choosing new members was carried out with utmost seriousness. The Committee on Standards of Membership in a September 1924 Supreme Council meeting specifi-
cally adjured evaluators always to ask the following question when con-
sidering an applicant: "Does his appearance show that he has the man-
ners, culture, and necessary breeding which would compel us to feel
that in him we find a truly representative specimen of young Jewish
manhood?" Without such specific standards, terrible mistakes could be
made. At the same meeting, the Supreme Council voted unanimously to
expel Richard Loeb, a member of their University of Michigan chapter
and recently indicted, along with Nathan Freudenthal Leopold of the
University of Chicago, for the kidnap and murder in Chicago of 14-
year-old Bobby Franks. After what became one of the most sensational
murder trials yet seen in the United States, despite the best defense ef-
forts of attorney Clarence Darrow, Leopold and Loeb were both con-
victed and sentenced to life imprisonment plus ninety-nine years. The
two former college men put their education to good use by developing
a successful correspondence school, which they ran from jail. Leopold
lived long enough to be paroled to Puerto Rico in 1958 and to write a
book about his experiences. Loeb met his death at the hands of a fellow
prison inmate in 1936. 18

After dispensing with the Leopold and Loeb matter in Septem-
ber 1924, ZBT's Supreme Council commenced planning that year's
forthcoming convention, a luxurious affair which was to include a cruise
from New York and Baltimore (presumably beyond Prohibition's three-
mile limit) to the Hotel Monticello in Norfolk, Virginia, an oyster roast
at Cape Henry in the evening, and both formal and informal dances at
Norfolk's Ghent Club. 19 In general until World War II, if attendance
at Jewish services were mentioned at all in connection with Zeta Beta
Tau's programming, the day given for going to Temple was almost al-
ways Sunday, a clear indication of the group's classical Reform Jewish
orientation.

With few exceptions, it was understood that the definition of
"breeding" and "family" translated into acquired wealth, both individual
and collective. It was understood that application and acceptance into
the fraternity implied not only the ability to afford basic fees but to keep
up with the standards of recreational activities, clothing, and entertain-
ment set by the other members, along with any periodic assessments for
parties and social events. Sorority women in particular from elite groups
both Jewish and non-Jewish were expected to come from comfortably
well-off families able to supply them with the necessary clothing and
accoutrements to keep up with the rest of the chapter. Those without
that financial ability did not apply or else sought out other fraternities—
and these did exist—where they knew the obligations would be lighter. The practical factor of variations in financial means alone was significant in the proliferation of Jewish fraternities. Seldom before or after the 1920s would there be as much substance to Zeta Beta Tau’s tongue-in-cheek nickname of “Zion Bank and Trust” or “Zillions, Billions and Trillions.” In the early 1970s, a series of crises and a contraction within the Jewish Greek subsystem brought about the merger of four formerly separate Jewish fraternities under the single Zeta Beta Tau umbrella. Senior alumni, by then mostly prosperous businessmen and professionals, were heard to react with wonder at their new membership status. “But we couldn’t afford to belong to ZBT!” they exclaimed, recalling the leaner years of their youth.

In the 1920s few fraternity houses anywhere could match the opulence of ZBT’s University of Alabama chapter house in Tuscaloosa. The chapter photo of 1928 shows twenty-six men with their heads held high, all dressed in fine suits with stiff collars and ties. The chapter house, built in Georgian style with a sun-porch, featured a living room with heavy, elaborately carved mahogany furniture, upholstered sofas, a fireplace, a chandelier, and a foyer. The dining room, where a Zeta Beta Tau felt banner hung over a second fireplace, was pictured set with white tablecloths, china and crystal.

Taking a “Grand Tour,” or extensive foreign travel during summer and school vacations, was also a marked feature of the relative affluence and cultural sophistication of Zeta Beta Tau’s membership. The prestigious Cunard Steamship Company acknowledged ZBT’s potential volume of business as well as its social acceptability when it wrote to the fraternity in 1924 offering members traveling together shared staterooms in their ships at reduced rates. Such generosity incidentally also reduced the embarrassing possibilities of unwilling Gentiles being placed in the same ship quarters as Jews and having to ask to have their rooms changed. “Where Have You Been?” was a typical topic for a bull session in each chapter house at the end of every summer. Each issue contained news of members’ travel to exotic lands. The fraternity quarterly’s “Vacation Number,” published in May 1929, remarked on the number of graduates who were about to depart “on that summer vacation trip to Europe, California, Hawaii and perhaps around the world.” The accounts of their adventures provide a fascinating portrait of life in Europe at the time as well as a poignant view of life in pre-World War II Germany, the land from which most of their ancestors had come as well as one of their most popular travel destinations.
The 1929 vacation issue included a particularly interesting travelogue, entitled “In the Land of Pretzels and Beer,” written by a 1926 graduate of the University of California, Bernard S. Greensfeder, who was spending the year at the University of Berlin. Despite their distinctive culture, Germany, Greensfeder noted, was apparently overcome by a craze for Americanization, with cars, advertising, newspapers, translated books, foods (including chocolate malts, pork and beans, and Heinz ketchup) to be found everywhere, along with American films and music. To the author, writing barely twelve years before Germany declared war on the U.S., everyone seemed fascinated with everything American. All the students he spoke to expressed a longing to visit the country. In fact it appeared to him, in 1929, that Americans had completely taken over German industry, and that the entire country was dependent upon American money. “The finishing touch is yet to come,” observed Greensfeder ironically. “That will be the arrival of a delegation of European ethnologists, seeking the remnants of German civilization in the city of Milwaukee.”

Greensfeder also provided his readers with a view of 1920s German university student life through an American’s eyes. Most notable to him was the extreme poverty and complete lack of cars, for most of the university class, he observed, had lost everything in the post-war inflation. The German counterparts to American fraternities were known as Corpsbrüder, where men with the same political beliefs were grouped together. Among them, dueling was “still in vogue” and a hacked face still a sign of manhood, although, as he pointed out, “many more Americans are killed in football than Germans in dueling” each year. They had no chapter houses, but met for lunch or dinner in designated public restaurants. The headwater would bring out a standard bearing the colors and crest of the fraternity and set it out on the table, surrounding it with beer mugs. Open drinking competitions were common. “They utterly can’t understand our 18th amendment,” Greensfeder observed. “Anecdotes of bootleggers, police raids, poison liquor, and pocket flask technique excite unbounded amusement, not unmixed with pity.” On the question of whether German students were harmed by such indulgences, the author referred to illegal American drinking by writing “one must frankly compare a couple of harmless steins against a shot of paint-dissolver now and then.”

In addition to Germany and England, France was an especially popular destination for ZBTers as it was for most traveling Americans.
“Yes, I’ve Been To France,” another travelogue in the 1929 vacation issue of the ZBT Quarterly, written by Junior Henry J. Galland at the University of North Carolina, urged ZBT men visiting that country to go off the beaten path and to investigate Normandy, Brittany, the coast, and the Basque country, in addition to Paris, which he referred to as “The Paris of the floppy-trousered collegian,” which was all most travelers ever saw. “It is Paris from one angle only,” he warned, “the angle of thousands of college men who come home happy in the belief that they have seen all the Old World has to offer, and have tasted of the delights of the complete traveled man.”

The travel volume of Zeta Beta Tau’s membership grew so large that one member living in Kingston, Jamaica, complained in August of 1929 that too many ZBTs were traveling to the Continent or to England every year for them to find one another if they wished it. Should not the national fraternity establish some kind of central registry for traveling fraternity brothers? By the following summer, two bureaus had been set up for the hundreds of ZBTs still traveling abroad eight months after the stock market crash—one at the office of the London Times in England, and the other at that modern headquarters of Americans in Paris, the American Express office at 11 Rue Scribe. ZBT’s executive head called upon members that summer to send in their names and itineraries, and to prepare large ZBT parties to be held in both Paris and London late in the summer.

**Professional Goals**

In their discussions of professional training and work, an inevitable preoccupation of older college students, it is evident that, in comparison to members of other Jewish fraternities at that time, ZBT members were more likely to enjoy the cushion of family wealth. That wealth usually came from fathers and grandfathers who had acquired it through storekeeping or some aspect of the garment trade. This class and financial background, which assured that the professional student would not have to work his way through school or suffer deprivation during long years of training and certification, was a decided asset in the rush away from mercantile pursuits and into the professions which began to characterize American Jewry in the 1920s. Success in business preceded and aided success in the professions. “Ladies-skirts-wholesale is O.K. for the Old Gent, if that’s the sort of thing he likes,” wrote Herbert Lippman, a 1909 graduate of Columbia, in an article about how to become an architect,
“but not for you. During the few years at college, you think about the offerings.”

Another work-related article entitled “Toward a Medical Career” by Dr. Clarence K. Weil, a 1920 University of Alabama graduate and practicing surgeon in Montgomery, suggested in 1927 that medically minded ZBT men study foreign languages, cultivate a sport and hobby to become physically fit and well-rounded, get an internship “in the biggest and best hospital that will take you,” and then spend, with the help of letters of introduction from medical school professors, six months in Berlin, Amsterdam, Paris or Vienna to get tutoring in various areas of interest before going into private practice. For urinary diseases, he reported, “Paris is the place par excellence, and this is true in two ways”; a visit to Germany, he wrote, was best for learning about the diseases of children. The author seemed to take it for granted in his writing that such aspirations would be within the reach of all ZBT men who desired to become medical men. European cities in those days were places of pilgrimage for physicians from all over the world, including the United States. Well-heeled specialists would flock there, sometimes with their families, to take advantage of short courses, workshops, or private teaching. It was not until the devastation of Europe in World War II brought the necessity of cramming fifty years’s medical research into five that the U.S. achieved its eminence in the field of medicine and the general direction of these educational visits was reversed.

As the 1920s progressed, Zeta Beta Tau’s national officers were gradually shaken from their customary complacency that theirs was the only Jewish fraternity worthy of any note. The rapid upward mobility and increased numerical strength of their collegiate coreligionists was becoming apparent. The change was reflected in the status and prestige of their fraternities. At a meeting of Zeta Beta Tau’s Supreme Council in November 1924, held at the Wall Street law offices of Executive Nasi Harold Riegelman, General Secretary George Macy reported the unexpected news that there had been on college campuses “a fantastic increase in the number of worthwhile Jewish students.” Before, he informed them, ZBT had had difficulty finding enough “fine Jews” to fill its ranks. Now, however, they could not accommodate all of the desirable candidates who were filling its rushing lists. Consequently, such candidates were streaming into the other fraternities, which “may well pass into the plane of what we have always considered ZBT caliber. . . . This is already evident at Pennsylvania. The chapters of Pi Lambda Phi, Phi Epsilon Pi and Phi Sigma Delta at that university would do credit to
ZBT at any university. We must therefore remember,” Macy concluded, “that the time is probably coming when we will have the problem of social competition that has previously affected us only slightly.”

Much of ZBT’s most immediate social competition came from Phi Epsilon Pi, a fraternity whose ranks included wealthy businessmen’s sons studying both in college and on the job in the expectation that someday they would inherit their fathers’s empires. Comrades followed their progress in awe and admiration. “Eta Man Works in German Plant: Son of American Millionaire Receives Fifty Cents a Day,” a story published in a 1923 edition of the *Eta Egotist* of Phi Epsilon Pi’s Eta, or University of Pennsylvania, chapter, gave the example of “Eddie” Bamberger, a recent graduate of the Wharton School and native of Cleveland, Ohio, whose closet at the fraternity house had reportedly contained fourteen suits and twenty-three pairs of shoes. “Eddie” had been directed by his father, president of the Bamberger-Reinthal Company of Cleveland, to forsake his accustomed life of luxury and to live the life of a German factory worker in the small town of Opolda, without heat, running water, a bathtub, or even proper wages, in order to study the German machines used in his father’s plants in America. Eddie’s duties included learning how to fix, oil, and even build the machines, as well as working under foremen in every department of the factory. He also served as an assistant salesman and, as a reward for his labors, accompanied the German head of the factory as an interpreter on trips to Belgium and England.

### 1920s Social Life at Phi Epsilon Pi’s Penn Chapter

While Eddie Bamberger labored in factories in a land from where his Jewish ancestors had emigrated only a few generations earlier, his comrades back at Penn’s Phi Epsilon Pi house were preoccupied with other things. The same May 1923 issue that reported on Eddie’s activities also described the fraternity chapter’s two-day House Party in March, which included group attendance at the college’s Senior Prom, a tea at the fraternity house and a dinner dance at Philadelphia’s Ritz-Carlton Hotel. At such times, male fraternity members in Phi Ep, as in other fraternities, commonly vacated the entire house to turn it over to their female guests, who were guarded by a chaperone. “Girls, and what ‘knockouts,’ came from Smith, Wellesley, Vassar, Goucher, Chevy Chase, Bryn Mawr and other Eastern colleges,” the paper reported. “All flocked to Penn to see Phiep put on the ‘Ritz.’ Come again girls; you sure are wel-
The chapter’s annual Spring Dance had recently been held at the Philmont Country Club, and on May 18th, Friday evening, the fraternity was to hold a “Daylite Savings Danse,” [sic] planned by Fraters Dick Hano and Ernie Brav, and Julie Kobacker—a novelty affair that will put to shame the far-famed ‘South Sea Island Dance’ that Eta gave a few years ago. Lest the name deceive you, the house will be lit up, but not with the inmates.” Those who attended could expect member Hank Smith to have “charge of the intercollegiate champion necking balconies.”

In addition to reports of elaborate parties, the fraternity’s society and gossip columns, including one called “Eta’s Penn,” lampooned the men’s attraction to illegal gambling, listening to the radio at the expense of their studies, the massive sums recently spent to pay for the chapter house, and the men’s tendency to come from families who had changed, anglicized, or possibly Germanized their Jewish names:

Bridge is an expensive game in the Eta house. Ask the boys who played! One of them said that for an additional dollar on the levied fine, he could have bought the house.

Someone said that any fraternity that buys a new house does not need wallpaper. All they need is a little paste and they could use the mortgages. Ask Eta—she knows!

Phi Ep is the first one to install a radio in a fraternity house on the campus. (Install is the word to use, for that’s the way it’s being paid for, in installments). Owners are Frankie Weberman and Simp Mathis . . . but the way the fellows stream up to their room to listen, you’d think they were handing out diplomas free. It also has a wonderful effect on your scholastic standing, e.g., the writer caught Webby with the earphones on the other night, listening to a jazz concert, and at the same time “concentrating” on a Foreign Exchange problem.

What’s in a name—e.g. Hank Smith. He says his great-grandfather changed it from Schmidt to Smith for convenience. (Editor’s note: We looked up the family tree and besides finding that Hank’s the sap, we found that his great grand-pa’s name was Schmidtstowitz. Sh-h-h-h-h!)

Regardless of their class standing, the first requirement for fraternity social life was finding suitable members of the opposite sex to act as companions, or at least temporary partners, at parties and dances. The “ballroom” style of dancing that prevailed was designed for mixed couples. This could represent a constant challenge and source of anxiety for
both men and women, especially those not attending coeducational colleges. Members of Jewish sororities were one of the obvious first choices as companions and potential dance partners for Jewish college men, but that supply in the 1920s was still too small to meet the demand and interfaith dating was frowned upon by all sides.

In the case of Phi Epsilon Pi's Eta chapter, approval of their female guests, usually found and chosen by the social and auxiliary women's committees, was not universal. Although the customary rhetoric in all men's fraternity publications would have it that every single woman attending one of their functions was of movie-star quality, reality could not always match fantasy. "If Congress ever regulates the tariff according to quality, the boys who are doing the 'importing' at the house will have to see to it that their dads get a raise or a better job," read one item in the *Eta Egotist*'s gossip column. The term "import" was slang (still in use in the late twentieth century) used by college men to refer to female guests brought in for special events from outside the university, whether the school in question was all-male or coeducational. Some members of the chapter expressed their dissatisfaction with the females attending the University of Pennsylvania with the following variation of a college football cheer:

Yen—Yen—Yen,  
Penn—Penn—Penn  
When will a good coed come to Penn?  
When?—When?—When?

Another item read, "The *Egotist* goes on record as a firm disbeliever in spreading this sweet-convention-women stuff. If what was seen at the last is sweet, I'll take quinine."38

Nowhere else was the men's preoccupation with finding women more blatant than in their search for dates for the annual conventions, as a typical announcement from a 1927 Phi Epsilon Pi convention flyer illustrates. The convention was slated to be held that year at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York, with a New Year's Eve Dinner-Dance in the Main Ball Room:

WHAT, NO WOMEN?  
Yes, dear Fratres, plenty. By actual count there are about 3,692,741 members of the weaker sex in this fair city of ours, so you can imagine the task it has been to pick, sort, and classify the eligibles. The committeeman
in charge of women has been playing the part of a combination George White and Flo Ziegfeld in his effort to cull nothing but the best, and take it from us, he's done a mighty good job of it.\textsuperscript{39}

Those eligible women also had other options, however, and competition for their time was stiff. The ad continued:

Now New York women, despite their good looks, wicked line and amiable dispositions, have a peculiarity for which they can hardly be blamed. The New Year's weekend being the biggest of the year, dates are made months in advance. It has required heaps of tact, soft soap, oil and what not to induce the women on our lists to hold off until December 10th before making their engagements. So if you want a woman, and we'll vouch that you won't be stuck, shoot the coupon along now.

The coupon, of a type that was common among certain Jewish fraternity advertisements through the 1940s, read “I [do] [do not] want you to arrange for my convention partner” and asked for “General Measurements for My Partner” (approximate age, height, weight), “Color of Hair” (Blonde, Brunette, Black, Red, Titian, or What Have You), “Complexion” (Light, Fair, Medium, Dark, Peaches and Cream, Parlor) along with the member's name, chapter, and address.\textsuperscript{40}

Even ZBT men, who in their rhetoric usually affected the attitude that any woman in their vicinity would simply swoon and fall into their arms, faced challenges when trying to establish relations with preferred members of the opposite sex. A 1923 graduate of the University of California noted the useful mystique and appeal of fraternity membership in this area when he mentioned the collegian “who first hooks his sparkling new frat badge center-vest in a move to break down the sales resistance of some alluring yearling damsel.”\textsuperscript{41} And a feature on how to improve one's wooing technique entitled “The Hindu Secrets of Love,” published in 1923 in the same issue as news of the notorious Harvard quota controversy, showed that Jewish university men had far more on their minds than only the bothersome issue of collegiate antisemitism.\textsuperscript{42}

\textbf{1920s Social Life for Sigma Alpha Mu and Alpha Epsilon Pi}

The rhetoric of men's fraternities whose members stood closer to the immigrant generation or were still relatively lower on the socioeconomic scale in the 1920s was noticeably more strained on the subject of women. Still, the subject clearly loomed as one of importance in their minds,
and the possibility of actual marriage was mentioned more frequently. The monthly bulletin of Sigma Alpha Mu, which was celebrating its eighteenth (or “Chai”) anniversary in 1928, urged readers to attend the upcoming convention at Pittsburgh’s William Penn Hotel that year; in so doing, they invoked the best-known example of ancient Israelite concubinage when they promised: “They’ve got the girls: grade A-1, the very best in town, a regular beauty show, personality plus, trained to do what you tell them, wonderful dancers, enough beauty to make King Solomon look like a piker.” Members who attended would enjoy Pittsburgh’s finest jazz orchestra, terrific “eats”—”The William Penn Hotel doesn’t serve hash”—and fifty percent discounts on taxis and rail fares. “If you have to rob your baby’s dime bank to get the twenty-five dollars it’ll be worth it to have the best time of your life,” readers were told. The fee would include all banquets, dancing, comfortable rooms, great music, chic entertainment, real fraternalism, and best of all, “the girl you’ve always wanted to meet” and “Free marriage license for use at the convention.”

What came to be the Sammies’ characteristic smooth confidence in their ultimate appeal to women, relative to their more genteel and perhaps more sophisticated Jewish brethren, grew swiftly through the years. With full recourse to the latest techniques from Madison Avenue, a full-page advertisement appearing in the Sigma Alpha Mu December 1929 Bulletin portrayed two flappers riding the New York City subway, breathless with anticipation at attending the upcoming Sammy convention in Detroit and ascending to the heights of hyperbole. The ad was headed, “My Dear, Don’t Tell Me You Haven’t Heard!” and read:

The Sammies are planning a huge affair! Simply gigantic! One of those three day things with parties, and New Years Eve, and formals, and informals; and luncheons while the boys do their horrid business. . . . And Detroit! Don’t you just love it?—with its big buildings—big doings—big everything!—. . . . My dear, I’m simply thrilled beyond sensibility!—and the boys are so unusual! Don’t tell me you’ve never dated a Sammy! Such dancing—and every one an Adonis—but their conventions are more—they’re a riot! . . . My blood just tingles—AM I GOING? MY DEAR! IT’S INSANE TO REFUSE!44

Clearly a young Jewish woman with the requisite looks, connections, family approval, and sufficient supply of dresses (in contrast to the men, who could make do with one or two evening suits) could enjoy an active social life on the Jewish collegiate social circuit in the
1920s. For those not so blessed, however, the prospects were bleaker. A 1928 sketch in *The American Hebrew* entitled “A Party With Boys: A Penetrating Up-to-the-Minute Sketch of College Life,” addressed this issue through the poignant story of a fictional Dorothea Brettmann, who was described as short and fat with flat yellow hair, round pale eyes, and tortoiseshell glasses. According to the sad tale, fellow student Ariadne Winkelberg, “a nosy little girl of Jewish extraction and Christian Science upbringing,” whose father was president of the Winkelberg chain of dry goods stores and who was the richest girl in the sophomore class, was giving a party at a hotel during the Christmas holidays “with boys” and had invited Dorothea. “Whom shall I ask, Mama?” Dorothea implored in a letter to her mother. “Can you get me a boy?” The question prompts the following response:

Mrs. Brettman sighed when she received the letter. She had sent Dorothea to college to meet a millionaire, perhaps—and yet every dance that came along resolved itself into the old problem. And Mrs. Brettman would put on all her Wall Street diamonds and pay a round of calls to mothers of sons. They received her cordially, listened to how Dorothea was longing to go to the prom with a tall handsome boy like Charlie (or Willie) and then explained how Charlie would be out of town or Willie got an ear-ache if he danced in a draft. Finally after much entertaining on the part of Mrs. Brettman, some mother would be cornered in such a position that she had to lend her son for the evening. But for Ariadne’s party, Mrs. Brettman was stumped. Rack her brains as she might, Mrs. Brettman was unable to negotiate a boy for Dorothea. . . .

Dorothea is overjoyed when she is finally fixed up for the party, through the efforts of her college roommate, with a Yale senior. Yet when they finally meet, he is described as short and frail with a wan and pimply face and “dark circles of over-study” surrounding his “weak, watery eyes” and his date realizes that he stands hardly higher on the social scale than she.

In the case of Alpha Epsilon Pi’s *The Scroll*, which began publishing in the fall of 1920, the crazed pursuit for female company was hardly mentioned. This was perhaps because the fraternity, limited as it was at the beginning largely to night school commerce students at New York University, was still young and poor relative to other fraternities. Members, busy with studies and daytime jobs, did not have the resources to enjoy dances, balls, and formal country club evenings requiring evening dress and suitably attired dancing partners. However,
names of members's wives and "sweethearts," along with the women's extensive participation in such fraternity gatherings as theater parties, outings, picnics, boat rides, baseball games, basketball games, and sometimes tennis matches make an unusually frequent appearance in The Scroll in comparison to other fraternity publications of that era.

Vocational choices were also more limited for Alpha Epsilon Pi men than for members of the older Jewish fraternities. They could not so easily enter the fields of medicine or other professions. Selling insurance, working as IRS agents, teaching (in one case, an AEPi teacher married one of his former students at Bushwick High School in Brooklyn), small business, and becoming certified public accountants were the most common occupations for Alpha Epsilon Pi graduates in the early 1920s, with an occasional foray into the field of law—again, usually through the means of night school. Their conventions were also not as luxurious. Three-day hotel weekends were at first out of the question. It was all the fraternity could manage, for its fourth annual convention in December of 1920, to hire Delmonico's restaurant in New York City for one evening. The 1921 convention took place for one day at the Hotel Bossert in Brooklyn, not one of the city's premiere locations.

**Upward Mobility**

Nevertheless, within a short time Alpha Epsilon Pi was able to raise its aspirations. The locations and character of their annual conventions served as a clear barometer of rapid upward mobility, in some ways a microcosm for the American Jewish East European immigrant community itself. The seventh annual convention in December of 1923 included one New Year's Eve Dance at one of the smaller rooms of the Waldorf-Astoria. In 1924 the entire convention took place at the famed hotel, even though the given dates—December 27–28—did not include the popular New Year's Eve and thus the rates had to be lower than they otherwise would have been.

Another important rise in the fraternity's status was Alpha Epsilon Pi's expansion from three chapters in New York City to nineteen spread across the United States. These included NYU, Cornell, Penn, Illinois, Emory, Cincinnati, Georgia Tech, Ohio State, Penn State, Auburn, Ohio Northern, Illinois Tech, Virginia, Marquette, Delaware, Georgia, Wisconsin, Rhode Island, Washington University (Missouri), and Vanderbilt. At these colleges, members could pursue the liberal arts, and the relative social abyss of night school sessions did not exist. The
Supreme Master, Sigmund H. Steinberg, was able to report at their 1929 convention, by now held entirely at the Hotel McAlpin in Manhattan over a period of two days, “Year by year the chapters themselves have grown in affluence, acquiring houses, and even building palatial mansions.”47 If foreign travel was still beyond them, AEPi's living in New York City were able to rent a bungalow at Beach 46th St., Edgemere, L.I., for several summers beginning in 1920, and to spend their weekends together there. “‘On to Edgemere!’ is the cry these days,” wrote the editor of the Scroll of Alpha Epsilon Pi in 1921. “The boys are getting impatient to get back to the seashore life. Is it the lull of the gentle waves, the stars shining upon the golden sand, or the beautiful girls?” 48

As for the art of ballroom dancing, it did not take long for Alpha Epsilon Pi men to acquire that skill too. The report of the Cornell chapter in April 1920 mentioned that a “magnificent” new Victrola, a gift from the new members, was being worked “overtime” as dancing classes were conducted from eight A.M. to two A.M. Members Sam Schwartz, Jerry Gurwitz, and Ben Ozaroff were acting as instructors, while member Boris Bernard wanted to know “whether Chopin’s ‘Funeral March’ is a fox-trot or a one-step.” 49

As Alpha Epsilon Pi spread beyond New York City, members previously confined to Greater New York discovered the opportunity to travel, to drive in an automobile, and to be hosted in areas of the country they had never seen before. One notable example of this was a house party given by the new Cornell chapter in 1920, to which members living in New York City were invited. As Alpha Epsilon Pi’s “Beta” chapter, Cornell was the second to be established in 1917, and was referred to fondly in the fraternity’s minutes as “our first born.” 50 An obviously excited author described for the Scroll how members, wives, sweethearts, relatives and friends, almost all residents of Brooklyn, either took the train or “motored” up to Ithaca and the beautiful Land of the Finger Lakes.

This weekend in the country included a tour of the campus and its breathtaking scenery, a concert on Friday night, dancing at the fraternity house “until the wee hours of the morning,” and a parade before the Yale–Cornell football game the next day. An “observation train” with five hundred other passengers took them to see crew races on Cayuga Lake, and on Sunday afternoon they viewed a baseball game between the Cornell chapter and the visitors. After Sunday dinner the group got into cars and visited Watkin’s Glen, “one of nature’s most beautiful spots.” The trip clearly had as great an impact on the participants as if
they had traveled across the seas. “No wonder the Cornell alumni have such a longing to go back and visit the scene of their collegiate life,” wrote the author of the article, a student at New York University, with a touch of wistfulness.\(^5\)

**The Raising of the Gates**

Despite these and other successes in the game of enjoying a normal collegiate social life, all was not well for young Jewish college students in the post-World War I era. The years of their higher education coincided with the years of jazz music and Coolidge Prosperity, but idealism had also given way to an era of relative intolerance in America. The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in October 1917, the formation of the Third Communist International (Comintern) in 1919 to export that revolution around the world, and a series of radicalist bombings in the U.S. led to mass arrests and suspicion of all foreigners, especially those of Southern or Eastern European origins. In the canon of antisemitism, Jews were associated with the Communist Party. In addition, opponents of mass immigration to U.S. shores had been gathering strength for years, and at the end of the war, they had new ammunition supported by pseudo-scientific theories. The U.S. had already accepted more immigrants than it could possibly absorb without suffering the complete mongrelization of its culture, they charged. If the country did not put up the gates in the wake of the war then it would be flooded further with millions of refugees including Jews still left in Eastern Europe.

The nation's lawmakers agreed. After placing temporary restraints on immigration in 1921, the U.S. Congress effectively ended the era of mass immigration in 1924 with the National Origins Act. This placed a tight cap on the numbers allowed into the U.S. each year and parcelled permits out according to a country-by-country quota system that was biased in favor of northern and western Europe and against the southern and eastern sectors of the continent. Jews already in the United States by then were well aware that their millions of relatives still in Europe would no longer be welcome in what they had once called in Yiddish “the golden land.”

The land itself was not proving to be all that golden, if one looked closely enough. A newly invigorated Ku Klux Klan perpetrated violence against African Americans and those who aided them, and added Catholics and Jews to its hate list. The great industrialist Henry Ford, heeding the suggestions of his advisers, decided to run excerpts
from *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, a notorious antisemitic forgery, in the pages of his nationally distributed newspaper *The Dearborn Independent*. In addition, upwardly mobile Jews continued to find their way blocked at every turn. They were barred from certain hotels and resorts, neighborhoods, clubs, summer camps, and many white-collar or entry-level positions in non-Jewish firms.

The raising of the gates that characterized U.S. immigration policy in the 1920s was played out in an almost identical fashion, if on a smaller scale, at the admissions offices of the nation’s elite colleges. Until that point “social” antisemitism (such as name-calling, being beaten up by fellow students, remarks made in class by students or teachers, vandalism, exclusion from clubs, teams, or extracurricular activities) no matter how traumatic it might be, stopped short of actually preventing a determined student from seeking higher education. At the turn of the century so few students applied to college that even Harvard was bound to accept virtually any adequately prepared high school graduate who showed up, passed the battery of entrance exams and paid the appropriate fees.

After World War I, this changed. For the first time “selective admissions” systems developed to check the exploding number of applicants, and these systems included features that specifically targeted would-be Jewish college freshmen. Harvard itself, the oldest college in America and in many ways a symbol of Jewish immigrant parents’s fondest dreams for their children, also became a symbol of these trends when in 1922 its president discussed openly the institution of a Jewish quota there. The resulting controversy cast a pall of fear, insecurity, and disillusionment among Jewish college students and their families.

In the face of external hostility and criticism, even the most communal-minded Jewish fraternity leaders tended to internalize the views of those who disparaged them collectively. Their writings in that era reveal how deeply anti-Jewish criticism touched their lives, and are couched in a rhetoric of intra-Jewish snobbery that all too often crossed the line into self-hatred. It would appear that many of the subjects of this inner communal wrath were motivated to modify their allegedly objectionable behavior all the faster. In all, increasing enmity from without and bitterness and despair from within could mitigate whatever happiness Jewish fraternity members managed to find during those brightest college years of the 1920s.