Going Greek

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For the first decade of the twentieth century, the officially Jewish Zeta Beta Tau and the then-officially un-Jewish Phi Epsilon Pi fraternities remained each other's only national competitors. Both tended to draw their members from the same applicant pool of the native born, German Jewish middle-to-upper middle class elite. Pi Lambda Phi, which lay dormant in those years, also had in the past, and would in the future, cater to the relative elite. A broader cross-section of the American Jewish population, however, was joining the subsystem's potential constituency. What might be called the "second stage" of the system's development began in 1909 with the founding at the City College of New York of Sigma Alpha Mu (pronounced "mew" as in "music."). The core of the "Sammies'" membership were products not of the well-established elite, but of the upward-bound children or grandchildren of Yiddish-speaking East European immigrants who had begun their stay in America in such neighborhoods as on the streets of New York's Lower East Side.

The advent of the "Sammies" signified three new phenomena in the Jewish college fraternity world. First, there was rapid proliferation and coast-to-coast expansion, with the formation of mature alumni networks and four new national fraternities founded in 1910 alone. Second, a distinct hierarchy developed, as social class, income, denominational, generational, ideological, and geographical differences led to separation and stratification between organizations designed to serve what was ostensibly the identical American religious and ethnic group. Confined
within their own universe, each fraternity developed its own profile and style. Young Jews ended up seeking and finding room, board, friendship, recreation, and potential marriage partners from within many different fraternities and sororities.

Finally, Jewish fraternity organizers of all backgrounds began to face a storm of criticism not only from Gentiles but also from adults within their own communities. Rabbis and Jewish communal leaders charged that banding together in secret student societies wasted precious time, diverted energy and resources away from more traditional religious and cultural activity, encouraged assimilation, and divided Jew against Jew in a distasteful display of snobbery that their people could ill afford. In addition, the critics charged, fraternity students risked actually confirming the worst accusations of antisemites and increasing anti-Jewish feeling by encouraging campus clannishness and making unwanted Jews even more conspicuous than they already were in the eyes of fellow students, faculty, staff and townspeople.

The Origins of Sigma Alpha Mu

Sigma Alpha Mu's leaders at first took a distinctly casual approach toward such questions of communal concern. Unlike their predecessors, agonizing soul-searching or lengthy debates on the topic of sectarianism did not occupy a prominent place in their earliest records. According to the reminiscences of the founders, originally twelve men, only nine of them Jewish, were invited to the first meeting at the home of Hyman Isaac Jacobson (CCNY '12) known as "Hij," on November 26, 1909, although only eight, all of them Jews, actually ended up coming. "We weren't any of us religious," reported "Hij" fourteen years later, confiding to an interviewer that his family had wanted him to be a rabbi, "and I was the worst of the bunch."1 Clauses restricting SAM's membership to Jewish men only and specifications that fraternity business meetings should not be held on the Jewish Sabbath were not added until 1914, apparently without any major internal battle.

In a characteristic display of irreverence, the young men of Sigma Alpha Mu first considered calling their group the "Cosmic Fraternal Order" and using Hindu letters rather than Greek.2 Because eight did attend the first meeting, an eight-sided figure or Octagon—devoid of any deep theological or philosophical implications—was chosen as the fraternity's symbol. SAM's governing council, for example, was called "the Octagon" while its publication was named The Octagonian. Their
differences in dress and deportment from members of other fraternities as well as their relatively free-wheeling spirit was evident in a ditty sung about them in SAM's earliest years:³

He's a son of City College and he founded S.A.M.
He carries knives and pistols and he doesn't give a damn
He dresses like a hobo, wears a khaki shirt of yeller
But for all his sins we love him, he's a damn good feller!

SAM's first task was to secure its status as a legitimate student organization. While recognition from the College's administration was readily forthcoming, acceptance from fellow students was not. The fraternal newcomers had to fight for the ultimate sign of City College status—a wooden bench of their own among the many which stood next to the great pillars of the school's Lincoln Corridor. By custom, the school's fraternities and student organizations of all kinds gathered around these benches during lunch hour to hold their meetings. The physical plant of CCNY was too limited to permit quarters any more luxurious than that. When the men of SAM dared to stake out their own bench they had to endure, in another founder's words, "many a dirty look and worse comment," especially from the college's Zeta Beta Tau chapter, which met two benches away.⁴ However, the Sammies held fast, and the meetings continued.

Within less than a decade Sigma Alpha Mu added twenty-one more chapters to its rolls including the Universities of Kentucky, Minnesota, Cincinnati, Yale, Harvard, MIT, Illinois, McGill, Alabama, Utah, and Toronto. This spread its bounds across the nation and made it numerically the largest Jewish fraternity after Zeta Beta Tau.⁵ Yet the fraternal memories and sentiments attached to that humble piece of furniture were so strong that years later, when the Corridor was renovated and the benches scrapped, Sigma Alpha Mu's national officers arranged to have their own old meeting-bench removed. It was placed on display in the fraternity's national offices and remains there to this day.

How could Sigma Alpha Mu or any other fraternity, originating with a group of friends at one college, spread chapters across the land so quickly? In SAM's case, much of its expansive organizational energy came from the first meeting host, executive secretary, and fraternity editor "Hij" Jacobson. By academic training, he was a mathematics major and writer who joined the statistical department of the Metropolitan Life Insurance company after graduation. It helped that Jacobson was
also an activist in social reform and political movements, including the fight to gain American women the vote. In the Spring of 1913, for example, along with three other Sigma Alpha Mu members, he marched in a demonstration of the Men's League for Women Suffrage, and made sure that all of his fraternity brothers were aware of this fact. Much of his organizational drive in the 1910s, however, went into specific fraternity affairs, particularly the editing, writing, and production of the *Octagonian of Sigma Alpha Mu*.

A good fraternity publication, properly distributed, was one of the first steps toward national expansion and the creation of an alumni network. The *Octagonian* itself began as an amateur mimeographed newsletter in 1912 and progressed to professional printing, on par with that of other national college fraternities, by 1916. Through his editorial columns, Jacobson coaxed, cajoled, and preached to his fellow members, continuously reminding them not only of the high ideals of their fraternity but on practical details such as the proper use of pledges, oaths, and ritual books, distribution of shingles, and why it might be better to avoid the common college custom of giving away their fraternity pins to their girlfriends. Techniques for recruiting new members, however, was the topic he stressed the most. An awareness of the size, power, influence and prestige of the Gentile fraternities and a longing to duplicate it in one's own Jewish group permeated Jacobson's expansionist rhetoric. Members' own siblings and friends were the first points of attack. “Who's Your Friend?” was his constant call, as he urged members to use every opportunity to enlist new brothers into their fraternity. “You went home during the holiday,” Jacobson scolded his readers after what he termed their “Social Easter” vacation in April 1916.

When the editor announced the establishment of SAM's first chapter in Minnesota—remarkable news for many young members who had probably never been beyond the boundaries of the greater New York area in their lives—Jacobson wasted no time in urging them onward.
ExPANSION AND OPPOSITION, 1909–1919

with typically competitive rhetoric. “As the click, click, click of the press keeps turning out these pages for your information and amusement, the dawning sun of Kappa Chapter lights up with glory the battlements and towers of the University of Minnesota. Next will come Lambda. How soon and where its birth will occur will be determined wholly by your interest and your effort.”

Methods of Expansion

Any single fraternity officer willing to accept the organization as an avocation and to pursue an aggressive campaign of letter writing, visits, negotiation, persuasion and recruitment could have a significant impact on the organization’s growth in a short period of time. The same technique was used by SAM’s predecessors in the optimistic and idealistic years immediately preceding the U.S. entry into World War I. Historians have observed that a burst of organizational and institutional formation took place across the American Jewish spectrum during this specific period, and moreover that organizations founded at this time have tended to endure to the present day. “Phi Ep” added no fewer than twenty-four new chapters between 1911 and 1917, including the University of Georgia, the University of Virginia, Georgia Tech, and Auburn University. Zeta Beta Tau added as many plus five more in the same period. Phi Epsilon Pi’s executive secretary Jesse Acker in New York City and traveling secretary Herman Kline were responsible for much of their fraternity’s expansion. When not pursuing his professional studies at Harvard, Kline traveled constantly through New England and upstate New York in search of potential new chapters. He received no salary and slept at the homes of friends or relatives, although some of his transportation costs were covered.

“You know me, Jesse!” Kline wrote from Cambridge as he enthusiastically described his plans, most of them ultimately successful, to establish new chapters at Tufts, Harvard, MIT, Yale, Maine, Colgate, Union, and Syracuse Universities, in terms that would not have been unfamiliar to the organizer of a labor union. “My heart and soul are in the work!” Wooing a potential group of friends away from the arms of another national fraternity and into one’s own could be part of the job. Jesse Acker was himself not above urging another organizer in Philadelphia to “break up” the nucleus of a Zeta Beta Tau chapter, if their elimination was necessary in order for Phi Epsilon Pi to gain a foothold on a particular campus.
Simpler and less aggressive expansion methods were also available. New chapters did not always need to be hunted down and then established from the ground up. The patterns of the collegiate Greek system were so well known that national fraternity officials often discovered that Jewish students on a particular campus had already banded together in a purely local Greek-letter fraternity. These “locals” could operate with their own customs, rituals, houses, and board plans for many years before deciding to “go national.” At that point, the local fraternity could be the one that sought out one of more national fraternities to petition it for acceptance. Indeed, if fraternity investigators were unsure that a group of friends could handle fraternal financial and organizational responsibilities on a national level, they would encourage the undergraduates to form a Greek-letter local fraternity or colony first as a form of probation. If the local passed muster after a trial period, then it could be granted a full charter as a chapter of the national fraternity.

The older Phi Epsilon Pi was an example of growth by acquisition of pre-existing groups. Out of forty-five chapters founded between 1904 and 1945, twenty-six—more than half—were formed from pre-existing Greek-letter locals. At the University of Georgia, their chapter grew out of one of the oldest local Jewish fraternities on record, Eey Daleth Sigma (E.D.S.), which had been founded in the college town of Athens as early as 1895 and was courted by several Jewish national fraternities. The majority of the group, most of them residents of Atlanta, eventually decided to accept membership in Phi Epsilon Pi in 1915. The University of Georgia provided the fraternity with an important southern base and thus helped Phi Epsilon Pi to become especially prominent in that region for decades afterward.

Transferring from one school to another with a desire to maintain or re-create a friendship network was another, relatively simple way for a fraternity to spread its bounds. The Columbia chapter of Phi Epsilon Pi, for example, was founded by “Alpha” men who had attended City College for one or two years and then transferred to their Ivy League neighbor on Morningside Heights. Transfers could occur for any number of reasons. Starting out at a relatively less prestigious and less expensive school and then switching remained a time-honored tactic for the impecunious but educationally ambitious. By this method a student could acquire the advanced academic training that he or she might have missed at an inadequate high school program and possibly save a year or two off tuition expenses. Students also might be forced to transfer because of the relocation of their families or for reasons of
work or health. Medical factors were especially apparent in the early strength of Jewish fraternities at universities in the states of Arizona and Colorado. Both of these states contained cities and special medical facilities where doctors routinely sent patients suffering from tuberculosis or other serious diseases.

The earning of one's undergraduate degree followed by attendance at a professional school somewhere else in the country was another common method of expansion for the men's fraternities. A professional student who had enjoyed his undergraduate fraternity experiences and who received enough encouragement and support from the national officers might be glad to take time away from his studies and to start a chapter on his new campus. It was not necessary to secure huge numbers of men. Eight students were considered an excellent core for a new chapter, although a charter from the national organization could be extended with as few as five or even three students. SAM's Jacobson insisted that under optimum conditions twenty-five men were the maximum that any single chapter could hold comfortably. In part because of the influence of active professional school members, undergraduate chapters of Jewish fraternities tended to spread most rapidly away from New York City and toward more southern, midwestern or western schools with large enrollments and prominent professional programs.

Expansion through the geographic mobility of graduate members from the East coast also could occur when the member, upon completing professional studies, moved out to the hinterland to set up a practice, pursue better vocational opportunities, or assume a faculty position at a college or university. Far fewer female than male college graduates had access to such opportunities. However, it was common among the sororities for a newlywed wife, having followed her husband to a new section of the country, to be called upon to try and establish or otherwise supervise a chapter in a nearby school.

**Jobs and Professions**

The acquisition of a profession and access to greater vocational opportunities were, after all, strong motives for young Jews and their families to seek out a college education in the first place. Professions in the traditional East European Jewish scale of values meant prestige, job satisfaction, a good income, flexibility, and geographic mobility, an important priority for a people accustomed to being forced to pull up stakes at a moment's notice. Education, once acquired, could not be taken away
or revoked by hostile authorities; the “capital” imparted by education could easily be stored and transported in one’s head and hands, and a practitioner was not physically bound to working a specific piece of land. Professions dangled the prospect that one might actually enjoy and find fulfillment through one’s livelihood. This was a new and attractive alternative to toiling by the sweat of one’s brow or spending years hunched over a machine, years standing behind a counter, years buying and selling merchandise, or any number of other uninspiring methods Jews had devised or been permitted throughout the generations of putting bread on the table. Above all, professions meant independence from corporations or bosses where a Jewish background or observance of holy days could limit one’s upward mobility or indeed prevent a Jew from getting a job at all.

Not all professional positions were created equal, however. In fraternity records from the 1910s it is already possible to discern not only the movement of American Jewish men away from the proletariat and small business toward professions and white-collar occupations, but also how class background affected the type or level of profession a young Jewish man could aspire to. From the pages of Sigma Alpha Mu’s Octagonian, it would appear that law, medicine, accountancy, actuarial science, municipal service and small business were the most popular occupations after graduation for its largely East European membership. One issue in 1916 noted with pride the role of one young alumnus in developing an entire new sewer system for Baltimore, a city previously notorious for its lack of a proper public sanitation system.16

“Sammies” seeking a career in medicine, however, faced serious challenges. The medical members of Sigma Alpha Mu in the 1910s, according to the fraternity’s alumni news columns, were commonly able to find physician’s jobs only within the New York City public welfare system (orphanages and Blackwell’s Island employed a goodly share of them) public hospitals, smaller private hospitals of lesser prestige, or in institutions specifically established to service East European Jews. For example, a 1914 alumni news column reported appointments of Sigma Alpha Mu fraters at such places as Coney Island Hospital, Williamsburg and Bushwick Hospitals, and Sydenham Hospital. Exceptions to the rule were noted with special pride. “Columbia Medical’s Frater Katz has made an internship at Dwight Memorial,17 the seat of prejudice. ‘Tis indeed a great victory,” reported another column. “Landy and Natanson have succeeded in capturing high places at Mt. Sinai... All our seniors are now well provided for, upholding SAM tradition.”18 Mt. Sinai was
a Jewish hospital, but in general, it accepted only physicians of Ger-
man Jewish name and background. Nor did Mt. Sinai cater to the re-
ligious or dietary needs of the traditional Jewish immigrant clientele.
It was partly in response to this that a second Jewish hospital in New
York City catering specifically to Russian Jews and Yiddish-speaking
patients, Beth Israel, had been established in 1890.19

An East European slavic “sky” or “witz” at the end of one’s
name, rather than a more Germanic “son,” “man,” “feld,” or “stein” (or an
elegant “Rose” or “Rosen” at the beginning) could limit a Jew’s progress
even among other Jewish doctors. In all, whether for the sake of Gentiles
or for other Jews, fraternity magazines of the 1910s and 1920s com-
monly served as a bulletin board to announce one’s change of name. A
typical example appeared in a 1913 issue of the Octagonian of Sigma Al-
pha Mu, informing readers that “Frater Sassulsky of Epsilon [Columbia
Medical School] who becomes an Alumnus this week, is henceforth, by
order of the Supreme Court of the State of New York, to be known as
Irving J. Sands.”20

Private practice, particularly among one’s fellow Jews, was of
course always an option upon the completion of one’s medical training,
as an article in the April 1914 Octagonian reported in a highly humorous
vein. The item also illustrates the movement of thousands of Jews away
from the Lower East Side of Manhattan and into new neighborhoods in
the Bronx, the Upper West Side, and the neighborhood of Brownsville,
Brooklyn, which in those days still contained plentiful farmland. There,
Sammy doctors of the 1910s and 1920s regularly gathered for alumni re-
unions. This passage incidentally confirms and illustrates well the data
of historian Moses Rischin in his classic study The Promised City: the
percentage of New York City’s Jews who lived on the Lower East Side
declined markedly after 1910. By 1916 only twenty-three percent lived
there, compared to fifty percent in 1903 and seventy-five percent in
1892:

Many of our Alumni Fratres have already reached the end of the rugged
path, have settled down and hung out their shingles in all parts of our great
city including Brownsville, where a little community has congregated. We
admit that Brownsville is incomplete unless a nucleus of Sigma Alpha Mu
doctors is there. So that’s why they are there—to make Brownsville com-
plete. Not only that, but also to elevate medical ethics and may they make
a smooth path of it! (No! not Brownsville—for the goats would have noth-
ing to graze on.) Another obscure part of Brooklyn will be illuminated by
Fra. Dr. Muller—Greenpoint. I tell you Brooklyn is going to be all light.
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Others are Bronx Park and Central Park. Nothing like seeking a similar environment to the one you have been brought up in. 21

By contrast, the columns and alumni reports of the Zeta Beta Tau Quarterly rarely acknowledged, in the 1910s or later, any discrimination against the fraternity’s doctors. As affluent American-born German Jews, it would appear that ZBT men enjoyed easier access to the best schools, residencies, internships, prestigious European fellowships, and hospitals than their Russian Jewish compatriots did.

More Fraternities Follow

After Sigma Alpha Mu, the establishment of another Jewish fraternity at Columbia University, calling itself Phi Sigma Delta (1910), soon followed. Known as the “Phi Sigs,” their secret Greek motto was Philos Stegnon Dendron, or “friendship is a flourishing tree,” and the symbol of the Biblical Tree of Life was central to their initiation ritual. According to fraternity lore, Phi Sigma Delta began as an offshoot of Jewish students unable to coexist in the originally nonsectarian Columbia fraternity Delta Sigma Phi—hence the reversal of the letters and the founding of a new group. 22 Next came Tau Epsilon Phi (1910, Columbia School of Pharmacy, popularly named “Tep”), Tau Delta Phi (1910, City College, “Tau Delt”) and Beta Sigma Rho at Cornell in 1910. Beta Sigma Rho began as a small local group and was significantly the first to be founded outside of New York City, although many of the Jewish students in attendance at Cornell came from the New York City area. At first it was known by the Greek-Hebrew letter combination Beta Samach, with, according to the founders, “the Greek Beta and the Hebrew Samach suggesting the application of the Greek society idea to the social and cultural life of the Jewish undergraduate.” 23 However, as in the case of Z.B.T. the call of the Greek letters and the temptation to organize themselves on the same lines as the Gentile fraternities brought about the abandonment of this dual identification.

Kappa Nu, a relatively small fraternity founded by pre-medical and medical students, came next, established at the University of Rochester in 1911. Although the group adopted Greek letters as their name, their badge contained the Greek letters’s Hebrew equivalents, kuf and nun, for kesher neurim, “the ties of youth.” The constitution limited membership to Jews only, and Hebrew words and Biblical and liturgical references predominated in their secret initiation rituals. 24 Kappa Nu
was followed in 1912 by Phi Beta Delta at Columbia. Omicron Alpha Tau, founded in 1912 at Cornell, was known as “the most Jewish” of them all and reportedly maintained strictly kosher kitchens for its members. Phi Alpha, founded in 1914 at George Washington University, had all its first chapters south of the Ohio River. At the same time Pi Lambda Phi was rejuvenating itself from its new base at Columbia University, adding six chapters to the rolls from 1914 to 1919—Penn State, University of Pittsburgh, Lehigh, Stevens Tech, Fordham, and the University of Chicago. Overall, of the first eleven men's national Jewish college fraternities, seven were founded in the New York City area, where in 1914 almost half of Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants to America resided.

The Third Stage: Night and Commuting Students

At first, the luxury of belonging to a college fraternity was limited to relatively affluent students who enjoyed the wherewithal to either live in residence at their colleges or at least be able to attend during the light of day. The bylaws of early chapters in New York City specifically limited membership to these “day school” rather than “night school” students who had to work for wages during daylight hours and had only their evenings free for study. Despite any admiration for their determination in pursuing such a potentially exhausting schedule, young night school students ranked low on the collegiate social scale, as did those who commuted long distances by subway to school. These students tended to be from lower-income families, closer to immigrant status, and not infrequently from more traditional religious backgrounds than day school students. They were also likely to have less time, energy, and funds to spare for engaging in collegiate-style social activities.

What might be called the “third stage” of Jewish college fraternities began with Alpha Epsilon Pi, which was founded at New York University in 1913 and known by the popular name AEPi or “Ay-ee-pie”. AEPi originated from a group of friends who would meet at taverns and restaurants in the Washington Square area in order to eat dinner and enjoy each other's company before commencing their evening classes at New York University's School of Commerce. Their numbers included Charles C. Moskowitz, a talented basketball player who, according to AEPi's own annals, was asked to join the NYU chapter of a leading Jewish fraternity already in existence—on the condition that he not try to bring in any of his close friends. Learning that they would not be
welcome, legend has it, the athlete gathered ten of his friends around
him at the Washington Square Arch on November 7, 1913, and declared
them to be the “Alpha” chapter of the Alpha Epsilon Pi. By doing so,
he thereby indicated his determination that theirs be only the first unit
of a fraternity that would someday become national in scope. In its first
years Alpha Epsilon Pi managed with little money, less recognition, no
fraternity house, and not even a permanent meeting place. In time,
however, Alpha Epsilon Pi experienced spectacular growth, particularly
in the post-World War II years, until it was almost equal in wealth and
numbers to its older Jewish rivals.

The last multi-chapter Jewish men’s fraternities to be formed
included Alpha Mu Sigma (Cooper Union, New York City, 1914), Sig-
ma Omega Psi (City College, 1914), Sigma Lambda Pi (NYU, 1915),
and Sigma Tau Phi, formed by engineering and architectural students
at the University of Pennsylvania in 1918. All of these were small and
short-lived, eventually either becoming defunct or being absorbed into
the larger and stronger Alpha Epsilon Pi.

Women Students Organize

Jewish collegiate women matched the proliferation of men’s collegiate
organizations on a smaller scale. The first Jewish college sorority had in
fact already been founded in 1903, one year before Phi Epsilon Pi, at
New York City’s Normal College, a teacher-training institute that later
was transformed into Hunter College. Calling themselves at first by the
initials J.A.P., the founders included Francine Zellermayer, the younger
sister of Z.B.T. founder Maurice Zellermayer. She eventually married
the brother of another founder, Rose Delson. Settlement house work
on the Lower East Side and study sessions on women in the Bible were
among J.A.P.’s earliest activities. The women called themselves “Jay-
ay-peeze” and their publication The J.A.P. Bulletin. In a movement par-
allel to that of Z.B.T., the organization moved gradually closer toward
the Greek-letter, multi-chapter model, and by 1913 had renamed itself
Iota Alpha Pi.

Observers have wondered with justification if it is possible to
assume that some of the earliest uses of the term “Jewish American
Princess,” came about in connection with this sorority. If it was used in
connection with J.A.P., however, it would soon have become incongru-
ous, for the group’s seniority in the sorority hierarchy did not guarantee
it a reputation for affluence or outstanding social prestige. The organi-
zation grew slowly and remained small. Normal College remained its only chapter until 1913, when a new chapter was founded at Brooklyn Law School. In the 1920s and 1930s other chapters established included New Jersey Law School (1922), Denver University (1927), University of Toronto (1929), and the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg (1932). In 1942, a young woman about to be initiated into Iota Alpha Pi at Brooklyn College eagerly awaited the moment when the true secret meaning of the initials “J.A.P.” would be revealed to her. We are “Just a Plain Sorority,” she was finally told—in other words, not for the especially popular, affluent, or snobbish, but just a group of good friends. J.A.P. chapters did not survive the upheavals of the late 1960s and the organization disbanded in 1971. 31

Next among the Jewish sororities came Alpha Epsilon Phi, founded at Barnard College in 1909 and known by the popular name AEPhi or “Ay-ee-fie.” AEPhi did in fact cater to the female collegiate Jewish elite and became in many ways a counterpart to Zeta Beta Tau. Phi Sigma Sigma, also founded at Hunter College in 1913, was a non-sectarian group that took the Egyptian sphinx as its symbol and the words “Aim High” as its motto. These were followed by Sigma Delta Tau, founded at Cornell in 1917, frequently AEPhi’s closest competitor; and Delta Phi Epsilon, (“Dee-fie-ee”) founded by a group of young women studying at New York University Law School. Even more so than Iota Alpha Pi, Delta Epsilon Phi became an important institution for the Jewish communities of Canada, and by the 1940s had established chapters at McGill University in Montreal, the University of Toronto, the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, and the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. 32

After World War I: Prosperity and Chapter Proliferation

The conclusion of World War I and its immediate aftermath in 1919 and 1920 brought the formative years of the national Jewish fraternity subsystem to an end. Excluding the purely professional fraternities, at least seventeen national organizations served college men and at least five served college women. Thereafter, growth came in the rapid expansion of membership rolls, not in the establishment of entirely new organizations. The war itself, which began in August 1914 and which the U.S. entered in April 1917, caused but a temporary lull in the fraternities’s operation. Young fraternity men enlisted in the armed forces, and several lost their lives. The War Department in the fall of 1917
temporarily prohibited fraternity meetings or initiations as inimical to the war effort. Some college campuses were taken over by the military for training purposes through the SATC, or the Student Army Training Corps, a program derogatorily referred to by its detractors as “Saturday Afternoon Tea Club” or “Safe at the College.” Fraternity houses were requisitioned for use as barracks, and furniture and ritual paraphernalia were put into storage for the duration.\footnote{33}

By 1919 the subsystem was on its feet again, however, and Phi Epsilon Pi, along with the other older and upper-tier fraternities, were able to hold their “Victory Conventions.” By fraternity custom the annual conclave or convention was where the most important organizational business was transacted. It also ranked as one of the most important fraternity social events of the year. By comparing the location, length, and level of entertainment of conventions and social events of various fraternities, group class and income differences, as well as how these changed over time, become readily apparent. In the first half of the twentieth century, American college fraternities most often held their conventions in December, ideally on New Year’s Eve, at the best hotel its members could afford. In the case of Jewish fraternities, an additional criterion was finding the best institution that would also admit Hebrews through its doors. In its first years, for example, the newer Alpha Epsilon Pi had to make do with a single night out in a restaurant to celebrate its annual convention. Not until the mid-1920s did it graduate to holding its convention at hotels.

For the relative elite of Phi Epsilon Pi, the 1919 gathering and first post-war reunion took place at the William Penn Hotel in Pittsburgh, “the newest and one of the best in Pennsylvania.” The program began with a “smoker,” a ubiquitous fraternity as well as a common professional form of sex-segregated relaxation where men would gather informally to chat and to smoke cigars, cigarettes, or pipes, all provided by the host. It went on to include a reception to introduce out-of-town members to their chosen dates, another reception at the University of Pittsburgh’s chapter house, a night at the city’s Davis Theatre, a formal banquet, and a formal dance held in the hotel’s main ballroom on New Year’s Eve. The entire event ran from Sunday through Tuesday and cost fifteen dollars, including the price of two theater tickets.\footnote{34}

The men of Phi Epsilon Pi in 1919 had reason to celebrate. In fifteen years their organization had grown from a group of seven men at City College to a national fraternity of twenty-six chapters and over one thousand members—four hundred undergraduates and six hundred
alumni. Despite the fraternity's relative youth at least fourteen chapters either rented or owned their own houses with room enough for all the undergraduate chapter members to live. Twenty-four active alumni who paid a pledged amount monthly supported the headquarters of the City College chapter, with six active members. The Dickinson College chapter in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, had just purchased a $10,000 home, almost entirely with alumni backing, while the Rutgers chapter was preparing to move into its own house, paid for and endowed with alumni bequests.

Nor was Phi Epsilon Pi alone in the dedication and concrete support provided by its alumni. Whether out of pride, a desire to build a social center for themselves, or the wish to provide a safe and comfortable place for their children when they went to college, extensive building programs in the 1910s and 1920s raised the subsystem's prestige and desirability in the eyes of incoming Jewish college freshmen and their families.

Obstacles: Students, Administrations and Parents

The growth and expansion of the Jewish Greek subsystem did not proceed without hindrance, however. As had been the case at the University of Missouri, hostile college administrations were, and for many years remained, one significant obstacle. As the number and membership rolls of Jewish college fraternities grew, the issue of their official acceptance on individual American campuses became increasingly controversial. In 1916 for example, the same year that the campaign to win over Missouri failed, Brown University undergraduate Isaac Y. Olch, head of an illicit chapter of Phi Epsilon Pi at Brown, begged the national organization to keep their existence a secret and not to send him any mail addressed directly to the chapter house. William H. P. Faunce, the president of the university, had forbidden the formation of any Jewish fraternities on his campus and had threatened Olch and his friends with expulsion if they dared to form a fraternity chapter openly.

Uncooperative student bodies represented, also in the 1910s and for years after, another obstacle to full acceptance for Jewish fraternity chapters. Jewish fraternities could find themselves shunned or ignored, denied entrance into the local interfraternity or Panhellenic councils that governed and regulated fraternity affairs, or relegated to some form of “Group B” or “Second Division” status on lists of campus organizations. They could also be denied the right to be listed entirely,
as happened to the Zeta Beta Tau chapter at Columbia University in 1912. At that time the Class of 1914 editorial board of the *Columbian*, the undergraduate yearbook meant to document all student activities, refused to print any entries for any of the Jewish societies on campus. When Professor Gottheil attempted at least to get his own fraternity ZBT listed, drawing his opponent’s attention to its relatively high social status, the result was a typed, two-page, single-spaced resolution, passed unanimously, on why doing so would “not be in the best interests” of Columbia. The student writers went to almost comic lengths to avoid using the actual word “Jew.”

By granting full recognition to the “organization in question,” the resolution read, “the way would be thrown open to the recognition of other such organizations, which would have the final effect of drawing to the University an increasing number of a class of men, who as a class, do very little for campus activities.” The alumni, whose support was so vital to Columbia, would also object to recognizing this “class of men,” since their numbers in the alumni group were “almost negligible.” The resolution concluded: “Be it further resolved that as these ideas surely point to the fact that we should not recognize the organizations of a class of men who do practically nothing, as a class, for campus activities . . . we cannot as a body . . . make any exceptions, since the recognition of one organization of this aforesaid class of men would lead to the recognition of all. Signed, the Board of Editors of the 1914 Columbian.”

In reaction to this refusal to acknowledge a legitimate student organization at Columbia College because it was Jewish, Gottheil decided to request the intervention of the president and his former classmate Nicholas Murray Butler. At first, the results were positive. Butler promptly called in to his office the members of the editorial board—one of whom happened to be Jewish—and persuaded the young men to change their minds. However, as Gottheil later wrote to Felix Warburg of the American Jewish Committee, reporting on the incident and including a copy of the resolution, the Christian fraternities at Columbia reacted with such “agitation” that three weeks later the editorial board voted to reverse itself. Moreover, when Gottheil suggested to the one Jewish member of the board that he resign in protest over the whole matter, the young man refused to do so.

Gottheil declined with thanks Warburg’s subsequent offer to “bring in heavy artillery” from prominent Jewish leaders and the American Jewish Committee to fight for the right of Jewish student organizations to be listed in their own college’s yearbook. “I am afraid there
is no use of doing so, as the battle is lost," he declared. He then felt compelled to express a seldom-voiced belief that the only cure for campus antisemitism would be to form a Jewish-sponsored university. This was an important issue in higher education that had and would continue to divide deeply different segments of the American Jewish communal leadership for decades to come. "There is, of course, only one solution to the difficulty which is felt more or less at all our institutions of higher learning," Gottheil wrote in November 1912, "but it is a solution which will never be envisaged by the Jews of this country. We need a Jewish University here—which, of course, need not be more Jewish than the University of Chicago is Baptist or Yale is Congregational. I am fully persuaded that this is the only solution. Of course, I shall never make any such a proposition in public. I should be a very small prophet in a very large wilderness." 41

While lack of acceptance from Gentiles might trouble the vast majority of Jewish fraternity members and officers, lack of cooperation and obstacles to expansion that originated within the Jewish community itself could be even more disheartening. As the chapters proliferated it became evident that American Jews were themselves far from united on the wisdom of forming these organizations. Parents of potential members could be the first lines of support or opposition. Those of long residence in the country might well belong to a Jewish country club of some kind, have been exposed to American higher education themselves, or in some way at least understand that Greek-letter fraternities were the social centers of the universities and thus extremely important to the happiness and welfare of their offspring. For those with less formal education or of lower income or level of acculturation, however, the letter from the fraternity's officers advising them of their child's acceptance might be their first exposure to this strange American institution. They might not understand exactly what a fraternity was, why they should pay the extra bills for it, and why their children—whose college education might entail considerable sacrifice on their part—should waste time on anything beyond the serious business of studying.

In January 1916, for example, the national officers of Phi Epsilon Pi learned that "through parental objection or some cause of that nature," the initiation of a desirable pledge at Cornell had not materialized. 42 A few months later, when the national president demanded to know why only six men instead of the promised eight had paid their initiation dues at the new University of Michigan chapter, he was told by the local organizers, "We can only state that their families considered
it inadvisable for them to become affiliated with any fraternity. Conse­quenty, they had to withdraw from our club at the eleventh hour. We regret this fact more than you do, since they were very good men.”

As a result of these and similar incidents, in order to help fore­stall such potential criticism and the danger of last-minute drop-outs, Jewish fraternities realized that they had to send letters to the parents explaining exactly what their mysterious institution was all about and the benefits that the children could derive from them. If these explana­tory letters were successful, then the enrollment of one Jewish student in a fraternity could set not only his feet but those of his entire family on the path toward acculturation. If not, then a valuable potential mem­ber would be lost. A joke long popular in the ranks of Phi Epsilon Pi illustrated well this type of bewilderment on the part of an apocryphal Jewish father who has just received a letter congratulating him on his son’s acceptance into the Phi Epsilon Pi fraternity house. “After all I went through to send my boy to college,” the father exclaims, “and he lives in a bakery!”

The Importance of Being “Representative”

If a child were not accepted into a Jewish fraternity, then shock, resent­ment and disapproval from within the community could be even worse. Rejected students and their families, particularly where there were no ready opportunities to join other fraternities, could hardly be expected to experience feelings of warmth toward the Jewish Greek subsystem. Furthermore, the tendency of the fraternities to stress manners and acculturation to established American patterns of behavior could create a painful gap between young Jews who understood and strove to embody such behavior and their less enlightened comrades who, for whatever reason, seemed to miss the point and continued on in their stereotypi­cally lower-class, ill-mannered ways. It was bad enough for newcomers to be looked down upon by Gentiles for their alleged uncouthness. To be looked down upon by one’s fellow Jews as well doubled both the insult and the injury.

Jewish students eager to win acceptance from the wider com­munity could all too quickly become acutely self-conscious, internaliz­ing the external society’s values and cringing when they saw fellow Jews violating them. A common response was to seek total disassociation from such offenders or, in the case of fraternity expansion, to look upon a potential pool of applicants with especially critical and unforgiving
In their investigations of possible new chapters, fraternity officers found themselves in constant debate whether one or the other group of Jewish students or a campus of lesser prestige was completely "hopeless," or whether there was some chance of salvaging enough usable "material" to make a chapter worthwhile. Miscalculation was risky, since too much emphasis on quantity at the expense of quality could cost any fraternity any reputation or standing it had hitherto managed to achieve. This pattern of thought and behavior appeared early in the formation of the Jewish Greek subsystem and it became increasingly pronounced in the decades leading up to World War II.

In one case in 1916, the officers of Phi Epsilon Pi, after overseeing their group's rapid expansion to nineteen college chapters, feared a drop in status and made a conscious decision to become more selective in their choice of new members. The days of Herman Kline signing up new chapters as quickly as he could find them, they decided, were over. The communal key word most frequently used in such discussions was "representative"—i.e. the search for young Jews who would "represent" their people well, be American-born or close to it (a prized asset in an era of mass immigration) and not embody any anti-Jewish stereotypes. In February their president ordered negotiations with a local Jewish fraternity at Connecticut Agricultural College cut off because he considered the school of insufficiently high rank to merit a Phi Epsilon Pi chapter. In addition, they called for the consolidation of the Harvard and MIT chapters because, in the opinion of their field investigator, "MIT alone isn't strong enough for a representative Phi Epsilon Pi chapter."

When it came to the development of an organization's public relations, it was not surprising that the expression of these similar views would arouse resentment on the part of students' families or the local Jewish community.

Concern with standard American or Anglo-Saxon manners and specific rules of etiquette became and remained almost an obsession in the publications of Jewish fraternities. A feature published in the Phi Epsilon Pi Quarterly informed fraternity leaders in harsh terms about the importance of enforcing good dress and good behavior. For example, the traditional Jewish custom of men keeping their heads covered at all times had no place in conventional western manners. Not to remove one's hat while indoors, whether for religious reasons or out of ignorance was considered a serious breach of etiquette. Table manners also came in for special scrutiny:
Don't sit in the windows looking out, with your hat on. You are only John Jones, not a millionaire member of the Union League Club. Passersby won't think it's a whim or carelessness. They'll merely conclude that your fraternity doesn't know any better. . . . Have the meals served rightly. Have clean table linen, keep the napkins clean, and (this may seem un-called for) furnish napkins. Remember, part of your job is to teach the hick how things are done by civilized people, and all these things are by no means included in classroom courses. Don't throw the food at the men in vats. At least three hours (one-eighth) of your day is spent in eating. Make those three hours an activity for men, not for animals. 49

Communal Opponents

That fraternities as a whole promoted "snobbishness," lack of democracy, foolishness, and lack of sufficient attention to studies were general adult criticisms which anyone might make. So were condemnations of hazing, paddling, and roughhouse-initiations, which were an integral part of fraternity culture.

However, in addition to the usual adult suspicion and fear of the Greek system in general, Jewish leaders and rabbis in particular had special and sometimes contradictory fears regarding this new movement among their young people. On the one hand, college fraternities could be viewed as a "christianizing" and assimilatory movement that would destroy Jewish identity and prevent any organization of students along religious lines. The student leaders of campus religious and cultural organizations, such as the Menorah, Hillel, or student Zionist associations, resented the appeal fraternities held for college students and their tendency to divert student energy along nonreligious or noncultural channels, away from more conventional expressions of Jewish identity. On the other hand, at other times Jewish leaders voiced fears that Jewish fraternities promoted too much Jewish identity—that is, that secret societies formed of Jewish students would encourage clannishness, retard integration into the general society, and arouse fears of antisemites that Jews were banding together to conspire against them.

America's organized Reform rabbinate at first considered college fraternities as a serious obstacle to their plans. From 1897 onward the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), the official organization of American Reform congregations, had begun to organize student worship and study groups through rabbis serving in congregations near college campuses. Jewish students, eager to blend in with the rest of the student population, too often responded to UAHC over-
tures with hostility and claimed that starting Jewish religious activities on their campuses would only inflame the very anti-Jewish hatred that had made formation of their fraternities necessary in the first place. The related Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the umbrella group of Reform rabbis in the United States, responded in these early years by taking a strong stand against Jewish college fraternities. Ironically, their denomination probably included more individual fraternity members, chaplains, and advisors than any other did. During their student days at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, the main seminary for American Reform Jewry, rabbinical students matriculated simultaneously at the University of Cincinnati, where several Jewish fraternity chapters existed.

To the rabbis of the CCAR, who had been discussing their concern for American Jewish college youth since their 1896 annual conclave, forming secret fraternities that aped Gentile ways and encouraged hostility to traditional religious figures was hardly the best way to preserve Jewish identity on the American campus. At the same time, they saw the existence of secret Jewish student societies as “un-American,” undemocratic, separatist, and dangerously provocative. By their 1913 conclave, members of the CCAR sponsored a resolution opposing all secret fraternities. It was carried by an overwhelming majority.

To Harold Riegelman (Cornell ’14), soon to become the most powerful Executive Nasi in Zeta Beta Tau’s history and himself a committed Reform Jew, the gathering of this “ignorant anti-fraternity sentiment . . . among our own people,” was the worst sting that their movement had to suffer. “There are those who attack on the ground that we are a fraternity, and hence objectionable,” he complained, “and others who attack on the ground that we are a sectarian fraternity and hence doubly objectionable.” The Jewish fraternity, it seemed, could not escape opposition on any front.

**Debate on Separatism: An American Dilemma**

For most fraternity officials, exclusion and separation from mainstream campus organizations and activities was a constant thorn, and through the years much lobbying and campaigning would take place in an effort to eliminate it as an obstacle to full integration into campus life. A notable exception to this view, however, appeared in an editorial published in the *Octagonian of Sigma Alpha Mu* in April 1915, written by member Louis E. Levinthal (Penn ’14). For him, separate Jewish fraternities were
precisely the sort of agent whereby Jewish identity in the United States could be protected and preserved. Levinthal did not dispute that those barriers between Jews and non-Jews might someday fall. He did not agree with his fellow members, however, that such a goal was positive or desirable. Nor did he agree with CCAR opponents who believed that the separatism embodied in Jewish fraternity life would have a negative impact on the future of American Jews.

These unusual views for their time were perhaps the reflection of the author's intense Jewish and Zionist background. Levinthal came from a distinguished Orthodox Jewish family in Philadelphia (both his father and brother were prominent rabbis) and although he himself pursued a legal career, he was always active in Jewish affairs; he became president of the Zionist Organization of America in 1941.

In his caustic 1915 editorial in SAM's newsletter Levinthal praised the maintenance of religious separation, scoffed at the idea of universal brotherhood, and advocated that Jews continue to be as sympathetic and prejudiced in favor of their own people as Gentiles were prejudiced in favor of Gentiles. “So often we are told that the age of the Brotherhood of Man is shortly to be ushered in, that the hearts of all men are to beat as one, that racial and religious prejudice is to be relegated to the past, that I am quite willing to confess that I should dread such a condition of affairs,” Levinthal wrote. “I have no apology to offer for the Jew-baiter. I am setting out to defend not the unnatural antipathy that has its source in ignorance and thrives in bigotry, but the natural, inherent and wholesome sympathy that every Jew should have for every other Jew, because all Jews are brothers.” Discrimination could be a positive good, Levinthal continued, if through it Jews could prevent intermarriage and thus preserve their distinctive identity. “I am not at all sorry that this prejudice, so universal, exists,” he admitted. “To be perfectly candid, I rejoice when I find that Jews are excluded from the ordinary college fraternity; I am glad to see the fashionable hotels advertise that they do not admit Jews. Why? Because I want nothing in the world so much as I want the Jewish people to continue to live as a people apart and distinct from the rest of the peoples of the world.”

The price would be the death of the Jewish people if separation were eliminated and Jews were accepted as true equals on the American college campus, Levinthal believed:

How can we Jews hope to continue to be Jews if we mingle freely with the non-Jews? Where shall the line be drawn? If we eat and sleep with non-
Jews in fraternity houses and in hotels, why should we not marry their sisters and daughters? Isn't it a fact that those Jews who do mix freely with their non-Jewish neighbors drift away from the faith of their fathers into baptism and intermarriage? It is only by maintaining ... as many separate factors as possible that we Jews can remain Jews amid non-Jewish surroundings. An exclusively Jewish fraternity, such as the Sigma Alpha Mu, with its ideals essentially Jewish, is a separative factor in the life of the American-Jewish college war. Long life to it!

*Octagonian* editor “Hij” Jacobson also saw the question of the internal Jewish attack on fraternities, and the charge that they might weaken Jewish unity and spread antisemitism, as subjects worthy of his personal attention and refutation. In the Passover edition of the *Octagonian* in May, 1913—which opened with the traditional greeting, “Le-Shono Haboah be-Jerusholaim,” (“Next Year in Jerusalem”), Jacobson published a critical editorial by Jacob Turchinsky, a nonfraternity student at NYU who was deeply concerned with the growth and proliferation of fraternities that he saw all around him. In Turchinsky’s views, no Jew who understood the full implications of these groups could possibly support this expansion.

“ARE YOU HELPING your Alma Mater, the citizens of your country, by being Fraternity men?” Turchinsky first asked his readers, and proceeded to give his own negative answer, invoking the name of millions of their fellow Jews overseas who were not blessed as they were with the freedoms and opportunities of American democracy. “WE ALL KNOW what the caste spirit has done,” he wrote.

Let us take an example with which you as young Jewish men are quite familiar. Take the Yichos of the Russian Jew. Because he happens to be a tailor, he will not permit his son to associate with the cobbler’s family. Are you sure that you are not creating a caste spirit among us Jews? As it is, we are already divided into more than the proverbial 57 varieties. Are you Americans, upon whom the entire Jewish population of the world is looking with longing expectant eyes, are you going to disappoint them by creating artificial castes?

The Turchinsky–Jacobson debate was one of the few times in the relatively optimistic 1910s when the anti-Jewish feeling which daily faced the readers at school was directly mentioned in the pages of the SAM newsletter. Turchinsky, as many others, believed that the formation of a separate Jewish-Greek subsystem in the end would increase antisemitism, not alleviate it, victimizing even those who did not choose
to join such organizations. “IT IS TRUE that anti-Semitism exists in our schools,” he admitted.

The writer knows and has experienced it himself. He has fought back without avail. But will it be lessened by Jewish Fraternities? Will it not result in the lines being more sharply drawn than before? Will there not be clanning of the student body, and with it the inevitable result, the forcing out of a great number of Jewish students from our schools? I FULLY REALIZE that something must be done. I can see the time approaching when the spirit of anti-semitism will prevail over the entire country . . . Will not the creating of Jewish Fraternities only hasten the combining of all anti-semitic forces in the country, and with that bring the final encounter?

Turchinsky closed his letter by imploring his fellow Jews that if they persisted in forming their own fraternities, that they at least guard their conduct. “JEWISH FRATRES, be careful of your actions,” he warned. “The entire Jewish population of the world will be judged by what you do. Your good actions will not be remembered; your bad ones will be exaggerated, spread over the face of the globe, and each of us will be liable for the action of any one of us. BE CAREFUL!”

In his reply, Jacobson, in contrast, expressed the belief that Jewish fraternities that trained their members to compete on the same grounds as Gentile students could provide an important way for college students to fight antisemitism, not exacerbate it. “The world may not love a fighter, but it respects him,” he wrote. “And we find that the Jewish Fraternity man, armed with the determination to be on an equal footing with the Gentile student, is more respected and has more opportunities in his college career than the non-frat men.” The remedy to fraternity exclusiveness, he insisted, was not to abolish fraternities, but to make the system more pluralistic by forming enough groups so that everyone could enjoy the advantages of fraternity life. It was more Jewish fraternities, not fewer, wherein lay the true answer to fears of Jewish weakness in the face of antisemitism.

In his assertions, Jacobson did not hesitate to invoke the Russian pogroms that had motivated so many members’ parents and grandparents to seek out life in the United States. “The writer’s [Turchinsky’s] attitude and ours are like the attitude of the Jew who reminds us that ‘Israel’s mission is peace,’ and goes forth to soften the heart of the Czar with prayers, and that of the Jew who shoulders a gun to protect his home. And the odds are all in favor of the latter,” he declared. “Jewish Fratres, be careful! Gladly we welcome the advice. But if what we are
doing will bring anti-Semitism, let it come! We doubt whether the ill-feeling toward the Jew in American colleges can be much increased. But if it can, then all we can say is: ‘If ’twere done, ’twere well ’twere done quickly!’”

Despite all opposition, the Jewish Greek subsystem continued to expand. Chapters strove, and for the most part succeeded, in providing members with much of the normal college existence and peer companionship that students longed for. The fraternity chapter became almost a second or substitute family when social bonds began to weaken with parents and older relatives who had never attended college. Through the 1910s and afterward Jewish fraternities organized parties, dances, boat rides, theater trips, singing festivals, picnics, baseball games, banquets and anything else that could be done for their members’ amusement. In their periodicals and meeting minutes, discussion of broader issues occupied but a small part. Members were far more likely to discuss such matters as where to buy pins and shingles, whether to print or continue mimeographing their publications, whether an $8.00 charge for annual dues was too high, and what kind of scavenger hunts, stunts, and gruesome initiation proceedings could be cooked up for the benefit of new members.

By the beginning of the third decade of the twentieth century the structural similarities of the new Jewish Greek subsystem to its Gentile predecessors, to the outward eye at least, far outweighed the differences. For those young Jews who had the access, the desire, and the means to participate in their Greek system, this meant that for a short, precious time they might forget the trials of their ancestors. Society might not yet permit them full entrance, but they could still do their best to enjoy their lives as truly American college students.