

Winter 2015

# Communal Reflections: The Jewish Historical Society of Staten Island Oral History Project

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## Recommended Citation

Stempler, Amy F., "Communal Reflections: The Jewish Historical Society of Staten Island Oral History Project" (2015). *CUNY Academic Works*.

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## Communal Reflections: The Jewish Historical Society of Staten Island Oral History Project

Amy F. Stempler, College of Staten Island, CUNY

**T**he history of Jewish communities in New York has often cast a shadow over the history of other communities throughout the United States. Staten Island, though part of America's largest Jewish city, has not received the scholarly attention awarded to Manhattan and the other outer boroughs.<sup>1</sup> This distinction further solidifies the Island's reputation as the "forgotten borough."<sup>2</sup> Some of this neglect derives from Richmond County's comparatively small total population; it accounts for only 6 percent of New York City's total population and only 2 percent of its Jews.<sup>3</sup> As with most histories of the Island, the story of the Jewish community is also placed within a 'before the bridge, after the bridge' framework, referring to the impact of the 1964 opening of the Verrazano Narrows

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The author wishes to thank the editors and reviewers of *New York History* for their insight and helpful comments, which greatly improved the manuscript. The author is also indebted to the staff at the Archives & Special Collections at the College of Staten Island Library, particularly the Archivist, Professor James A. Kaser, PhD, and Jeffrey Coogan, for their assistance during her frequent visits.

1. For one of many examples, a 1932 map that showed percentages of Jewish residents in New York City neighborhoods did not even mention the existence of Staten Island. Based on 1927 and 1937 numbers, Jews comprised approximately 5 percent of the borough's population, which could have been included in the key for less than 9 percent used in the map. The map was adapted from J. B. Maller, "Jewish Neighborhoods of New York City—1932," *Jewish Social Service Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (June 1934) reprinted in Beth Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression: uncertain promise* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 82. The 1927 and 1937 statistics are drawn from the *American Jewish Year Book* 42(1940–41): 225 (hereafter *AJYB*).

2. Although Jenny Tango's work, *The Jewish Community of Staten Island* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2004), n.p. Tango's volume is a helpful resource, rich with historical photographs, but it is not a scholarly treatment of the subject and does not contain pagination.

3. Based on the 2010 New York State Census results that show New York City's total population was 8,175,133 and Staten Island's total population was 468,730, see *NYC2010 Results from the 2010 Census*, Department of Planning, City of New York, <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/pdf/census/census2010/pgrhrc.pdf> (accessed 3 June 2014). The percentage of Jews is based on 2011 numbers that showed Staten Island's Jewish population was 33,900 and New York City's total Jewish population was 1,086,000. See *Jewish Community Study of New York 2011 Comprehensive Report*, UJA Federation of New York, <http://www.ujafedny.org/get/494344/> (accessed 3 June 2014).

Bridge.<sup>4</sup> The bridge connected the Island to the rest of New York City.<sup>5</sup> As a result, from 1960 to 1980, its population increased nearly 60 percent and the Jewish population more than doubled. By the end of the twentieth century, Staten Island had the fastest growing Jewish community in New York City. Jews constituted 9 percent of the borough's population, a higher proportion of the population than the number of Jews in all states outside of New York.<sup>6</sup> Little is known about the community, especially its early years. However, with evidence from an oral history project, we can now begin to reveal some of the historically significant aspects of Jewish life on Staten Island.

From 1979 to 1998, the Jewish Historical Society of Staten Island (JHSSI) conducted over thirty interviews with members of the Jewish community.<sup>7</sup> The oral history project coincided with the initial plans for what was called a "historical group." The JHSSI's mission to preserve local Jewish history also underscored the magnitude of the 'before the bridge,

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4. This article uses Staten Island, the Island, the borough, and Richmond County interchangeably.

5. In addition to being an island, the borough is geographically set apart from the rest of New York City and is much closer to New Jersey, with which it is widely interconnected and shares three bridges built prior to the Verrazano Narrows Bridge. See Daniel C. Kramer and Richard M. Flanagan, *Staten Island: Conservative Bastion in a Liberal City* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2012), 2, 4–5, 23.

6. The Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York conducted the first major demographic study of the Jews of Staten Island in 1981. Although Richmond County had the smallest population in New York City, the borough was selected because it was experiencing the most rapid growth, due in large part to an influx of Russian and Orthodox Jews. The study reported that between 1960 and 1981 the Jewish community grew from 11,000 to 31,000 residents. See *The Staten Island Jewish Community in Perspective*, Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York, Communal Planning Committee Subcommittee on Geographic Services Coordination, May 1985, 2, available at: <http://www.jewishdatabank.org/studies/downloadFile.cfm?FileID=2402> (accessed May 13, 2014). According to 2002 estimates, there were 42,000 Jewish residents in Richmond County, and they continued to amount to around 9 percent of the population. However, recent census data indicates that the current community stands at only currently 34,000 residents and 7 percent of the total population. This decline of nearly 20 percent is the largest reported in all boroughs. See, Chapter 6, "Staten Island," *Jewish Community Study of New York 2011 Geographic Profile*, UJA Federation of New York, available for download at: <http://www.ujafedny.org/geographic-profile-report/> (accessed 4 June 2014). See also, *Jewish Community Study of New York 2011 Comprehensive Report*, UJA Federation of New York, available for download at: <http://www.ujafedny.org/get/494344/> (accessed 4 June 2014). However, some in the community have taken issue with the study, see Maura Grunlund, "Staten Island Jewish leaders dispute survey that finds a smaller, graying, more secular community" April 21, 2013, available at: [http://www.silive.com/news/index.ssf/2013/04/staten\\_island\\_jewish\\_leaders\\_c.html](http://www.silive.com/news/index.ssf/2013/04/staten_island_jewish_leaders_c.html) (accessed 27 May 2014).

7. The Jewish Historical Society of Staten Island Oral History Project collection includes audio tapes, microcassettes, and videotapes, along with notes and transcripts. The collection is on deposit in the Archives & Special Collections in the Library of the College of Staten Island, City University of New York (CUNY). Also available is the documentary *Jewish Veterans Speak*, produced by Lenore Miller with the Jewish Historical Society of Staten Island in 2008. The documentary includes videotaped oral history testimony of Jewish war veterans who served from World War II through Vietnam, but was not addressed for the purposes of this study.

after the bridge' context. In addition to the goals to collect documents, preserve artifacts and publish histories, the group aspired to inform the frequently referred to "newcomers," or "A.B.s" (an abbreviation used to describe those who came *after the bridge*), about their adopted home.<sup>8</sup> The organizers had also hoped the JHSSI would be a source of unity to connect the newer Jewish residents of the Island's South Shore and to the more established residents from its North Shore.<sup>9</sup>

The first meeting in November 1979 attracted about fifty people, most of whom were older citizens originally from the North Shore. The meeting's facilitators asked members of the audience to write down their name, place of birth, current residence, and a neighborhood history to share. Early on, one facilitator interjected to emphasize, "about Staten Island" (as though there was a need to clarify that they were not interested in Jewish life about other boroughs).<sup>10</sup> The dichotomy was also exemplified by the group's founders, Oscar Weissglass and Dr. Joe Adler, who spearheaded the oral history project. A serendipitous conversation between the two in the lobby of the Jewish Community Center finally put the idea of documenting the Jewish history of Staten Island, a topic the Island's history-minded residents had discussed for decades, into motion. Weissglass, a long-time active member of the Jewish community, hailed from a very prominent family whose business, Weissglass Dairy, was established in 1899.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, Adler was a much younger man who had lived on Staten Island for less than two years. Adler was aware of his

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8. "Jewish Historical Society Brkfst at 4Bridges," dated July 7, 1986 (tape recording), Jewish Historical Society of Staten Island Oral History Project Collection, Archives & Special Collections, Department of the Library, College of Staten Island, CUNY, Staten Island, New York (hereafter JHSSI Collection). Also see, "JHS 1st Meeting," dated November 1979 (tape recording) and "Dr. Malcolm Storm – JHS Planning," dated March 1981 (tape recording), JHSSI Collection.

9. Notwithstanding these provincial motives, the JHSSI was organized at a time of significant interest in local history and growth in regional historical societies. Dr. Malcolm Stern, then president of the New York Jewish Historical Society, confirmed such activities were occurring within the Jewish community, adding that a round table on regional Jewish historical societies was scheduled at the American Jewish Historical Society's upcoming conference in 1981. Stern was an invited guest at the second meeting of the JHSSI, see "Dr. Malcolm Storm – JHS Planning," dated March 1981 (tape recording), JHSSI Collection. [Note: Dr. Stern's name is misspelled on the cassette tape]. Also see: Andrew Flinn, "Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges 1," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 28, no. 2 (2007): 151–176.

10. "JHS 1st Meeting," dated November 1979 (tape recording), JHSSI Collection.

11. The author wishes to thank Allan Weissglass for meeting with her and providing a copy of the self-published, *Smiling Over Spilt Milk: A Family History*, by his father Charles Weissglass. Allan Weissglass is the nephew of Oscar Weissglass, co-founder of the JHSSI and a long-time leader in numerous civic and Jewish organizations.

newcomer status and joked that one has to live on the Island for at least sixty years to be considered a Staten Islander.<sup>12</sup>

The oral history project had already begun in the summer of 1979, but plans to finalize the structure of the organization continued for several years. The interviews, now on deposit in the Archives & Special Collections at the College of Staten Island, City University of New York, provide a wealth of first-hand information. However, the project does have some limitations; the two most significant being the older age of the participants and that they represent the experience of only those active in community organizations.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, most of the details and patterns that emerge relate to Jewish life before the bridge, particularly during the Great Depression through the post-World War II years. Collectively, these accounts serve as a starting point to create a narrative of the social, educational, and religious nature of the community. This study describes the distinctive characteristics of the Jewish experience on Staten Island and establishes a foundation for further inquiry.

### THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER: A “HOME AWAY FROM HOME”<sup>14</sup>

The most common thread linking the oral histories was the description of the Jewish Community Center (JCC) as being the heart of Jewish life in the period before the opening of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge. From the North Shore to the South Shore and then Mid-Island since 2006, the JCC’s growth and new locations mirror the Jewish migration patterns in the borough. The first JCC was built in 1929 in Tompkinsville on the North Shore.<sup>15</sup> Its mission was to provide a home for the Jewish community’s social, recreational, and educational needs, as well as a place where people from all walks of life would feel welcomed. In keeping with its charge of inclusiveness, the JCC hosted workshops sponsored by B’nai B’rith for Jews and non-Jews to discuss communal and interfaith issues, as well as the

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12. “JHS 1st Meeting,” dated November 1979 (tape recording), JHSSI Collection.

13. Whenever possible, supplementary primary and secondary sources verify oral history testimony.

14. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 5.

15. See “Centre Lays Cornerstone: Jewish Community Group Holds Ceremony on Staten Island,” *New York Times* (December 10, 1928): 13; and “Dedicate Centre April 14: New Jewish Community Building on Staten Island Ready,” *New York Times*, April 7, 1929, 10.

organization's award ceremonies given to non-Jews in human relations.<sup>16</sup> By the time the JCC broke ground, there were an estimated 7, 200 Jews living on the Island, which constituted 4.9 percent of the population. Nearly a decade later, the community absorbed another 2,000 residents and welcomed two new congregations.<sup>17</sup>

The JCC opened at an inauspicious time, just months before stock market collapse in October 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression. Like most institutions, it struggled during the Depression and remained under water for much of the 1930s. However, the Great Depression also fueled interest in and expanded the popularity of Jewish Community Centers.<sup>18</sup> One resident explained that young people gathered there because there was little money to participate in other activities.<sup>19</sup> Graenum Berger, the JCC's Executive Director from 1932 to 1938 and later author and activist for Ethiopian Jews, noted that the Depression transformed the center into a social service agency that met some of the community's needs.<sup>20</sup> Berger was well-prepared to take on the challenge of this new position, having just earned a master's degree from the Graduate School of Jewish Social Work in Manhattan. He was deeply influenced by the classes taught by Mordecai Kaplan and implemented those teachings at the JCC.<sup>21</sup>

The JCC's financial situation was so dire that closing letters had been typed. By 1933, the mortgage was in default, and the bank was going to foreclose on the property. Berger personally went to the bank with money from some Board members just to pay the interest on the loan in order to stay afloat.<sup>22</sup> Had the building closed, the Jewish community would have lost its organizational structure to provide needed social services and a home away from home for many of its youth.

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16. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 21.

17. See *AJYB* 42(1940-41): 225.

18. See Wenger, *New York Jews*, 162.

19. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 1.

20. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 21. Jane Aberlin, an active JCC Board member for over six decades confirmed that, "we all became like amateur social workers." See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 1. For more on Berger, see Eric Pace, "Graenum Berger, 90; Aided Ethiopian Jews," *New York Times*, April 2, 1999, A19.

21. Harriet A Feiner, "Kaplan's influence on Jewish social work" in Emanuel S. Goldsmith, Mel Scult, and Robert M. Seltzer, eds., *The Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 360-361. See also "Welfare Group Adopts New Operating Plan," *Jewish Telegraph Agency* (May 17, 1935), at <http://www.jta.org/1935/05/17/archive/welfare-group-adopts-new-operating-plan#ixzz35rrxOISV> (accessed 18 June 2014).

22. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 4.

The Center survived through creativity and innovation. One Saturday evening, Berger went down to the JCC basement, and to his surprise, discovered a crap game in progress. When he asked what was going on, he was told, “this is going to pay your salary,” which Berger added was always six months behind. Although met with some resistance, Berger changed the individual membership to a family membership so that the family would be responsible for payment. Berger actively solicited new members, and along with his revised membership plan, membership increased from about 500 to over 1,000 unique memberships during his six-years as director.<sup>23</sup>

Despite Staten Island’s conservative political culture, it is not surprising that a number of its Jews were involved with socialist and other groups deemed ‘radical’ by the American public during the interwar years.<sup>24</sup> Berger was associated with leftist movements, so much so that he noted “everyone remembers my radicalism, they forget my Judaism.”<sup>25</sup> Though Berger was warned against it, he brought Margaret Sanger to the JCC to discuss birth control. This decision rattled the heavily Catholic borough.<sup>26</sup> He again sparked controversy when he accepted an invitation from John Dewey to attend a meeting to help support the progressive Popular Front government during the Spanish Civil War. His attendance, which offended local Catholic leaders, was mentioned in an editorial in the *Staten Island Advance*. Although Berger was confronted by leaders at the JCC about his participation, he remained Executive Director until 1938. His popularity among residents was cemented in 1935, when they staged a large rally aimed at convincing him to turn down an offer for another position at twice his current salary. Regardless of conflicts during his tenure, Berger was said by one interview participant to have had the greatest influence on local Jewish youth, many of whom shared his social and political beliefs.<sup>27</sup>

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23. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 4.

24. For example, a number of interviewees mentioned their involvement in the Arbiter Ring/Workmen’s Circle, the labor-socialist fraternal organization, which had a branch on the Island since at least 1914. See *AJYB* (1914–1915): 278. The conservative nature of Staten Island is explored in the previously cited *Staten Island: Conservative Bastion in a Liberal City*.

25. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 4.

26. As Wenger noted, although birth control was a controversial issue, Jewish women used birth control in much greater numbers than women of other religions and a 1939 study indicated that urban Jews were its most frequent users. See Wenger, *New York Jews*, 75–76.

27. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 27.

The Jewish community was also affected by political extremism on the other side of the spectrum in the form of pro-Nazi activity on the Island. The presence of the borough's active German-American Bund, an organization created to build support for Nazism among ethnic Germans living in the United States, did not fade in the minds of many of those who agreed to be interviewed. The JCC provided an environment where Jews could coordinate efforts to combat this threat. While serving as Executive Director, Berger had conflicts with the Bund. In 1935, Berger worked with Clarence C. Stoughton, future president of the historically Lutheran Wagner College, to form an alliance against a Lutheran pastor who was using anti-Jewish rhetoric. Along with other Lutherans, they established a lecture series, designed for both Jews and non-Jews, on anti-Semitism. As a result, Berger indicated that Stoughton eventually changed his views.<sup>28</sup> However issues with the Bund persisted, and Staten Islanders continued to confront Nazism. Dr. Isaac Milner, rabbi of Temple Emanu-El, believed that two simultaneous fires at the synagogue and his nearby residence were set by Nazi sympathizers. He attributed the arsons to retaliation for articles he had written for the *Staten Island Advance*, which attacked the Nazi regime. "There were" he added, "a lot of Nazis on Staten Island" at the time.<sup>29</sup>

Later events confirmed Dr. Milner's assessment. Due to its strategic location, Staten Island was carefully monitored for spy activity by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) during the two World Wars. In the midst of World War II, the FBI arrested two residents, Ernest Lehmitz and Erwin Despreter, for spying on behalf of the Nazis.<sup>30</sup> Oddly enough, Lehmitz was no stranger to many in the Jewish community. Lehmitz lived on the same block as one interviewee who remembered him. During the interview, he recounted how Lehmitz rented an attic in a three level house on Oxford Place so he could observe the movement of troopships from the

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28. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 4. The working relationship continued after Berger left the JCC, see "Germans, Jews Unite for an Adult Course: Two Staten Island Institutions Have Joint Program," *New York Times*, October 29, 1939, D6. For further examples of educational resistance to Nazi activity, see endnote two in Warren Grover, *Nazis in Newark* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 9.

29. See "Nazis Fire Synagogue and Rabbi's Home in Staten Island, Police Probe Blazes," *Jewish Telegraph Agency* (February 17, 1942), at <http://www.jta.org/1942/02/17/archive/nazis-fire-synagogue-and-rabbis-home-in-staten-island-police-probe-blazes#ixzz35J5fhz6s> (accessed June 18, 2014).

30. Although they each received 30 year sentences, neither served their full term. See Smith, *Gateway*, 195-196.



North Shore.<sup>31</sup> Although he did not elaborate on the exact details of the circumstances, Louis R. Miller, a prominent member of the Jewish and local community, recalled how he had spent a night at the Staten Island Hospital with “that Nazi spy” and was unaware of Lehmitz secret life.<sup>32</sup>

Spying on the Island did not end with World War II. But by the end of the late 1940s, covert operations took on a different tone when a thirty-two-year-old lawyer became a spy for pre-statehood Israel. Reuben Gross’s story is retold in Leonard Slater’s *The Pledge* (1970).<sup>33</sup> The book details the history of the secret American underground after World War II that helped arm Israel for its war of independence, supplying everything from planes to a special telescope for military leader Moshe Dayan’s good eye, after having lost his left eye in battle.

The oral history testimony from Gross’s son, Avery, adds more detail to the dramatic events that unfolded. After returning from service in the U.S. Army during World War II, Reuben Gross feared for the safety of Jews world-wide. As a result, he offered his services as an amateur ham radio operator to the Jewish Agency’s New York office. In 1946, with a first-class radio telegrapher’s license, he began underground radio contact with Tel Aviv. Gross sent secret messages, in Morse code, that were too urgent or sensitive for commercial cable, but he never knew the content of the messages. At the time, then Palestine was under British rule, which limited Jewish immigration. As a result, American and Canadian sailors embarked on a clandestine rescue operation with the Palestine Jewish underground to transport Holocaust survivors to Palestine.<sup>34</sup> At one point, Gross believed something significant was occurring due to the high volume of messages. Coverage in 1947 of the famed *Exodus* ship that covertly brought immigrants to Israel under the British Mandate seemed to confirm his hunch, but the Vice President of the Jewish Agency’s New York office could not disclose the substance of his work.

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31. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 5.

32. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 21. Both the oral histories and *Jewish Veterans Speak* documentary discuss individual experiences with anti-Semitism, but the topic falls outside the scope of this study.

33. See Leonard Slater, *The Pledge* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 109–113.

34. See Murray S. Greenfield and Joseph M. Hochstein, *The Jews’ Secret Fleet: The Untold Story of North American Volunteers Who Smashed the British Blockade of Palestine* (New York: Gefen Publishing House, 1987).

Later that year, two FBI agents and one agent from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) raided Reuben Gross's house. The FBI had been listening to Gross's communiqués, but it was unable to break the codes because Gross had programmed them as if they were being sent from Greece. At the time, Greece was in the midst of a civil war that pitted the Greek government army, supported by the U.S. and Great Britain, against the military branch of the Greek Communist Party. Once the FBI realized the messages were to Tel Aviv, they lost interest, and Gross never heard from them again.<sup>35</sup> Years later, Reuben Gross volunteered as a radio operator for the Israeli Air Force and found the member of the Palestine Jewish underground he had been communicating with from Staten Island during the British Mandate period.<sup>36</sup>

## EDUCATION AND SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS

The testimony in the oral history project demonstrates that similar to other Jewish communities, Jewish Staten Islanders were committed to both secular and religious education. In the post-World War I era, many prominent colleges and universities discriminated against Jews. As a result, many Staten Island residents sent their children to the City University of New York (CUNY).<sup>37</sup> Several stories detailed in the oral histories illustrate the wider acceptance of Jews in post-World War II America. One interview participant who went to CUNY's City College stated that in the 1930s no Jew would set foot in Wagner College, which began as a Lutheran seminary and remains affiliated with the Church. He explained

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35. However, due to violating the international treaty on code use, the FCC suspended Gross's license, which was reduced to six months after he successfully appealed. See Slater, *The Pledge*, 113.

36. There are several mentions of the community's involvement with the Zionist cause and State of Israel, but the topic deserves further investigation. There are at least two published accounts of activity, including reference to a letter received by Dr. Stephen S. Wise from Max Levy as chairman of the Staten Island Zionists and of the Keren Hayesod (United Israel Appeal) in 1926. See "Dr. Wise's Resignation Not Accepted by Zionist Executive," *Jewish Telegraph Agency* (January 4, 1926), at: <http://www.jta.org/1926/01/04/archive/dr-wises-resignation-not-accepted-by-zionist-executive#ixzz35JFP6EEL> (accessed June 18, 2014). There was also a 1934 story about an outing to the Hungarian Zionist Camp in Staten Island. See "Avukah Winds Up Season with Staten Island Outing," *Jewish Telegraph Agency* (September 2, 1934), at: <http://www.jta.org/1934/09/02/archive/avukah-winds-up-season-with-staten-island-outing#ixzz35J59RSEB> (accessed June 18, 2014).

37. According to Wenger, during 1930s, Jews made up 80 to 90 percent of the student body at City University of New York (CUNY) campuses at City College, Hunter and Brooklyn. See Wenger, *New York Jews*, 63. For more data on the Jewish composition at CUNY, see *AJYB* (1950): 56–57.

that if Jews applied to Wagner, they were not accepted.<sup>38</sup> By the late 1940s, this had changed. Another interviewee enrolled in Wagner College in 1946, although he acknowledged that he felt self-conscious on campus and that his friends tended to be from outside the college community.<sup>39</sup>

Further progress at Wagner College occurred in the 1960s. Temple Israel's Rabbi Marcus Kramer led a Jewish group for Wagner students, which alone reflects an increase in the Jewish student body. The group met off-campus once a month because, at the time, the college maintained a policy that only Lutheran groups could meet on its grounds. In 1969, after three years of unsanctioned meetings, the Jewish group successfully challenged the ban and became the first non-Lutheran group on campus. However, permission was granted only after their third application.<sup>40</sup> The resistance towards forming the group was alluded to in an interview published in the Wagner College student newspaper, *The Wagnerian*, a month before the college formally recognized the Jewish group. The President of the Hillel Club, Rubin Ferziger, was questioned whether the group would be accepted by the student body and if they intended on following the "liberal trend" to challenge college administration policies. Ferziger stated that they were not a "rebel group" and hoped to work with the administration despite previous issues.<sup>41</sup> In a second interview months later, he added that the Hillel Club counted more than 50 percent of the Jewish student body as members. This number had risen since claiming 30 percent of the ninety-two Jewish students on campus had attended their now bi-monthly meetings.<sup>42</sup>

In terms of religious education, Leng and Davis noted that Temple Emanu-El's Hebrew School was "one of the educational features of the Island."<sup>43</sup> Around 1919, there were seventy students who attended four

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38. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 2.

39. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 5.

40. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 16.

41. "Jewish Students Organize Hillel Club," *The Wagnerian* (January 17, 1969), at: [http://library.wagner.edu/wagnerian/1969/wagnerian\\_05-16-69.pdf](http://library.wagner.edu/wagnerian/1969/wagnerian_05-16-69.pdf) (accessed August 10, 2015).

42. "Interview with Rubin Ferziger," *The Wagnerian* (16 May 1969), at: [http://library.wagner.edu/wagnerian/1969/wagnerian\\_01-17-69.pdf](http://library.wagner.edu/wagnerian/1969/wagnerian_01-17-69.pdf) (accessed August 10, 2015).

43. See Leng and Davis, *Staten Island*, 495. There is evidence that other Jewish schools were planned or existed, which is another area that requires further study. Leng and Davis also noted a Jewish Educational Alliance in Stapleton, founded in 1921, and there was a Hebrew Free School of Staten Island that had 49 pupils, see *AJYB* 21 (1919–1920): 448. Additionally, an article discussed a school founded by the Judea Maccabee Association to teach secular and Hebrew topics intended to serve 160 families. See "Model Jewish Community Planned on Staten Island," *Jewish Telegraph Agency* (October 6, 1930),

sessions per week, and by 1928, an education building was dedicated to provide additional space for social and educational activities.<sup>44</sup> Many children from Staten Island also received their Jewish education at the Jewish Education Center of Elizabeth in New Jersey and at other Hebrew schools in New Jersey, Brooklyn and Manhattan.<sup>45</sup>

The plans for the building of the Verrazano Bridge were a catalyst for significant advancement in Jewish religious education on Staten Island. The motivation for the Jewish Foundation School (JFS), established to provide high-quality Jewish- and secular-studies to boys and girls, stemmed from its backers confidence that the bridge would result in more Jews moving to the Island.<sup>46</sup> Although the JFS opened its doors in 1954 with just nineteen students and three staff members, the school currently serves more than 400 students with a staff and faculty of eighty at its two locations. During the 1950s, adults were also inspired to pursue Jewish education in the form of home study groups. One active participant involved in an early effort described it as a social group that decided to do something more meaningful. As a result, four couples met once a month to discuss a topic in Jewish history, such as labor unions, or the Sanhedrin, the ancient Jewish court system. He noted that once the idea spread, additional home study groups developed.<sup>47</sup>

### “WE NEED OUR WIVES’ HELP”

The oral history collection provides insight into the important role women played in the formation of Jewish communal organizations. Jewish women were not only involved in creating the first Jewish institutions, but also they served in leadership positions. While this may be a sign of egalitarianism, it may also have been a necessity due to the small size of the Jewish community. According to one of the women interviewed, “we need our wives’ help” was the response of a synagogue leader who insisted they establish a sisterhood.<sup>48</sup> The JCC’s first treasurer and vice president were

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at: <http://www.jta.org/1930/10/06/archive/model-jewish-community-planned-on-staten-island> (accessed June 18, 2014).

44. See *AJYB* 21 (1919–1920), 446. See also “A Brief History of Our Congregation,” Congregation Temple Emanu-El, <http://templeEmanu-Elsi.org/history.html> (accessed June 3, 2014).

45. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 10 and Folder 18.

46. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 10.

47. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 17.

48. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 24.

both women. In fact, May Stein held the position of vice president for seventeen years. Stein also chaired the first social committee and annual ball at the Center. Numerous cocktail parties were held prior to the gala, which was described by many as the community's premier Jewish social event of the year.<sup>49</sup>

Communal involvement grew in the 1930s. Several hundred Staten Island women from Junior and Senior Hadassah, the National Council of Jewish Women, and various local synagogue sisterhoods attended a card party to benefit the refugee fund that had been arranged by Stein and the JCC's Women's Division.<sup>50</sup> Stein also worked with the Jewish Welfare Board to institute regular religious services for the men at Fort Wadsworth and the U.S. Army Port of Embarkation on Staten Island during World War II.<sup>51</sup> She had followed in the footsteps of her mother, Emma Greenwald, who had helped to establish the synagogue at Sea View Hospital, the preeminent tuberculosis sanitarium at the time. The new enterprise was important enough for the *New York Times* to report that the Women's Division of the American Jewish Congress urged support for the synagogue.<sup>52</sup> Stein's daughter, Jane Aberlin, continued her family's activism at the JCC as president of the Women's Division and an active member of the Board of Directors.<sup>53</sup> Leadership went state-wide when Mrs. Maxwell Ehrlich was elected president of New York State Conference of National Council of Jewish Women in 1936.<sup>54</sup> Jewish women had also made their mark through civic engagement, comprising 10 percent of Staten Island's Advance Women of Achievement award recipients.<sup>55</sup>

Despite their prominence in Jewish organizational life, it still took months before women at B'nai Jeshurun, the Island's first synagogue,

49. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 1.

50. See "Island Women Aid Relief Fund Drive," *Jewish Telegraph Agency* (July 18, 1934), at: <http://www.jta.org/1934/07/18/archive/island-women-aid-relief-fund-drive#ixzz35J79Uxz0> (accessed June 18, 2014).

51. See "Naval Base Chapel Open: Jewish Welfare Board Hold Dedication on Staten Island," *New York Times*, May 15, 1943, 8.

52. See "Aid for Synagogue Asked: Women's Congress Urged to Help Sea View Hospital Project," *New York Times* (February 16, 1933): 16. See also, "Synagogue at Sea View Hospital is Dedicated," *Jewish Telegraph Agency* (March 31, 1930), at: <http://www.jta.org/1930/03/31/archive/synagogue-at-sea-view-hospital-is-dedicated> (accessed June 18, 2014).

53. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 1. See also, "Dedicated volunteer had over a half a century of service," *Staten Island Advance* (October 21, 2012): A11.

54. See "Women Approve Ban on Child Labor," *New York Times*, April 1, 1936, 23.

55. Award winners include May Stein, Jane Aberlin, Edith Susskind, and Beatrice Victor, who shared her experiences as Navy nurse in the aforementioned documentary *Jewish Veterans Speak*. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 1.

dared to leave the upper balcony to sit with their husbands. This remained true even after the synagogue changed its affiliation from Orthodox to Conservative that allowed mixed seating around 1940.<sup>56</sup> Louis R. Miller, a former president of the synagogue, explained that synagogue leaders had introduced the Conservative movement in order to have men and women sit together. Yet, even after the change in affiliation, he would still witness women sneaking up to the balcony from the dais. Miller stated that he would then have an usher request that she come down to the main sanctuary. But once a woman would open the door and see no other women, they would quickly sneak back upstairs. It is significant to note that the female members, while active in the synagogue, did not take advantage of the opportunity for mixed seating, let alone take initiative as a group, even when male leadership encouraged them. Likewise, the Jewish (and female) owner of Edith Susskind Gift Specialist did not allow female employees to wear pants when she opened her boutique in 1957.<sup>57</sup> These examples are indicative of the influence of Staten Island's largely traditional culture, which is in stark contrast to the otherwise liberal outlook synonymous with New York City.

Also exhibiting the conservative nature of the Island was the reaction of some congregants of the Reform synagogue, Temple Israel, to their rabbi's involvement in the budding Civil Rights movement. Rabbi Marcus Kramer exemplified the movement's commitment to social justice and *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) and played an instrumental role in organizing and supporting Civil Rights in the borough. He was active in the Urban League, the NAACP, and was among the first to join the advisory board of the local branch of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Rabbi Kramer, who led the synagogue from 1956 until 1971, expressed that some of his congregants were troubled by his involvement with civil rights. However, he asserted that they grew more accepting once they knew he was working with other Protestant and Catholic churches, which he

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56. Although gallery seating had officially ended in 1921, mixed or family seating remained controversial. However, Marshall Sklare noted that by 1955 it was the norm in the vast majority of conservative synagogues. See Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Debate over Mixed Seating in the American Synagogue." Ed. Jack Wertheimer, *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 380.

57. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 23.

believed illustrated that, “this was the kind of thing the Lord had blessed,” and should therefore be supported.<sup>58</sup>

### THE “TERRIBLE BROUHAHA” OVER THE FIRST AND ONLY REFORM SYNAGOGUE ON STATEN ISLAND

One of the most distinctive aspects of Staten Island Jewish history, and another example of resistance to change, was the heated debate over Reform Judaism itself. The Reform movement was initially considered radical for its modifications to traditional religious practice and social liberal ideology. However, within the first few decades of the twentieth century, it had entered the mainstream of American Judaism and it eventually became the largest movement in the country. Therefore, the uproar surrounding the establishment of Temple Israel in 1948, and the fact that it has remained the only congregation affiliated with the Union of Reform Judaism on the Island, is unique to the borough.

The oral histories offer some insights into the controversies surrounding the formation of the Reform synagogue. Jane Aberlin’s interview was particularly informative. Aberlin was a descendant of the first Jewish family on Staten Island, and her great grandfather, Moses Greenwald, called himself “the first Jew on Staten Island.” After leaving Germany during the 1848 revolution, Moses Greenwald lived in Port Richmond on the North Shore and he became a successful merchant and property owner. Seven years later he welcomed a son, Abram, the first Jew born on the Island. Abram Greenwald expanded the family’s wealth and played an important role in civic and cultural affairs. In addition to being known as the “father of the JCC,” Greenwald was also instrumental in securing the legislation to build the three bridges connecting Staten Island and New Jersey that opened between 1928 and 1931.<sup>59</sup>

In an interview, Aberlin observed that her grandparents, including her German-born grandmother, were members of the Conservative synagogue, Temple Emanu-El. Yet, her parents attended a Reform synagogue in Brooklyn, as no such options existed on the Island. Her parents joined

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58. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 15.

59. See Charles W. Leng and William T. Davis, *Staten Island and Its People, A History, 1609–1929*, Vol. 5 (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, Inc., 1929–1933), 311–312. Also see JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 1.

with five other local Reform families to organize a congregation on Staten Island. She described the meeting as a “terrible brouhaha,” complete with “screaming and yelling,” which lasted until nearly two o’clock in the morning. Aberlin recounted that one objector spoke at length about how a Reform synagogue would “ruin Staten Island and the Jewish world.”<sup>60</sup> Further details about the contentious formation of the synagogue were expressed by another interview participant whose in-laws were among the founders of Temple Israel.<sup>61</sup> Besides confirming that a planning meeting was met with strong opposition, he added that there were estimates of 2,500 unaffiliated Jewish families in the borough and many argued that a Reform synagogue could fill that void.<sup>62</sup>

Another unique feature of the Jewish experience on Staten Island, related to Reform Judaism, was the lack of discussion throughout the oral histories regarding the relationship between German and East European Jews. This relationship is generally, though too often simplistically, cast in a framework of hostility between the wealthy and more established “uptown” German Jews and their poor, Russian-immigrant “downtown” co-religionists. Only one interview participant touched upon the issue stating that the German and Russian Jews were not too friendly with each other and noted that although he was politically influential, Abram was not someone Russian Jews could depend on as a “special friend. The same interviewee added that Abram’s support for philanthropic causes was rather superficial, preferring to lend his name rather than his time and effort.”<sup>63</sup>

The only other instance in over thirty interviews where the relationship was even addressed came from Aberlin, whose wealthy and politically-connected family was of German ancestry. She described her grandfather, Abram Greenwald, as “Beau Brummel,” who routinely dressed in a tuxedo and had a flower in his lapel. This depiction, coupled with a story about her grandmother who criticized a JCC Director for not wearing a tie, corresponds to the portrayal of the elite German Jews of the late nineteenth century. Aberlin noted that her family did not think dietary

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60. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 1.

61. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 20. See also “Congregation is Formed: First Reform Group on Staten Island is Set Up,” *New York Times*, 13 June 1948, 35.

62. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 20.

63. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 27.



rules were important and hesitantly disclosed that it was “not done in their circle.”<sup>64</sup> The only vague hint of the *noblesse oblige* that often characterized the early German Jews occurred when she said how her family looked after immigrants. In other Jewish communities, these altruistic gestures were often viewed as unsolicited attempts to assimilate or “Americanize” newcomers. Yet, there is virtually no mention of such antagonism in the oral history project. She also recalled that the first wave of Jews, like her family, were more secular and differed from what she called the “1903 crowd,” referring to the Russian pogroms that contributed to massive immigration. Abelin’s husband, Isador, came from one such immigrant family. In keeping with that generation’s common political ideology, she described her husband as “very leftish” and his brother Edward as “the radical.”<sup>65</sup> However, it is noteworthy that there was no mention of any problem with her marrying a Russian Jew, let alone an immigrant.

## CONCLUSION

In a holistic sense, the frequent use of the adjective “cohesive” by members of the Staten Island community seems to be an accurate reflection of their experience. The absence of commentary related to separate, or at times of adversarial relationships amongst Jews of various European backgrounds is uncommon. Living on an island removed from the rest of New York City, Staten Island’s Jewish community has a unique history. Its geographical isolation appears to have had a greater influence than many of the cultural ideologies members brought with them from Europe, which elsewhere led to community conflicts. This also helps to account for their self-defined framing and identity as the original Jewish community. Both the historical society and the oral history project have their origins in the new challenges the community faced after the Verrazano Narrows Bridge connected it to Brooklyn and the other boroughs. The divisions the bridge created stand in stark contrast to the unified community represented in the oral history interviews. They may also be amplified by a fierce loyalty among the native Staten Islanders, across ethnic background, to a bygone era prior to urbanization.

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64. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 1.

65. See JHSSI Collection, Box 1, Folder 1.

Ironically, the discord that resulted from the flood of East European Jewish immigrants in the 1880s between the established Jewish community and the newcomers, mirror issues encountered within the Jewish community of Staten Island one hundred years later. After having already doubled its total population, the community witnessed another influx, this time from the Orthodox community and of Russian Jews fleeing the Soviet Union. How demographic changes have affected its character continue to unfold, but can only be appreciated with a more thorough examination of the community's experiences. This study provides an initial understanding of Jewish life on Staten Island and makes a contribution to the development of a more complete history of all the Jews of New York City.