

“ONE HEART, MANY SOULS”: THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF JEWISH WOMEN AND
IDENTITY FORMATION IN ST. LOUIS, 1919-1950

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by

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AND IDENTITY FORMATION IN ST. LOUIS, 1919-1950

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In memory of my parents, Barney and Ann Rubinstein, and my friend and advisor, Mary Neth. Dedicated with great love and gratitude to Gabe and Alex.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the ways middle-class Jewish American women expressed their Jewish identities through particular volunteer activities from 1919 to 1950. Focusing on the St. Louis chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women, this work examines options for adaptation of identity formation and expression in order to gain a better understanding of the ways in which ethnic and religious group identification is established and altered. During the period from 1919 to 1950, many opportunities existed for middle-class American Jewish women to create and recreate themselves, emphasizing particular ethnic, religious, class, or gender identities in response to their different needs at any given time.

I maintain that Jewish identity is strong and adaptable and that concepts of Jewishness are, like race and gender, socially-constructed. They are therefore mutable rather than fixed. Individuals form an identity, but others around them may perceive that identity differently. Communities also form identities and interact with one another. Interactions between the individual and her community and between different communities can thus shed light on the ways in which identity is formed on both an individual and a collective level.

Members of St. Louis’s Chapter of Council engaged in activities that appealed to various identities, emphasizing different faces at different times. They never completely cast off any of their different selves, but they did favor one over the others when they deemed it necessary or desirable.

Introduction—Meeting Esther: Jewishness, Gender, and Identity

Twin issues have concerned Jews for much of their history: the issue of “passing,” or of selectively disclosing one’s heritage, and the issue of the decline and/or disappearance of the Jews as a people. In both the ancient and modern periods, these related issues have appeared in Jewish writings as representations of the difficulties of maintaining Jewish identity in a world ruled by non-Jews. For example, in the biblical story of Esther, the ability to save the Jewish people is linked to her decision to conceal her Jewish identity.

Esther, also known as Hadassah, was a young Jewish woman living in Persia during the reign of King Ahasuerus. When the young Esther was taken into the king’s household as a replacement for his willful queen Vashti, Esther’s uncle Mordecai warned her to remain silent about her Jewish heritage.¹ Esther was able to gain the king’s favor and become his queen, while he remained unaware of her Jewish identity. Although Ahasuerus was not a Jew, he did not necessarily hold the Jewish people in contempt. His advisor, Haman, however, was full of hatred and a determination to destroy the Jews.

When Haman convinced Ahasuerus to issue a decree of death for all the Jews in the kingdom, Mordecai warned Esther that she could not escape the fate of her people simply because of her position in the court. He sent word to her to stand up and claim her heritage:

For if thou holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father’s house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?²

¹ Esther 2:10 “Esther had not shewed her people nor her kindred: for Mordecai had charged her that she should not shew it.”

² Esther 4:14.

Esther decided to risk her life by going to the king without his explicit invitation (an act punishable by execution) in order to reveal her heritage and plead for her people. Her bravery and her supplications persuaded the king to change his decree. Esther thus saved her people and caused Haman's downfall; she also brought her uncle Mordecai into the court as an honored royal advisor.

Jews retell this story every year during the celebration of the holiday of Purim, and they have long viewed it as an example of a great and noble act by a woman on behalf of her people. However, Jews place little emphasis on the fact that this heroism is rooted in selective revelations about Jewish identity. Esther's status as a savior of the Jews rests not only in standing by her people when they were threatened, but also in the choice of when to reveal her identity. This decision lies at the very heart of Esther's victory. This early and oft-repeated example of passing as a non-Jew provides an example of the role of contextual identity in Jewish culture, especially for women.

In this story, identity and "passing" become important tools in the hands of a woman. During the celebration of Purim, the wearing of costumes and masks even demonstrates the concealing of one's identity. For modern Jews, however, "passing" is often conflated with assimilation and loss of culture. This issue of assimilation and Jewish survival has given rise to much debate within the Jewish community over Jewish identity and how to best maintain it. Historian Jonathan Sarna has disputed the idea of what he terms "the myth of linear descent," or the idea that Jewish assimilation and acculturation are one-way processes that end with the disappearance of American Jews.³

³ In this case, I am using the term "assimilation" to represent fully succumbing to the dominant culture without keeping remnants of one's previous heritage. "Acculturation," on the other hand, is a way to adapt to the dominant culture without eradicating one's existing cultural traditions.

Sarna explains that Jewish culture is quite resilient, despite the fact that many critics have claimed that it is on the verge of disappearing:

American Jews have creatively adapted their faith to their new environment. Reshaping Judaism in response to challenges from within and from without, they have time and again revitalized their faith, strengthening it, sometimes in surprising and unexpected ways....⁴

I also maintain that Jewish identity is strong and adaptable. I argue that concepts of Jewishness are, like race and gender, socially-constructed and therefore mutable rather than fixed. Individuals form an identity, but others around them may perceive that identity differently. Communities also form identities and interact with one another. Interactions between the individual and her community and between different communities can thus shed light on the ways in which identity is formed on both an individual and a collective level.⁵

This study examines the ways middle-class Jewish American women expressed their Jewish identities through particular volunteer activities from 1919 to 1950. Focusing on the St. Louis chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women, this work examines options for adaptation of identity formation and expression in order to gain a better understanding of the ways in which ethnic and religious group identification is established and altered. During the period from 1919 to 1950, many opportunities

⁴ Jonathan Sarna, "American Judaism in Historical Perspective," *David W. Belin Lecture in American Jewish Affairs*, Presented March 8, 2003 at the Jean and Samuel Frankel Center for Judaic Studies, the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor: Jean and Samuel Frankel Center for Judaic Studies, 2003), 1-5.

⁵ Identity can be linked not just to race or religion, but also to ethnicity and gender. Among works by historians, no work has focused specifically on the intersection of Jewish identity with gender and class, although David Roediger, Michael Rogin, Matthew Frye Jacobson, and Michael Alexander have all touched on questions of religion/ethnicity/race in their works. See Michael Alexander, *Jazz Age Jews* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), and David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness* (New York: Verso, 1991). For the intersection of religion/ethnicity/gender, see Paula Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representation of Women* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995).

existed for middle-class American Jewish women to create and recreate themselves, emphasizing particular ethnic, religious, class, or gender identities in response to their different needs at any given time.

During this era, when external variables such as war and economic upheaval were significant features in the national and global landscape, many women and men sought to understand their place in American culture. American Jews faced a variety of choices regarding how to incorporate their Jewish selves and their American selves into an integrated whole.⁶ Their choices are of vital importance to this project.

In the following chapters, I examine the activities of middle-class Jewish women volunteers from the local chapter of a national Jewish women's organization—the National Council of Jewish Women—in St. Louis, Missouri during the period from 1919 to 1950. I argue that Jewish women in the United States had a mutable sense of Jewish identity that they could emphasize in response to historical circumstances and that these changes can be traced through their participation in women's voluntary associations. The St. Louis chapter of Council demonstrates this in its own changing slate of activities. From milk stations for children during the 1920s to providing daycare services for working mothers during World War II, the women of Council engaged in activities that could assist Jews and non-Jews alike. They also engaged in specifically Jewish activities, such as providing holiday services for Jewish soldiers during World War II and contributing time to the Jewish Hospital and Jewish Home for the Aged. In the face of racism and anti-Semitism, Council sometimes emphasized other identities—American, middle-class, or white—over its Jewish identity. However, by the period after World

⁶ For a discussion of Jewish culture and secularization, as well as the conflict between religion and “assimilated” American culture, see George Marsden, *Religion and American Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), particularly pages 10, 132, and 219-221.

War II, the women of Council found compelling reasons, such as the desire to resist anything reminiscent of Nazism's concepts of racial superiority, to prioritize their Jewish identity.

The American Jewish community is a diverse group with many internal divisions that defy easy generalization. For the purposes of studying changes in religious and cultural identity, Reform Jews of the American middle class, particularly the women, had the most opportunities for adaptation of their identities. Jewish identity is at the heart of this group's existence, and it is tied inextricably to Jewish religion and denominationalism.

Jewish religion in the United States has had three denominational categories: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. Each branch of Judaism has specific attitudes regarding points of Jewish identity and *halacha*, or Jewish law. The strictest definition of who is Jewish and how Jewish law is interpreted comes from the Orthodox branch of Judaism. Reform Judaism has a much broader definition of who can be counted as Jewish, and its adherents engage in more interpretation and change regarding questions of *halacha*.⁷

Reform Judaism developed in the nineteenth century as a way to "modernize" Judaism. Reform Judaism first appeared in Germany, and most American Reform Jews have historically been of Central European descent. In terms of mass immigration, this means that the wave of Central European immigration that occurred prior to 1880

⁷ I use the term Orthodox to refer to the branch of Judaism that practices the strictest form of Jewish observance. Some prefer to use the term "observant," but I think this can cause unnecessary confusion. I will use the word "Orthodox" when referring to the branch of Judaism and "observant" as a qualitative adjective. Many will also note that a fourth branch, Reconstructionism, has developed in the twentieth century. My discussion will not address that branch, which did not emerge as a largescale movement until 1968, after this study ends. *Halacha* includes all questions of religious observance and ritual behavior. The frequency, location, and language of prayer are all questions of *halacha*.

consisted primarily of Reform Jews.⁸ Central European Reform Jews were the most likely to assimilate and to succeed financially in America by the end of the nineteenth century.

By the year 1900, most middle-class Jews in the United States were Reform Jews of Central European origins, as were most of the women who joined Council in St. Louis. The middle class is a very useful category for examining moves between the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds because members of that socio-economic class had more opportunities to do so and because they were most able to “pass” in the non-Jewish world. Their ability to “pass” was in no small part due to the fact that middle-class Jews rarely identified themselves as members of the Orthodox Jewish community during the first half of the 20th century and therefore rarely engaged in behavior, such as wearing skullcaps and *sheitels* (wigs worn by married women to cover their hair), that would clearly mark them as Jews to a non-Jewish observer. Jews coming from Europe, specifically Russia, who lived as Orthodox Jews thus looked very different from Reform American-born Jews and from Christians because Orthodox Judaism, especially as practiced in Russia, demanded different clothing and hairstyles, in addition to different kinds of religious practice.⁹

Gender is also critical intersection for studying and understanding assimilation, acculturation, and identity formation among Jewish Americans. While both women and men could pass as non-Jews, men have a physical marking (through circumcision) that women do not have. According to the rules of Jewish observance and the more

⁸ Sephardic Jews, or Jews primarily of Spanish and Portugese descent, also came in the first wave of Jewish immigration, but they came in smaller numbers and were culturally distinct from the Central and Western European immigrants.

⁹ Other distinctive forms of personal appearance included beards and extended forelocks (*peyes*) on men and special four-cornered garments beneath men’s shirts. Women not only wore *sheitels*, but many wore scarves or shawls over their hair as well.

traditional manifestations of Jewish culture, men have a fixed Jewish identity, rooted in the synagogue and the ceremonies of religious life. Jewish men's religious identity as Jews resided in the covenant of the *bris* (or circumcision), in the formation of the *minyan*¹⁰ for synagogue-based prayer, in activities such as public group worship, and in organized study of religious texts.

Jewish women were not traditionally required, nor often allowed, to participate in the same ritual observance and study. Without a similarly fixed identity, then, women have been free to form and express their Jewishness in a variety of ways. The mutable, two-way formation of identity was more pronounced in the lives of Jewish women because of the relational way in which their Jewishness emerged. The nature of women's Jewish identity rested primarily in the home and in family worship, as well as in their choices of public activities, affiliations, and identifications.¹¹ To be specific, while women can remain Jewish without participating in public ritual or physical marking, they are also able to more easily maintain their Jewishness without public expression of it or to discard their Jewishness altogether. Women do not have physical markings, and their rituals are carried out in private (i.e., the home). A man, on the other hand, will still have external physical markers even if he leaves the Jewish faith, and he cannot adhere to the Jewish religion if he refuses to engage in public practice of religious ritual.

Although synagogue participation of women was severely restricted until the development of Reform Judaism in the nineteenth century, leaving women without a

¹⁰ The *minyan* is the collection of at least ten adult worshipers. There are particular prayers, including *kaddish* (prayers said for the dead), which require a *minyan*. Such prayers will not be conducted until enough worshipers are present. Traditionally, any Jewish male over the age of thirteen can be counted in a *minyan*. Many Orthodox Jews still refuse to include women in a count of worshipers for a *minyan*.

¹¹ Although Jewish identity has historically been matrilineal, even that trait is relational because it develops out of the act of motherhood. While you could be a Jewish woman without being a mother, you could not be a Jew (either female or male) without the relational link of being born to a Jewish woman. However, men had additional ritual obligations that women did not have.

specific place outside the home to practice the Jewish religion, women could express their Jewish identity through home-based ritual, observation of *kashrut* (dietary laws), and promotion of Jewish education for their children. In traditional Jewish congregations, women who attended synagogue sat separately from male congregants and were not allowed to participate in important parts of the service such as the public reading of the Torah.¹² Reform Judaism's new interpretations of *halacha*, however, meant that women could participate in new ways and begin to define themselves as Jews through their public behavior.

During the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, as Jewish women from all of the Jewish denominations seized the opportunity to participate in voluntary associations, they were able to develop a new public space in which they could foster their Jewish identities and clearly self-identify with the larger Jewish community. These women could participate in synagogue sisterhoods and women's auxiliaries, as well as in identifiably Jewish groups such as Hadassah or the National Council of Jewish Women. These women also had the opportunity to forge bonds based on gender within their own socio-economic classes, bonds that crossed ethnic and religious lines. This mutability gave Jewish women a greater range of options for self-identification with a variety of subcommunities, and a study of such self-identification will provide a more extensive understanding of the motivations and consequences behind choosing to affiliate with one subcommunity rather than with another.¹³

¹² Women's duties in the home actually exempted them from synagogue attendance at all. Attendance at synagogue was a choice for women, not an imperative.

¹³ It is important to note that the most flexibility in such choice belonged to Reform Jews. As the Jews least tied to traditional ritual practice, they were also the Jews who gained access to the ranks of the middle class. Membership in middle-class women's voluntary associations, then, was most commonly found among Reform Jewish women. Zionist groups like Hadassah drew strongly from the working class and had more appeal for Orthodox and Conservative Jewish women.

Most, if not all, of the secondary literature on American Jews has focused on large urban areas in the eastern United States, rather than moderately-sized communities in the middle of the country.¹⁴ The Jewish community of St. Louis has historically been smaller than in many cities, such as New York and Chicago, and it did not relate to the non-Jewish community in the same way that Jewish communities did in larger urban areas. In cities with the highest concentrations of Jews, Jews were able to establish large neighborhoods, separate from their non-Jewish neighbors. Although St. Louis's Jews did form such a neighborhood, many of the city's Jews moved in non-Jewish circles and would relocate outside that neighborhood in the twentieth century.

Understanding smaller Jewish communities is useful for seeing the ways in which the pressure to assimilate could affect Jews in the rest of the nation, however, and new scholarship is shedding light on how Jews interacted in smaller towns. Important studies of Jews in smaller cities and towns include Eva Morawska's *Insecure Prosperity*, David G. Dalin and Jonathan Rosenbaum's *Making a Life, Building a Community*, Dan

¹⁴ There is substantial research on New York and Chicago, as well as some parts of the East. A large body of work also exists on Southern Jews, especially the community in Atlanta, Georgia. There are some studies on the Upper Midwest and the West, but none exist to put Jews of the Lower Midwest into the national context for the purpose of understanding American Jewish diversity. See Irving Cutler, *The Jews of Chicago: From Shtetl to Suburb* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), Hasia R. Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), Murray Friedman, *Jewish Life in Philadelphia, 1830-1940* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1983), Deborah Dash Moore, *At Home in America : Second Generation New York Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), Stuart E. Rosenberg, *The Jewish Community in Rochester, 1843-1925* (New York,: Columbia University Press, 1954), Beth S. Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression: Uncertain Promise* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), Linda Mack Schloff, *And Prairie Dogs Weren't Kosher: Jewish Women in the Upper Midwest since 1855* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1996), Mark K. Bauman and Berkley Kalin, *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), Leonard Dinnerstein and Mary Dale Palsson, *Jews in the South* (Baton Rouge,: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), Eli N. Evans, *The Lonely Days Were Sundays: Reflections of a Jewish Southerner* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), Rudolf Glanz, *The Jews of California : From the Discovery of Gold until 1880* (New York: s.n., 1960), Steven Hertzberg, *Strangers within the Gate City: The Jews of Atlanta, 1845-1915* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1978).

Rottenberg's *Middletown Jews*, and Betty Hoffman's *Jewish West Hartford*.¹⁵ Although these works demonstrate that divisions existed within these Jewish communities, these communities are too small to have a sizeable Jewish middle class interacting with a large Jewish working class. Many of these communities were so small that the Jewish community had difficulty maintaining a separate identity at all; having access to kosher foods or more than one synagogue was often not a possibility in these smaller communities.

As a mid-sized community, St. Louis represents a different model. St. Louis's Jewish community had more opportunities for interaction with non-Jews and for the formation of different identities than Jews in other larger cities would have had, and it was large enough and old enough to have internal divisions between different groups of Jewish immigrants. At the same time, it was not large enough to remain a community apart. St. Louis was, however, a large enough city that it had competing Jewish institutions and organizations, as well as distinctions between middle and working class Jews. St. Louis is also different because it is an older community, well established even before the beginning of the twentieth century.

The years from 1919 to 1950 marked some very important changes in both American culture and the lives of American Jews. For American Jews, the lingering legacy of World War I included one final influx of immigration before Congress enacted the Immigration Act of 1924, which established limits on the number of incoming migrants from certain areas, including the European countries with some of the largest

¹⁵ Ewa Morawska, *Insecure Prosperity: Small-Town Jews in Industrial America, 1890-1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), David G. Dalin and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Making a Life, Building a Community: A History of the Jews of Hartford*. (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1997), Dan Rottenberg, *Middletown Jews: The Tenuous Survival of an American Jewish Community* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), Betty Hoffman, *Jewish West Hartford: From City to Suburb* (Charleston: The History Press, 2007).

Jewish populations, such as Russia. The inclusion of the 1920s and 1930s in this study provides an opportunity to examine rising and falling economic fortunes and the accompanying rise in anti-Semitism and racism. Ending this study in 1950 enables the inclusion of World War II, the Holocaust, and the founding of the nation of Israel, all of which permanently changed the nature of Jewish identity.

I argue that Jewish identity can be formed and reformed in context with other identities. This idea owes a special debt to the ideas of Ruth Frankenberg, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, and Elsa Barkley Brown. The idea of dual consciousness was not new, but these authors recast it to examine how gender and race roles could intersect, conflict, and exist simultaneously. Frankenberg published *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* in 1993. In *White Women*, Frankenberg argued that white women's lives have been affected by both race privilege and racism. Her interviews with women of Ashkenazic¹⁶ descent demonstrated a complex interplay of identity construction and feelings of difference and belonging. She noted that both non-Jewish and Jewish subjects recognized that "Jewishness...was...a mutable category of belonging" and that "there was no one way to be Jewish."¹⁷ Jewish women could be simultaneously seen "as racial Others" while also claiming a white identity.¹⁸

For Higginbotham and Brown, racial and gender identities are the focus, and both argue that the two identities cannot be separated. Higginbotham's article, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race" describes race as a

¹⁶ "Ashkenazic" is a general term used to describe European or Germanic Jews. Generally, this term is used to distinguish such Jews from Sephardic, or Mediterranean Jews. There are linguistic and ritual differences between the two. The majority of American Jews would be considered *Ashkenazim*.

¹⁷Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 153, 217.

¹⁸Frankenberg, 216-217.

“metalanguage”¹⁹ that runs as a current through other contexts and which historians cannot separate out from other contexts. Perhaps even more important was her discussion of the “twoness” of life as experienced by African-Americans and the role of “race as a double-voiced discourse.”²⁰ Elsa Barkley Brown’s article, “‘What Has Happened Here’: The Politics of Difference in Women’s History and Feminist Politics” uses a musical metaphor—jazz—to explain the ways in which multiple contexts and perspectives coexist simultaneously. Brown explained, “...we have still to recognize that being a woman is, in fact, not extractable from the context in which one is a woman—that is, race, class, time, and place.”²¹ The simultaneous holding of more than one identity at the same time is an extremely important concept, one that translates well to the experiences of other groups.

The idea that the women of Council were juggling several identities at once resonates strongly with, but goes beyond, the simple duality pointed out by all of these authors. My project demonstrates that multiple identities co-existed not only simultaneously, but also sequentially, and changed over time in reaction to historical and cultural realities. The women of Council formed their various identities as Jews, women, and middle-class reformers within the context of the larger communities to which they belonged by religion, gender, and class.

Although some of the most influential works in Jewish history have assumed a single ethnicity or denomination for their subjects, this project examines the middle-class

¹⁹Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race” in Darlene Clark Hine, Wilma King, and Linda Reed, eds, *“We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible”: A Reader in Black Women’s History* (Brooklyn: Carlson Pub., 1995), 3,17.

²⁰Higginbotham, 13-14.

²¹Elsa Barkley Brown, “‘What Has Happened Here’: The Politics of Difference in Women’s History and Feminist Politics,” in Darlene Clark Hine, Wilma King, and Linda Reed, eds, *“We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible”: A Reader in Black Women’s History* (Brooklyn: Carlson Pub., 1995), 43.

Reform German Jewish women of the Council within the context of the larger whole of Jewish culture. The position of these subjects rests on the idea that they are more Americanized than Eastern European Orthodox Jews, but that they have not completely lost their Jewishness and been absorbed into non-Jewish American culture.

When examining the differences between the German and Eastern European Jewish communities, the works of Nathan Glazer and Irving Howe tell us a great deal about the diversity of the American Jewish community. Glazer saw Jews as different from other ethnicities, but not necessarily from one another, while Howe focused on differences between Jews without the context of the non-Jewish community. Glazer argued that the ethnic element was crucial to American Judaism and set it apart from other American religions. He also maintained that assimilation represented a particular threat to American Jews because it eradicated both their religious and their ethnic culture. This viewpoint glosses over the important denominational and regional differences between Jews, seeing them as a single culture, like that of Norwegians or Serbians.²² However, Jewish culture does have some important divisions, like that between Eastern and Western European Jews, which Howe noted in his book *World of Our Fathers*, a detailed portrait of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Both authors acknowledge the status of American Jews as a separate community with its own identity. However, my own work is able to place middle-class German Reform Jews in the larger context of the entire Jewish community and the city of St. Louis as a whole.

By looking at my subjects in both contexts—within and outside of the Jewish community—I am able to demonstrate the pressures to maintain a Jewish face while still participating in the American middle class. For women of the American middle class,

²²Glazer, 5-6.

voluntarism was an important form of public participation. This was true of both non-Jewish and Jewish women. My work takes both Jewishness and class into account while also looking at gender.²³

Gender is the focus of such scholarly works such as *Natural Allies* by Anne Firor Scott and *Relations of Rescue* by Peggy Pascoe, which also tie gender to voluntarism. Both scholars noted the ways in which middle-class women could maintain a sense of propriety in relation to their proscribed gender roles while expanding those roles to include more public activism. Scott and Pascoe argued that voluntarism and benevolence work represented a critical means for women to work together and express themselves in an activist way. Through this application of the traits and duties that society deemed “proper” for women, women could stretch boundaries and move into more public activities. According to Scott:

Benevolent women brought their domestic habits into the public arena. Not only did they sew and knit for the poor just as they did for their own families, they also behaved as good mothers were supposed to: rewarding virtue, attempting to cure bad habits, and concentrating special attention upon children and old women....²⁴

Pascoe described this same phenomenon in voluntarism and benevolence as “female moral authority.” She explained that women could not only use benevolence as a public voice, but that some women used it to turn influence into control over others.²⁵ However, conflicts for the subjects in both scholars’ work resulted from issues of class and race, and the reformers themselves did not have competing identities.

²³ Some of the influential early work on Jewish women did not even include research on voluntarism, although they were essential to adding gender to the analysis of the Jewish community. See especially Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonya Michel, *The Jewish Woman in America* (New York: Dial Press, 1976), Sydney Stahl Weinberg, *The World of Our Mothers: The Lives of Jewish Immigrant Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

²⁴ Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 15.

²⁵ Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), xvii.

The women of Council did have competing identities, even as they connected to both middle-class white reform and Jewish causes. The Jewish women of Council used domesticity and maternalism as a basis for their public work, just as other middle-class women did. In so doing, they often appeared to do the same work that non-Jewish women did. At the same time, however, they were still a Jewish group and needed to have some tie to the Jewish community. The relationship between Reform Jewish women of Germanic background and the more Orthodox Eastern European women they tried to Americanize mirrors class conflict. However, the division between these two groups of women is more complicated because of an allegedly shared religion. The women of Council had an ability to function and appear as middle-class white women to society in general, but it was because they could split their identity and change it, being simultaneously members of the Jewish community and also the American white middle-class.

My project is part of an emerging field of works on the activism of Jewish women. I am integrating the topics of identity and “passing” of middle-class Jewish women into the existing scholarship. Susan Glenn, June Sochen, Faith Rogow, and Mary McCune all explore Jewish women’s activism, and they even acknowledge class differences. They note that Jewish women’s activism may look similar to the activism of non-Jewish women, but it is indelibly marked by Jewishness. Glenn explains: “It was this orientation toward partnership that gave Jewish women's activism its distinctive cast and its strongest contrast to the woman-centered politics of American middle-class reformers.”²⁶ Sochen emphasizes Jewish women’s duality:

²⁶Glenn, 4-5, 6.

Jewish American women distinguished themselves in various public activities because of the ambivalent richness of their dual background. It was precisely their remaining rooted in the Judaic culture while living in the secular American world that gave them the fresh perspective, the agonizing need to redefine themselves, and the impetus to move outside predictable forms.²⁷

For Rogow and McCune, national Jewish women's voluntarism reflected dual identities of Jewishness and class.

My study demonstrates more than simple dual identities. The women of Council were able to engage in voluntarism as middle-class white women and as Jews, but importantly, they were able to express each of several identities—Jewish, white, middle-class, female—at will. My project is able to give concrete examples of the ways in which such identity expression played out on a local level for Jewish women of the middle class and uses voluntarism as a lens through which to view identity issues, a theme which is not present in any of the above works.

In order to examine both the Jewish community of St. Louis and the various identities of the middle-class Jewish women reformers of its chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women, I have broken the following pages into five chapters. The first two chapters give a more general context to the study, while the last three deal with the specific activities of the organization over time.

Chapter 1 explores the origins of the St. Louis Jewish community and the emergence of women leaders in philanthropy and voluntarism, including some of the women who would go on to found the first St. Louis Chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women. This chapter specifically investigates the background of these women as middle class German Reform Jews.

²⁷June Sochen, *Consecrate Every Day: The Public Lives of Jewish American Women, 1880-1980* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 1.

Chapter 2 depicts the establishment of the St. Louis Chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women, as well as an exploration of the national organization's development as something new in both the world of women's associations and the arena of Jewish women's voluntarism. This chapter examines what Hannah Solomon sought to do with the founding of Council and the reasons that St. Louis's first Council chapter failed.

Chapter 3 covers the years from 1917 to 1929. In this chapter, I consider the ways in which the activities of the St. Louis Council reflected the group's mutable identity during those years. More specifically, I describe the reasons that Jewish women felt uneasy about their place in society during these years, especially in St. Louis, and the way in which adopting a moderate course of maternalism and patriotism presented a response to that anxiety. In this period, the women of Council worked to be "good Americans."

Chapter 4 explores the years 1930 to 1940 and argues that the Council's activities during that period demonstrated a continued sense of marginality and an attempt to counteract it. During this era, Council's activities revealed a simultaneous concern with anti-Semitism and with whiteness. The St. Louis Jewish community in general and Council in particular engaged in residential relocation during the 1930s that demonstrated their changing status, even to the point of whitening themselves. At the same time, however, international events during this period also began to draw the attention of American Jews, even those in St. Louis, to the importance of community cohesion and concern with Jewish issues. At this time, the focus for the women of Council was to be "good neighbors."

Chapter 5 is a look at the years 1940 to 1950, a time when American Jewish identity shifted into a new direction. Concern for global events combined with fear for the Jewish community, both at home and abroad, to forge a new Council identity. World War II and the establishment of the state of Israel were the critical events tied to Jewish identity during this period, and by the end of our timeline, Council was openly challenging racism and anti-Semitism rather than pursuing the more moderate course that they had maintained for the first half of the century. The Jewish identity of Council in St. Louis transformed during these years, reflecting the culmination of identity modifications that had been occurring for the first four decades of the century. During this period, the women of Council endeavored to be “good Jews.”

The women of the St. Louis Chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women experienced life as members of the middle-class women, as women, as Jews, and as whites. They were both insiders and outsiders, and they acted in concert with one another on certain causes while disagreeing on others. The study that follows in these pages will bring together concepts of gender, ethnicity, and whiteness in an examination of the multiple identities of these middle-class Jewish women volunteers—“many souls” residing in “one heart.”

Chapter 1—Entering the Kingdom: Origins of Jewish St. Louis, Its Institutions, and its Women Leaders

St. Louis has always been a complex city with several identities. Known as the “Mound City,” the “Fourth City,” and the “Gateway City,” the city has been a French colonial holding, a Spanish settlement, and then finally an American urban center. It straddles physical boundaries— the Missouri River and the Mississippi River both run through the city, and the Illinois-Missouri border divides the city into eastern and western portions. It also straddles cultural boundaries: East and West, North and South, urban and rural. Like other cities of its vintage, St. Louis grew out of a frontier heritage and became a marketplace and meeting place for different cultures. It is the largest and oldest city in the state of Missouri, an industrial center in a region that has historically been agricultural.

St. Louis’s unusual status makes it an especially interesting case study in urban growth and the development of ethnic subcultures. It is ethnically diverse, culturally complex, and politically fragmented. Its Jewish community has also been diverse and fragmented through the years. The Jewish women of St. Louis developed their philanthropy and their identities as Jews and as women in relation to the development and growth of the city of St. Louis and its Jewish community. The Jewish community of the city of St. Louis developed much like those of other cities, and its institutions evolved within the context of particular historical events and issues, such as tensions between groups within the Jewish community and the rise of local elites. The women who

founded the St. Louis chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women were products of this community and of its particular development.

In 1807, the first documented and “identifiable” Jewish resident of St. Louis arrived. Joseph Philipson came to St. Louis to establish himself as a merchant. One year later, his brother Jacob also moved to St. Louis, and their other brother, Simon, finally followed in 1821. By that time, Joseph and Jacob had been forced out of mercantile endeavor by the Panic of 1819 and the ensuing economic problems; each had taken up a new career in teaching.¹

The Philipson brothers represent a “bridge” within the pattern of Jewish immigration in American history: they arrived in St. Louis during a low period of Jewish immigration to the United States. From 1775 to 1815, few European Jews immigrated to America, probably due to the war and economic problems that accompanied the birth of the new nation.² Not only did they arrive later than most “colonial Jews,” but the Philipson brothers did not intermarry, as many of the earlier arrivals did. Like those who came before them, though, their neighbors considered the Philipsons mid-to-upper class: “known as highly educated and cultured gentlemen.”³ However, like those who would come after them, they were Germanic/Ashkenazic Jews who started their lives in St. Louis as merchants.

The Philipsons arrived in St. Louis at a very exciting time in the city’s history. Lewis and Clark had recently returned to the city with exciting tales and reconnaissance

¹ Walter Ehrlich, *Zion in the Valley: The Jewish Community of St. Louis* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997), Volume I, 19, 25.

² Nathan Glazer, *The Characteristics of American Jews* (New York: Jewish Education Committee Press, 1965), 14.

³ Ehrlich, I, 25, 17.

from their journey across the continent, and the city was beginning to develop infrastructure in anticipation of becoming an official U.S. territory. In 1812, Missouri officially became a territory, and St. Louis County received the largest number of members in the lower house of the territorial legislature. Despite some setbacks in economic and physical growth, the city was still growing steadily when Missouri entered the Union as the twenty-fourth state in 1821. Now officially incorporated as a city, St. Louis began expanding and stabilizing. Migration and trade flourished, and St. Louis was a major trading post and supply post for those traveling into the West. By 1835, the city's population had swelled to 8,316, and as one observer noted in 1828: "Very few towns in the United States...have a more mixed population...."⁴

A group of new arrivals were about to add to St. Louis's growing and diverse population. The Jews who arrived between 1836 and 1880 represent the first mass Jewish migrations to the United States. It was these Jews who gave size and stability to the American Jewish community. Starting in 1836, the first mass emigrations began in Germanic Europe, especially Bavaria and Bohemia. Fleeing both economic problems and discrimination, German-speaking sons and daughters of the Jewish middle class left Europe as a "substitute for emancipation."⁵ Additional taxation and legal restrictions, such as *Matrikel* laws, which restricted Jewish marriages, acted as incentive for young Jews to seek a new homeland.⁶

⁴ James Neal Primm, *Lion of the Valley: St. Louis, Missouri, 1764-1980* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1998), 84-85, 102-105, 122-125, 134, 137.

⁵ Avraham Barkai, *Branching Out: German-Jewish Immigration to the United States, 1820-1914* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1994), 15-20, 25.

⁶ Glazer, *Characteristics*, 14.

These new immigrants were younger and more mobile than the merchants who arrived as the so-called “colonial Jews.” The dominant form of salesman in the new generation was the peddler, moving out from established Jewish communities and traveling to smaller and younger communities, where they contributed to the establishment of new Jewish enclaves across the U.S. In 1825, there were only about 6,000 Jews in the United States; by 1840, that number had more than doubled.⁷

It was during this period of mass immigration (1836–1880) that St. Louis developed itself as a permanent Jewish settlement, and its composition mirrors the same traits observed across the rest of the United States. Most of the arrivals during this period came from Bavaria and Western Europe. Many established themselves as businessmen and found economic success in their new homeland. They either came with their families or established families soon after they arrived. They were Jewish, but rarely Orthodox in their observance of the religion. Many of these Jews were Reform Jews who were leaving the lands where the Reform Jewish movement had been born. They came to the United States for more individual freedom, such as in the case of marriage without taxation, and for economic opportunity.

A different group began to arrive in the 1880s, with a different set of motivations. Problems in Eastern Europe, primarily Russia, drove many Jews to leave their homelands at the end of the nineteenth century. According to historian Nathan Glazer, anti-Jewish violence and legal restrictions were among the most significant “push” factors for Eastern

⁷ Glazer, *Characteristics*, 14-15.

European Jews who began to emigrate after 1881.⁸ During the early years of the 1880s, hundreds of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe suffered from these attacks, which included rapes, beatings, robbery, arson, murder, destruction of homes and stores, and desecrations of synagogues. Frightened and desperate Jews fled their homes and embarked for the United States in large numbers. From 1881-1892, an average of 20,000 Eastern European Jews entered the U.S. each year. By the 1920s, approximately two million Eastern European Jews had come to America.⁹ These Jews tended to work in the manufacturing sectors and to be Orthodox in their religious observance.

These two groups of Jewish immigrants were worlds apart, and there was a great deal of tension between members of the two groups. Older, more established members of the German/Reform community viewed the Russian/Orthodox Jews as backward, superstitious, and ignorant. At the same time, Russians saw the Germans as snobbish, too Americanized, and not even really Jewish in their less stringent practice of the religion. Class differences that would arise between middle and working class exacerbated differences over religious practice and cultural traditions, such as food and clothing. This clash replayed itself over and over in cities all over the United States as already established Jewish communities tried to reassert a balance in the wake of so many new arrivals.

St. Louis certainly saw this dynamic emerge in its own Jewish community, but there were also many occasions when Jews united as one community. For example, in

⁸ Glazer, *Characteristics*, 19.

⁹ Glazer, *Characteristics*, 22-23; Diner, *A New Promised Land*, 44; Ehrlich, I, 270.

1836, St. Louis's Jews formed their first official *minyan*.¹⁰ This act not only enabled St. Louis's Jews to perform communal prayers, but it also enabled them to act on one another's behalf in times of need. It was not long, however, before the Jewish community of St. Louis became settled enough to create official institutional entities. Within four years, St. Louis's Jews met to establish a Jewish cemetery. The ability to bury their dead as Jews was significant—Jews were living, dying, and requesting burial in St. Louis. Jews were also worshipping in St. Louis, and by 1841, St. Louis's Jews had created their first synagogue.

United Hebrew provided not only worship services, but also a *mikvah*, or ritual bath used particularly by women, a *mohel*, a man trained to perform circumcisions, and a *shochet*, or a kosher butcher. Having these things in place meant that religiously observant Jews in St. Louis could mark important events and practice recurring rituals. Orthodox Jews actually *require* all of these things in order to closely observe some of their most central religious precepts. The synagogue did indeed start as an Orthodox synagogue, although it eventually became Reform in 1860. Other synagogues quickly followed, and in a demonstration of the ease with which community tensions could create institutional splintering, some congregations were short-lived groups that broke away after an argument over a point of religious practice. However, all of St. Louis's Jews agreed on the principle of *tzedekah*, or charity, and it led to the formation of several voluntary associations.

¹⁰ A *minyan*, or group of ten adult Jewish individuals (historically male) needed for the saying of particular prayers, such as the *kaddish*, or prayer for the dead. A *minyan* is thus the first step to forming a congregation.

In 1842, a group of Jewish men created St. Louis's first largescale Jewish benevolence society.¹¹ Started as *Chesed v'Emeth*, the group's purpose was to help poor Jews, although it was not limited only to Jews. It would eventually be renamed the Hebrew Benevolent Society.¹² In 1849, a group of Jewish women took an important step when they started an aid society of their own. The Ladies Hebrew Benevolent Association of the United Hebrew Congregation began as a response to a cholera epidemic. Sadly, many of the founders of St. Louis's first Jewish women's organization were themselves claimed by the same outbreak.¹³ The women of United Hebrew continued to undertake charitable endeavors despite this inauspicious beginning, and they later formed the Ladies' Hebrew Relief Society. Women's voluntarism was but one important facet of the vibrant life of Jewish benevolence work in the city, which grew in size and importance as the Jewish community continued to stabilize and grow during this period. Jewish voluntarism in St. Louis had many components, but much of the benevolence work of this period was by the middle class on behalf of the working class. Middle-class reformers in the St. Louis Jewish community made efforts to clean up the city, to assist immigrants, and to aid women, children, the elderly, and the infirm. In this way they were not unlike middle-class reformers from any other religious or cultural background at the end of the nineteenth century. However, many of these men and women also participated in organizations and causes that related to their identity as Jews.

¹¹ There would have been burial societies (*chevra kadisha*) and societies for visiting the sick (*bikur cholim*) associated with the synagogue, but those organizations are by necessity small and dedicated to a specific purpose.

¹² Ehrlich, I, 63.

¹³ "Oldest Jewish Congregation West of the Mississippi River," Box 1, United Hebrew Papers, St. Louis Jewish Community Archives, Saul Brodsky Jewish Library, St. Louis, Missouri.

The Jewish community of St. Louis had developed a small cadre of successful men by the eve of the Civil War. These men, often native-born Jews of Germanic descent, and their families became the core of Jewish institutional life in St. Louis. The city was able to support two B'nai Brith lodges, as well as a Masonic lodge that was aimed specifically at a Jewish membership. The city was also able to sustain more than one Reform synagogue.¹⁴ This fact is significant because it demonstrates the need for and existence of identity adaptations within the American Jewish community.

By abandoning some of the most obvious and difficult to maintain religious practices within Judaism—dietary restrictions, language restrictions, and ritual clothing—American Reform Jews could conduct their lives in ways that resembled their American non-Jewish neighbors. Reform Judaism, according to Dana Evan Kaplan, also had its roots in notions of social reform:

Reform Judaism has historically emphasized what it interpreted as the central message of the prophets: the need to fight for social justice. The Reformers believed deeply in working with their Christian neighbors to help make the world a place of justice and peace....¹⁵

This kind of sentiment was important to the drive for benevolence and voluntarism in the Jewish community. It relates to the concepts of *tzedekah* (charity) and *tikkun olam* (healing the world), both of which are important to Jewish religion and culture. At the end of the nineteenth century, Jewish St. Louisans had scores of opportunities for *tzedekah* as social problems arose and sometimes reached crisis proportions.

¹⁴ United Hebrew had become Reform in 1860, but in 1866, Shaare Emeth became the first Reform congregation founded west of the Mississippi River.

¹⁵ Dana Evan Kaplan, *American Reform Judaism: An Introduction* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 15.

The Great Chicago Fire of 1871 was a defining event in terms of social crisis and benevolence during this period. It highlighted problems of overcrowding and inadequate city services, and it displaced tens of thousands of people, leaving them without homes or jobs.¹⁶ Many refugees from the Chicago Fire came to St. Louis seeking homes and jobs. That same year, as a response to the overwhelming need to assist the Jews fleeing Chicago and coming to St. Louis, St. Louis's Jews formed the United Hebrew Relief Association. This group acted to coordinate various charitable and relief efforts. Within ten years, the community had also formed United Jewish Charities, which represented a consolidation of the city's most successful Jewish benevolence organizations. The United Hebrew Relief Association, the Sisterhood of Personal Service, the Ladies' Zion Society, and the Hebrew Ladies' Sewing Society were among those who joined together "to relieve the deserving Jewish poor, prevent want and distress, and discourage pauperism...."¹⁷ By 1881, the St. Louis Jewish community was even uniting behind the idea of a home for the elderly. The needs of the St. Louis Jewish community became even more complicated, however, with the first wave of arrivals from Eastern Europe during the 1880s.

In 1882, the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society office in New York contacted the United Hebrew Relief Association in St. Louis about the possibility of accommodating some of the hundreds of new arrivals that the HEAS was funneling to the Midwest. The community soon discovered that it was divided on whether or not to give shelter to these immigrants. Many of the well-established German Jews in St. Louis were suspicious of

¹⁶ Karen Sawislak, *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire, 1871-1874* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 29.

¹⁷ Ehrlich, I, 247.

the Russians and their motivations. Despite such misgivings, St. Louis's Jewish community welcomed large numbers of Russian Jews, and it was the established and successful German Jews of St. Louis who developed organizations to help care for them, as well as for all needy Jews in the city.

Some of the most active philanthropists and civic volunteers in St. Louis at the end of the nineteenth century were Jewish, and their names—Rice, Stix, Fraley, Wolfner, and Sale—are now synonymous with leadership and influence in St. Louis's Jewish history. The men and women of these families were members of the native-born German Jewish elite, and many of them were Reform Jews. They had time and resources to devote to benevolence, as well as a conviction in the concept of *tzedekah*. All of them defined themselves as Jewish, even when their lives took them into the non-Jewish circles of power and privilege at the top of St. Louis society. Although some of their charitable work was to the benefit of all, they also devoted themselves to Jewish causes and charities. It was from these families that some of the founding members of the St. Louis Chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women had their origins. Their background tells us volumes about the religious, cultural, and class identity of the women who were drawn to that organization.

The Rice and Stix clans were extremely successful and very well-known around St. Louis at the end of the nineteenth century. These two families of merchants came to dominate the St. Louis mercantile scene (they opened their Rice-Stix store in St. Louis in 1879) and were very prosperous members of both the Jewish elite and the St. Louis elite in general. William Stix and Jonathan Rice were both born in Germany. They formed a

business partnership in the United States, and their families mingled through intermarriage (Jonathan's sister Dinah married William, and Jonathan married Aurelia Stix, one of William's relatives).¹⁸ These men and their large families lived in prestigious neighborhoods in St. Louis and amassed large personal holdings.¹⁹ They were active in the Jewish community and were interested in Jewish causes.²⁰

Their children, as native-born members of the German Jewish community and of the St. Louis elite, gave their time and money to many causes, including promoting the city of St. Louis. Both Charles A. Stix and Elias Michael (who married into the Stix clan) sat on the Board of Directors of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904. Charles M. Rice, Jonathan's son, became a lawyer and devoted time to the Jewish Hospital of St. Louis.²¹ Deceased members of these families now rest in St. Louis's New Mt. Sinai Jewish Cemetery, a graveyard jointly owned by three Reform synagogues. According to the *St. Louis Jewish Voice*, when the Rice-Michael mausoleum there was commissioned in 1895, it would "form the chief ornament of that beautiful 'city of the

¹⁸ 1880 Federal Census, Saint Louis, Missouri; Roll: T9_717; Family History Film: 1254717; Page: 232.2000; Enumeration District: 12; Image: 0609. From Ancestry.com and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *1880 United States Federal Census* [database on-line], Provo, UT, USA: The Generations Network, Inc., 2005. *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1880. T9, 1,454 rolls.

¹⁹ Washington Avenue, where many of these families lived, is still an area of large and expensive homes in the area of University City and Forest Park, near Washington University. See Federal Census for 1880 and 1890.

²⁰ Albert Nelson Marquis, *The Book of St. Louisans: A Biographical Dictionary of Living Leading Men of the City of St. Louis and Vicinity* (St. Louis: The St. Louis Republic, 1912), 576.

²¹ Walter Barlow Stevens, *Official Directory of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition World's Fair, Saint Louis* (St. Louis: Woodward and Tiernan Printing Co., 1904), 1; Albert Nelson Marquis, *The Book of St. Louisans: A Biographical Dictionary of Living Leading Men of the City of St. Louis and Vicinity* (St. Louis: The St. Louis Republic, 1912), 413, 576, 498.

dead.”²² By being buried in this cemetery, they demonstrated their membership in the city’s Reform Jewish community.

Another member of the Reform Jewish community buried in that same necropolis is Moses Fraley. Fraley, father-in-law to Charles A. Stix, was a banker and speculator in St. Louis whose escapades in the markets made national headlines.²³ He later entered the insurance business. He was also an important figure in the Jewish community, helping to found Temple Israel and United Jewish Charities. He was also a President of the Confederated Jewish Educational and Charitable Union.²⁴ His daughter, Sadie, married Charles Stix, and carried on the family tradition of devotion to Jewish causes. Fraley was a man for whom Jewish synagogue practice was important (as evinced by his work with Temple Israel), but he was also interested in Jewish causes and *tzedekah*. He was particularly interested in education and in making Jewish charity more organized and efficient.

Dr. Henry Wolfner, a prosperous Jewish physician, also devoted himself to a variety of causes, including education. Dr. Wolfner was a practicing ophthalmologist, as well as a Professor of Clinical Ophthalmology at Washington University. As a physician, he devoted time to both Jewish and non-Jewish causes. He was the oculist for both the

²² *St. Louis Jewish Voice*, October 18, 1895, 3.

²³ 1880 Federal Census, Saint Louis, Missouri; Roll: T9_723; Family History Film: 1254723; Page: 44.2000; Enumeration District: 133; Image: 0088. From Ancestry.com and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *1880 United States Federal Census* [database on-line], Provo, UT, USA: The Generations Network, Inc., 2005. United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1880. T9, 1,454 rolls; “Grain Speculators Fail; Moses Fraley Loses A Large Sum In The Chicago Market,” *The New York Times*, April 29, 1884.

²⁴ Marquis, 205.

Episcopal Orphans' Home and the St. Louis Jewish Hospital.²⁵ He was well-known for his compassion and his philanthropy, and the Missouri Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped now bears his name. Born in the United States to Austrian Jewish parents, Wolfner was also a member of St. Louis's Reform Jewish community.²⁶ Wolfner, like Fraley, was able to express himself as a Jew through his charity work, but he did not limit himself to Jewish causes. His benevolence work took him into the non-Jewish world as well, and both Jews and non-Jews knew his name as a reformer and philanthropist.

Most of St. Louis's Reform Jews would also have known the name of Rabbi Samuel Sale. Born in Kentucky to German parents, Sale went to Europe for his education and returned to the United States as a rabbi. He arrived in St. Louis in 1887, to take the helm of Shaare Emeth, one of the city's Reform synagogues.²⁷ A prominent and vocal member of the Jewish community of St. Louis, Sale sometimes sparked controversy, but he still earned respect and admiration on both the national and local levels.²⁸ Sale's work was intimately linked to his self-definition as a Jew, and all of his time was related to Judaism and Jewish causes. It was at his urging, in 1895, that thirty-

²⁵ Marquis, 648.

²⁶ 1900 Federal Census, St Louis Ward 28, St Louis (Independent City), Missouri; Roll: T623 901; Page: 7B; Enumeration District: 415. From Ancestry.com, *1900 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: The Generations Network, Inc., 2004. Original data: United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1900. T623, 1854 rolls.

²⁷ 1900 Federal Census; Marquis, 520.

²⁸ "St. Louis Rabbis At War; A 'Sensational' Newspaper Story Used As A Weapon Of Attack," *The New York Times*, December 15, 1890; "The War Of The Rabbis; The Tables Completely Turned On The Rev. Mr. Sale Of St. Louis," *The New York Times*, December 17, 1890; "St. Louis Hebrews Displeased; Rabbi Sale Advocates A Universal Day Of Rest," *The New York Times*, November 21, 1891; "Conference Of American Rabbis; To be Held in Rochester, Beginning Wednesday of This Week," *The New York Times*, July 9, 1895; "Dr. Samuel Sale Honored; Made Doctor of Hebrew Law by Hebrew Union College," *The New York Times*, May 28, 1933.

four women gathered at the Columbian Club to form the St. Louis Chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women.²⁹

Of the thirty-four women present at the Columbian Club that day to form the St. Louis Chapter of Council, many carried family names that had great cachet in St. Louis. According to the *St. Louis Jewish Voice*, “[their] very names appear to us a sufficient guarantee of future success.”³⁰ The group included Mrs. Dr. H. Wolfner (President), Mrs. Jon. Rice, Mrs. Chas. Stix, and Mrs. Dr. Sale. Also among the women present that day was Mrs. Joseph Wolfort, who represented the Jewish Charities at the Third Annual Conference of the Missouri State Board of the Women’s and Young Women’s Christian Association in 1895. She was specifically associated with the Home for Aged and Infirm Israelites.³¹ Miss Sheba Harris, Corresponding Secretary for the Sisterhood for Personal Service, was also there.³² In fact, many of these women were involved with other organizations. For example, a 1944 tribute to Mrs. Mary Wolfner stated that she was “always engaged in some worthy project meant to foster and further some beneficent cause, either in Jewish life or in human life.”³³ She was very active in synagogue life at Shaare Emeth, as was Rachel Sale, the wife of that congregation’s rabbi. Mrs. Rice served as President of the Sisterhood for Personal Service.³⁴

²⁹ Finding Aid, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-), Western Historical Manuscript Collection-St. Louis.

³⁰ *St. Louis Jewish Voice*, October 18, 1895, 3.

³¹ *St. Louis Jewish Voice*, October 18, 1895, 3.

³² *St. Louis Jewish Voice*, October 25, 1895, 3.

³³ “Tribute to the Memory of Mary Wolfner,” *Shaare Emeth Bulletin*, December 22, 1944, Folder 1, Shaare Emeth Papers, St. Louis Jewish Community Archives, Saul Brodsky Jewish Library, St. Louis, Missouri.

³⁴ *St. Louis Jewish Voice*, October 25, 1895, 3.

The St. Louis chapter of Council included far more members of the city's Jewish elite than of the Jewish working class. Russian Jewish women from the working class were not represented in this group, nor were any significant numbers of Orthodox Jews involved in Council's founding in St. Louis.

Rather, these women belonged, as did their families, to St. Louis's Reform German Jewish white middle and upper class elite. They self-identified as Jewish, but they had both the economic class standing and social status to be accepted in both Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. They participated in activities that crossed the lines between the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds, and they were very active in many different organizations and activities. It was just this kind of overlap that would doom the first St. Louis Chapter of Council. Because the core of St. Louis's Jewish voluntarism depended on a small group of middle and upper-class Reform German women and men, the sheer need and the high number of causes meant overstretched the available pool of interested benefactors and volunteers. Despite the desire for the new organization to fill a perceived lack in the world of women's voluntarism, there simply wasn't enough room for another voluntary association to put a demand on Jewish women's time in St. Louis at the turn of the 20th century.

Chapter 2—Taking Vashti’s Place: Putting a Jewish Face on Women’s Voluntarism

As the Jewish community of St. Louis was coming of age, its women were entering new social and cultural territory. On October 15, 1895, a small group of women welcomed Hannah Solomon to St. Louis. Their gathering was held at the Columbian Club, “the most prestigious club for affluent St. Louis Jewry.”¹ There, amidst elegant and luxurious surroundings, thirty-four women agreed to form the St. Louis chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women.² This new chapter met again within a week, to collect dues (\$9), form committees (Philanthropic, Sabbath Schools, and Religion), and to appoint three of their ranks to advertise an upcoming event—a St. Louis address delivered by Sadie American.³

As a bridge between small-scale Jewish women’s charitable organizations and the growing national trend of Progressive organizations concerned with broad social change, the National Council of Jewish Women had to draw on local connections and needs as well as national issues. Council represented a new kind of Jewish women’s organization, one that gave attention to larger concerns of social welfare that affected everyone, regardless of religion, but it was still able to give attention to Jewish concerns, such as maintaining Jewish culture and religion through things such as Jewish education. Council was also different from other Jewish women’s organizations because of its focus:

¹ Walter Ehrlich, *Zion in the Valley: The Jewish Community of St. Louis* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997), I, 395.

² Minutes of Regular Meeting, October 14, 1895 and October 18, 1895, Minutes of Regular Meetings, 1895-1898, Box 4, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-), Western Historical Manuscript Collection—St. Louis, Missouri.

³ Minutes of Regular Meeting, October 18, 1895, Minutes of Regular Meetings, 1895-1898, Box 4, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

Council was able to embrace both local and national issues, without embracing the internationalism of Zionism. Its social reform and charitable works extended beyond the boundaries of the synagogue and even the Jewish community and into its home cities. It was also a Jewish women's group that followed the model set by non-Jewish middle-class women's organizations, such as the Woman's Club, which had local chapters that worked on local issues, even within a larger statewide and national whole. The National Council of Jewish Women was a specific way to claim a form of female Jewish identity as an American woman on a larger scale. While Jewish women could and did join organizations that worked for charitable causes and fulfilled the Progressive urge to social reform, Council was identifiably and publicly Jewish. Additionally, although women could pursue Jewish causes on an individual or an organizational level, Council made it possible to do it within the context of the larger society. Council became a *Jewish* hand helping to rebuild the entire world, not just the Jewish community.

Although the national organization succeeded at its attempt to create a specifically Jewish face for women's public voluntarism in some cities, it initially failed to flourish at a local level in St. Louis. It was unable to offer anything significantly new or compelling to St. Louis's Jewish women who wished to engage in benevolence work. In fact, many of them were already engaged with such work in other forms. In St. Louis, many voluntary associations existed simultaneously— general middle-class women's clubs and study clubs, religious women's groups, including Jewish charity groups and synagogue sisterhoods, as well as Protestant and Catholic groups. In turn-of-the-century St. Louis

there were simply too many other causes and organizations competing for reformers' time.

In 1895, when the Jewish women of St. Louis formed their chapter of Council, their city was a large one, with all of the accompanying problems. The fourth largest city in the nation, St. Louis had a population of 451,770 in 1890. The city was also fourth in the nation in terms of gross value of manufactured products and fifth in the amount of capital invested in manufacturing.⁴ During the last decade of the 19th century, however, St. Louisans were watching mills close and production drop, and unemployment and poverty came to many of the city's residents.

As a manufacturing center, St. Louis also suffered from pollution and poor living conditions. In 1893, the city passed a smoke abatement ordinance in an attempt to deal with its air problems, but by 1897, the ordinance was struck down as unconstitutional.⁵ Problems with poverty, overcrowding, and pollution sent the well-to-do to the city's outskirts during the last half of the 19th century. Sadly, the city still needed solutions to many problems, including deteriorating public buildings and streets, government corruption, and poverty: "By the turn of the century, St. Louisans were frustrated by a city that did not work and embarrassed by 'muckraking' journalists who told its sordid stories in the national press."⁶ In response, men and women began to engage in reform,

⁴ James Neal Primm, *Lion of the Valley: St. Louis, Missouri, 1764-1980* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1998), 345.

⁵ Primm, 358.

⁶ Katharine T. Corbett, *In Her Place: A Guide to St. Louis Women's History* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1999), 155.

and a small group of Jewish women was there to participate in the growing calls to turn St. Louis into a cleaner, more moral place.⁷

Among those who wished to improve St. Louis were the women who gathered to start the local chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women. The initial response to the idea of such an organization was one of excitement, and many of St. Louis's most prominent women signed on as members. Most of them were Reform German Jews of middle-class (or even wealthy) means, although there was at least one woman of Russian Jewish descent in the ranks. At a General Meeting in November 1896, a discussion about Russian Jews led to the expression of some hostility toward the new immigrants and demonstrated the fact that most of the members were in fact from the more established German Jewish community:

[The Russian Jews] were strongly condemned by some speakers, and it was suggested that the farther away the Russians be sent, the better for *us*. I remember hearing similar sentiments being expressed in regard to *our* ancestors. Few members were aware of the fact that one of our ablest members is proud to remember a Russian father, but she did not rise in self-defense, lest the speakers be embarrassed.⁸

Additional clues to the middle-class Reform Jewish background of most of Council's members lie in the locations of their initial meetings—either the luxurious Columbian Club or the Reform synagogue Temple Israel—and in their ability to raise dues from their members.⁹

⁷ Corbett, 154.

⁸ Minutes of Regular Meetings, 1895-1898, November 9, 1896, 26-27, Box 4, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

⁹ Minutes of Regular Meetings, 1895-1898, October 14, October 18, December 12, December 19, 1895; January 29, February 25, March 13, April 9, April 28, October 14, November 9, 1896, Box 4, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

When Hannah G. Solomon founded the National Council of Jewish Women in Chicago in 1893, she provided an organizational base that could meet the specific needs of America's middle-class Reform Jewish women. Even from its very beginning, the National Council of Jewish Women seemed uniquely suited to occupy a position situated between Jewish organizations and middle-class American women's organizations. Although Jewish women had the opportunity at this time to form groups under the auspices of their respective synagogues, they did not generally form cross-denominational ties between Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jewish congregations. Instead, the tradition of *tzedekah*, or charity, meant that Jewish women worked for the poor, the infirm, and the young within the immediate circle of their synagogue and their neighborhoods. Groups such as *bikur cholim* (societies for visiting the sick) and *chevra kadisha* (burial societies) enabled Jewish women to perform *mitzvot* (positive actions that carry out Biblical commandments). However, these groups were small and carried out intimate functions.

Rather than attempting to unite women from varied backgrounds or tackle widespread social problems, these smaller groups addressed individual need on a neighborhood level. Generally both those giving aid and those receiving aid knew one another and could change positions depending on circumstances. In other words, the members of a burial society might have to assist in the burial of a fellow member's parent. They would not, however, assist in the burial of non-Jewish victims of a flu outbreak across the city or in a neighboring county simply because the need existed.

The National Council of Jewish Women appealed to the concept of a wider world of women's voluntarism. Rather than being associated with a specific synagogue, Solomon's group was to be independent and welcome Jews from all national backgrounds and denominations. At the same time, the organization could express itself as a middle-class women's organization with a Jewish identity while remaining within the larger arena of women's volunteerism.

Middle-class Jewish women who wished to engage in social work-style benevolence on a broader base were often drawn to Progressive organizations, such as women's clubs, study circles, and charitable societies.¹⁰ Their public activities differed strongly from that of their working-class Jewish counterparts, more strongly resembling the voluntarism of non-Jewish women from the middle class. As Hasia Diner explains:

These new-style philanthropists were women completely at home in their native land. Many, indeed, had far better grounding in general American culture than in traditional Judaism. Like their middle and upper-class Christian friends, they had an expanding sense of female possibility, a confidence that women could and should count for far more in the wide world of the coming century than they had in the past.¹¹

Council thus grew out of larger movements that were taking hold in the United States during this era, specifically the clubwoman's movement. Women's organizations had become an outlet for women, especially those of the middle class, to establish leadership roles and social ties in public ways, while appealing to the needs of various segments of society. Whether the need was better working conditions and wages or

¹⁰ Hasia R. Diner and Beryl Lieff Benderly, *Her Works Praise Her: A History of Jewish Women in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 241.

¹¹ Diner, *Works*, 241.

cleaner streets and assistance for the poor, women's organizations served their own members and their communities in a wide variety of ways.

St. Louis's Council members were initially enthusiastic about the reform agenda of the national organization, along with its emphasis on Jewishness. Despite Solomon's desire for the organization to draw from all walks of Jewish life, St. Louis's Council attracted almost no Orthodox or Russian Jewish women, especially within its leadership. As middle- and upper-class German Reform Jewish women, they represented a group who had friends and interests in the non-Jewish world, including the growing Progressive reform movement. At the same time, however, they did self-identify as Jews, and they demonstrated concern for Jewish causes as well. However, by October of 1896, when giving instructions to the local delegates who were departing for that year's Council National Convention in New York, the women of St. Louis's Council were less supportive of the distinctly Jewish face of Council and more embracing of a broader sense of reform. It was at this time that they expressed the desire to vote (should the opportunity arise at the Convention) to remove the word "Judaism" from Article II of the national group's Constitution and replace it with the word "humanity." While they did maintain interest in Jewish causes, such as compulsory Hebrew language study at Sabbath schools, they were also interested in defining themselves broadly, with a concern for all of humanity, rather than just the Jewish people.¹²

In its effort to connect Jewish causes with broader concerns for social reform, Council attempted to combine local grassroots voluntarism with largescale social and

¹² Minutes of Regular Meetings, 1895-1898, October 14, 1896, 24, Box 4, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

charitable work. Council encouraged its members “to see themselves not simply as housewives and mothers but as citizens.”¹³ At the same time, the influence of Progressivism showed in the desire to specifically address and battle the problems inherent in urbanization, industrialization, and immigration. Council’s founders intended the organization to bring Jewish women of different classes together, but this rarely occurred in practice, as women from different walks of life in the Jewish community were not able to meet on equal footing. Instead, the middle-class reformers who became members of the Council acted to assist their working-class counterparts, especially those who were new immigrants, in adapting to American ways and values. This form of “uplift,” similar to the race work of middle-class African American women’s organizations, both attempted to bridge the gap between the two groups involved and pitted them against one another by setting white American middle-class ways as a norm against which to measure everyone.¹⁴

Hannah Solomon, like the women who joined her group in St. Louis, was a middle-class German Reform Jewish woman from a family that was very active in its community. Solomon’s vision of reform work and women’s voluntarism grew out of her experiences in a city and a nation engrossed in the search for tenable solutions for industrialization, immigration, and urbanization. Solomon’s home city of Chicago had these problems in abundance and was also home to some of the leading reformers of the day. As the site of Jane Addams’ Hull House and a number of other reform efforts,

¹³ Nancy F. Cott, *No Small Courage: A History of Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 363.

¹⁴ Darlene Clark Hine, Wilma King, and Linda Reed, *"We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible": A Reader in Black Women's History* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Pub., 1995), 16.

Chicago was also the center of a vibrant and exciting organizational life at the end of the nineteenth century. Solomon called that period an “era of sweeping change of technique in civic endeavor.”¹⁵

Solomon’s relatives and friends shared her zeal for voluntarism and reform.

Solomon’s mother formed the Jewish Ladies Sewing Society of Chicago in 1883 to sew clothes for the poor.¹⁶ One of Solomon’s uncles and her brother were devoted members of B’nai Brith, and Solomon and her sisters were the first Jewish women to join the Chicago Woman’s Club.¹⁷ Solomon’s sister Henriette was, in fact, the fifth president of that esteemed organization, and in 1892, Solomon herself delivered the first paper on religion ever presented to the club.¹⁸ It was through the Chicago Woman’s Club that Solomon made contact with some of the city’s most active reformers, including Jane Addams, and it was also the conduit through which Solomon became involved in the World’s Fair preparations, particularly the Parliament of Religions, where Council was born.

Council grew rapidly and soon had members all over country. By 1896, the organization was ready to hold its first national meeting at which members from different places could meet one another and discuss the ways in which they could work together more effectively. Mrs. Laura Jacobson and Miss Bertha Sale represented St. Louis at the First Convention of the National Council of Jewish Women during November of 1896. Mrs. Hattie Heller, also of St. Louis, was the Vice President for the state of Missouri, but

¹⁵ Solomon, 92.

¹⁶ Solomon, 21.

¹⁷ Solomon, 71 and 42-43.

¹⁸ Solomon, 69-70 and 43.

was unable to attend the event.¹⁹ Mrs. Heller's report for the state covered three cities, including St. Louis, and foreshadowed the demise of St. Louis's Council due to competition from other organizations. The report stated, "No philanthropic work has been attempted, as there are so many organizations for such purposes that all that has been required is to lend a helping hand to others."²⁰ While the St. Louis chapter grew from 34 charter members to well over 100 members in its first year, a report given by Bertha Sale acknowledged, "interest in the work is not just what we could wish."²¹

The St. Louis delegation showed both passion for the work and positive leadership abilities—Mrs. Jacobson was even made National Chairman of the Committee on Resolutions.²² However, differences between the local chapter and the national organization revealed themselves too. In one particular instance, Miss Sale noted that many in St. Louis were unhappy that so much of the money raised through dues left the city to go to the national organization. She explained, "It seems to be the almost unanimous wish in our little town of St. Louis that we shall not send half of the money out of the city."²³ Even when local difficulties arose that divided the national organization from its St. Louis chapter, the delegates from St. Louis expressed great respect for and loyalty to Hannah Solomon and to the work of Council in general.

Solomon's self-definition as an American combined with her notion of "heredity and tradition of a foreign nationality" to influence her reform work and the formation and

¹⁹ Proceedings of the 1st Convention, Folder 93, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

²² *Ibid.*, 369.

²³ *Ibid.*, 302.

growth of Council. Solomon and many of her fellow reformers clearly identified as American women, but they were also Jewish women. Solomon was the daughter of German Jewish immigrants who came to America in the 1840s; she and her family were comfortably ensconced in the American middle class by the time Russian Jews began to arrive on American shores in large numbers during the 1880s. As she witnessed the arrival of these fellow Jews, Solomon formed the desire to help them. She wrote, “I realized that it was necessary to create a more general interest in the recently arrived immigrants in order to help them solve the many problems presented by the new language and unfamiliar customs of a strange country.”²⁴ Solomon’s friendship with Addams and the growing population of Russian Jews in Chicago also led Solomon and her organization to a special relationship with immigrants. In the years to come, some of Council’s most important and popular work would involve greeting, protecting, and integrating new arrivals from Europe.

It was as middle-class American women that Solomon and her cohort reached out to these fellow Jews. Like the National Association of Colored Women, Council provided a vehicle for uplift within a particular community. However, unlike the women of the NACW, the women who joined Council had a variety of groups from which to choose when they wished to help the “less fortunate.” For example, Jewish women were not barred from joining the groups affiliated with the National Federation of Woman’s Clubs, as Solomon and her sisters did in Chicago. It was only with Council, however, that they could engage in social reform work as *Jewish* women.

²⁴ Solomon, 93.

Solomon described the important connection between Council's specifically Jewish identity and their reform work during Council's first convention in 1896:

We realized from the first that a Jewish national organization had but two purposes for existence—religion and philanthropy—in this land of liberty where the most sacred day in the life of a man should be the day on which he received his right of citizenship. For the laws of the Jews were civic laws. Jewish virtue was inseparable from civic virtue.²⁵

Solomon's work with the Woman's Club and with Addams contributed to her first forays into immigrant aid, but as the area around Hull House developed into a Jewish immigrant neighborhood, it was her Jewishness that drove Solomon's voluntarism and organizational energy.²⁶ Middle-class Jewish women gained important benefits from working for uplift among the recent arrivals from Eastern Europe. Such work reinforced their identity as middle-class American women engaged in Progressive reform, as well as acting as a tool to assimilate the newcomers and to enhance the general image of all Jews in the eyes of the non-Jewish community. Middle-class Reform Jewish women were also able to use such work to demonstrate to the Jewish immigrant community that one could be fully acculturated to American ways while still remaining Jewish. This was particularly important to Reform Jews of German descent, whose Jewishness was frequently called into question by the more Orthodox Russian newcomers. At the 1896 convention, Solomon reiterated, "We are here to affirm that for us there is no sign spelling the fate of our Faith in assimilation or absorption."²⁷

²⁵ Hannah Solomon's address, 1896 Proceedings of the 1st Convention, Folder 93, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

²⁶ Solomon, 93, 97-98, 110, 147.

²⁷ Hannah Solomon's address, 1896 Proceedings of the 1st Convention, Folder 93, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

Council's balance between Jewishness and American middle-class ways emerged strongly from the words of Rebecca Kohut, a speaker at the Jewish Women's Congress at the World's Fair when Council was founded: "Act in every sense of the word as American Jews. This is the great lesson we must teach. It is a glorious privilege to be a Jew, but it is also glorious to be an American!"²⁸ For Kohut and the other middle-class women of Council, this combination of identities was very important because they shared as much culturally with non-Jewish women of the American middle class as they shared with working-class Jewish women. In fact, sometimes they actually shared more common ground with non-Jews:

By the turn of the twentieth century, American-born Jewish women under the age of forty—who by then composed only a small percentage of the nation's Jewry—mirrored very closely the domestic patterns of the Protestant middle class among whom many of them lived.²⁹

Jewishness was, however, still the critical quality that bridged the gap between American middle-class reformers like Solomon and the poor Russian immigrants they wanted to assist. It was also the primary factor in Solomon's formation of the Council. It was religion that guided Solomon initially, when she chose to place the Jewish Women's Congress at the World's Fair under the auspices of the Parliament of Religions. The Jewish Woman's Congress included discussion of "subjects relating to the Jewish woman, to Jewish problems and to the Jewish woman's part in their solution." Among these problems and solutions were mission work and humanitarian efforts on behalf of the poor.³⁰ Solomon appealed to a romantic vision of Jewishness and womanhood at the

²⁸ Solomon, 87.

²⁹ Diner, *Works*, 241.

³⁰ Solomon, 86-87.

1896 conference: “We are here to pledge our faith in the old tradition that women, the mothers of Israel, must light the Sabbath lamp, symbolic of the perpetual light of the Torah....”³¹ Even as the women of Council proudly connected with their Jewish heritage, they were still tied to the tradition of other women’s organizations that had become so popular at the end of the nineteenth century.

The foundation that Council shared with similar organizations from the same era was based not only on class, but also on gender. Solomon did not mention sex or gender among her important influences, but such concerns were certainly part of her calculations when she started the Council. According to Solomon’s own autobiography, she refused to cooperate with Chicago’s Jewish men when they gave women no space in their program for the World’s Fair.³² Three years later, she responded with a wry wit to those who criticized her emphasis on gender, while refuting the idea that the group excluded men: “...no objections have been made by the men themselves. We expect to admit them whenever they clamor for admission. Up to the present time, they have not clamored.”³³

Sadie American and Rebekah Kohut, both present for the founding of Council and important early leaders in the organization, noted the feeling of doing important work as women in a time when it was still unusual.³⁴ Solomon traveled to Europe in 1904 for the International Council of Women meeting in Berlin, and she looked back on the trip with great excitement: “My whole trip was destined to become resplendent through

³¹ Hannah Solomon’s address, 1896 Proceedings of the 1st Convention, Folder 93, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

³² Solomon, 82-83.

³³ Hannah Solomon’s address, 1896 Proceedings of the 1st Convention, Folder 93, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

³⁴ Mary McCune, *The Whole Wide World, without Limits: International Relief, Gender Politics, and American Jewish Women, 1893-1930* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 19, 37.

unexpected but thrilling contact with world-renowned pioneers in the emancipation of women.”³⁵ While there is some debate among scholars regarding the extent to which Council reinforced traditional values of womanhood or challenged them, it still held gender as an important formative factor.³⁶ As women and as Jews, the middle-class reformers who started the Council as a national organization in Chicago had the desire to make the world a more caring and more moral place.

The individuals who made up the first St. Louis chapter of Council, while sharing the urge to heal the world, were unable to keep up the momentum that had propelled the national organization and the first local chapters. Instead, competing causes left the St. Louis chapter of Council without a membership base upon which to rely. The Yiddish word for beggar is *schnorrer*. In St. Louis, at the end of the nineteenth century, the word “*schnorrerism*” appeared in the St. Louis Jewish Voice to describe the proliferation of relief and reform organizations trying to raise money to support various causes.³⁷ At the same time, the newspaper had articles every week discussing charities and publicizing various causes throughout the Jewish community. In fact, on the very same day that the article on “*schnorrerism*” appeared, the President of the United Hebrew Relief Society issued a plea to gather clothes and shoes for the poor, especially children, who were “neglecting school because they can’t attend in bare feet.”³⁸ Similar calls for aid also appeared in the Voice at this time, including those from synagogue sisterhoods (B’nai El Ladies’ Aid Society), as well as general women’s benevolent societies (Sisterhood for

³⁵ Solomon, 120.

³⁶ For more information on this debate, see McCune 11-19, 36 and Rogow, 4-7.

³⁷ *St. Louis Jewish Voice*, October 4, 1895, 4.

³⁸ *St. Louis Jewish Voice*, October 4, 1895, 3.

Personal Service), and the newspaper itself (the Jewish Voice Shoe Fund).³⁹ Several articles and snippets referred to charity and charity organizations. In one example, the editor commented that “the vast majority of the St. Louis Jewish young men do charity only when they dance at a charity ball.”⁴⁰ In another case, he stated:

We have too many societies, is the general cry. We have too great a variety of Jewish organizations, and the consequence is a useless exhaustion of our best endeavors, an irrational expenditure of vigor, talent, and means. In a community like St. Louis, exactly one half of the number of all sorts of organizations would effect [sic] double of the present results.⁴¹

One can draw two important conclusions from this collection of references: 1) there were a great many such organizations in St. Louis at this time and 2) these organizations had to battle to keep members and to raise money in the midst of so many calls for aid. While such factors may have been present in other cities, they represented a particular challenge in St. Louis, a smaller city with fewer members of a Jewish elite. St. Louis’s Reform German Jewish elite was successful enough to mix with the non-Jewish elite and it was not necessarily interested in limiting its social contacts or philanthropic interests to the Jewish community alone. However, they were a small group, and there was no one to take up the causes for which this elite had neither time nor money.

Membership was a particular challenge for organizations, and attendance at functions was frequently low. At the 1895 Annual Meeting of the St. Louis United Hebrew Relief Association, only around fifteen people attended.⁴² Such was also the case for Council, which had good attendance at first, but which could not sustain such

³⁹ *St. Louis Jewish Voice*, October 4, 1895, October 11, 1895, October 25, 1895, and November 1, 1895.

⁴⁰ *St. Louis Jewish Voice*, October 18, 1895, 3.

⁴¹ *St. Louis Jewish Voice*, October 25, 1895, 4.

⁴² *St. Louis Jewish Voice*, October 25, 1895, 3.

numbers after 1897. By 1898, numbers of attendees at events were dropping precipitously. Some meetings had as few as seven members present. In May of 1898, when St. Louis's chapter of Council held its Annual Board Meeting, the attendance problem actually interfered with the conducting of organizational business: "The society at large, failing to respond to the earnest request for a large attendance, the meeting was adjourned till [sic] Fall."⁴³ Events such as the planning for the World's Fair also competed for members' time, until the group finally disintegrated altogether.⁴⁴

Council's work in St. Louis replicated the work of non-Jewish voluntary associations, despite the national organization's desire to avoid such overlap. Although the national group strongly emphasized its role as the Jewish face of voluntarism, the St. Louis chapter's attempts to engage in specifically Jewish activities, such as a course of Bible study led by Rabbi Sale, were poorly attended.⁴⁵ In one case, the national organization recommended a course of action that the St. Louis chapter of Council was unable to complete. In December of 1895, the National office of Council sent a message to the local chapters instructing them to attempt to get one woman on the Sabbath School Board of each synagogue congregation.⁴⁶ However, only one synagogue was even willing to entertain the possibility, promising to "make ladies honorary members of the

⁴³ Minutes of Regular Meetings, 1895-1898, May 3, 1898, 46, Box 4, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

⁴⁴ Minutes of Regular Meetings, 1895-1898, September 21, 1898, 47, Box 4, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

⁴⁵ Minutes of Regular Meetings, 1895-1898, January 21, 1898, 43-44, Box 4, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

⁴⁶ Minutes of Regular Meetings, 1895-1898, December 19, 1895, 8, Box 4, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

Sabbath School Board, later to be ‘joint members with the gentlemen.’”⁴⁷ With little success or interest in Council’s religious agenda and no room to engage in other, more standard types of general Progressive-style benevolence work, the St. Louis chapter of Council was unable to establish itself as an independent local voluntary association that could give a Jewish face to the middle-class women’s reform.

By the turn of the century, St. Louis’s first attempt at a local Council chapter had faded away, not to reemerge until after World War I. In the interim, the city hosted a World’s Fair, witnessed struggles among its residents, and survived a war. The Jewish women of the city addressed some of these events and their accompanying problems in small, locally-focused organizations or sometimes as individuals, but without the auspices of a national organization focused on Jewish issues.⁴⁸ When they finally revived their local chapter of Council in 1917, St. Louis’s Jewish women would again be able to bridge the gap between their ethnic community and the rest of their city and nation, whether as women, Jews, or white middle-class reformers.

⁴⁷ Minutes of Regular Meetings, 1895-1898, March 13, 1896, 15, April 8, 1896, 16-17, Box 4, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

⁴⁸ For information on some of the important individual women reformers in St. Louis at the beginning of the twentieth century, see Corbett’s entries on Rachel Stix Michael (247-248) and Lucille Lowenstein (182-183).

Chapter 3—“Hiding In the Court of Ahasuerus”: Marginality and Conservatism in the St. Louis NCJW, 1917-1929

In 1917, the St. Louis National Council of Jewish Women reemerged as a counterpoint to other women’s voluntary organizations. While it remained linked to the clubwoman’s movement that had originally spawned the organization, it still laid claim to a Jewish voice. At the same time, its Jewish voice was broader in scope than other Jewish women’s groups. It focused on issues that extended into the greater community, such as poverty and peace, unlike the synagogue sisterhoods. However, its reach into the world stopped short of the global involvement of groups like Hadassah, whose Zionist goals took it into Palestine almost immediately and kept it narrowly focused on a small handful of activities, related primarily to its Zionist aims. Council members were able to engage in reform and benevolence work while promoting themselves as “good Americans” during a period when American Jews were striving to be fully accepted.

As Jewish women of the American middle class, the members of the NCJW had an opportunity to claim new identities, but pushing boundaries too far carried the risk of a loss of security and status, for themselves and for their community. This was especially true in the case of any perceived violations of gender norms, which would have caused suspicion that the entire Jewish community existed outside the limits of “respectable” middle-class American society. The NCJW thus took the middle road between the conservatism and isolation of the synagogue sisterhoods and the radicalism of the newly-formed Hadassah. Although the reformed St. Louis NCJW had a little trouble

establishing its new identity and position initially, it soon identified causes and activities that provided “safe” outlets while still advancing the cause of social justice.

During the years from 1917 to 1929, the National Council of Jewish Women chapter that existed in St. Louis was not a radical voice on behalf of either the Jewish community or the women of the middle class. While not as controversial as Hadassah, the NCJW was more interested and involved in larger social trends and issues than the other major category of voluntary association for Jewish women, the synagogue sisterhood. The women of the St. Louis NCJW were Jewish, but they were able to pick and choose how much attention they gave to Jewish issues, unlike either Hadassah or the sisterhoods. This more guarded approach took advantage of contextual identities, allowing flexibility in activities and attitude and providing a broad base of membership and support for the group. The organization focused on projects that promoted their image as a group of middle-class Americans who wished to help others succeed in “the land of the free.” They did not, however, focus on overtly Jewish causes or causes that would have emphasized their membership in a global Jewish community. Contextual identity was brought to serve the goal of blending in and overcoming marginality to become fully accepted members of the middle class.

During this period, American Jews stood on the cusp between marginality and full acceptance, existing as both American success stories and as the eternal outsiders. Safety, security, and status were very important issues for American Jews during this period. As an American “success story,” Jews represented an ethnic group that was prospering financially, and American Jews were much safer and more economically secure than Jews anywhere else in the world. However, anti-Semitism had by no means

disappeared. In fact, American Jews still lived in the psychological borderlands: living the “American Dream,” but still existing as “other,” representing both a religion and an ethnicity, and composing a part of white society, but only conditionally so. Additionally, American Jews were sometimes torn between fully supporting American policies, such as the halt on immigration, while maintaining sympathy for the Jewish refugees still in Europe. Sometimes the refugees were even relatives who also wanted to finally join their American *michpocheh*, or “relatives.” However, life for Jews in the U.S. was hardly as bright as it appeared. Instead, Jews still found that acceptance was conditional and could be fleeting.

One event of this period that demonstrated to Jews that they were still only marginally accepted in America occurred in Georgia. In 1913, Leo Frank was charged with the murder of Mary Phagan. In the highly-publicized criminal case that followed, race and Jewishness were central themes: the victim was white, the main witness was black, and the accused was Jewish. Frank, who ran a pencil factory in Atlanta, was accused of murdering Phagan, a young girl who worked for him at the factory. The prosecution’s case relied heavily, although not exclusively, on the word of one of Frank’s African American employees, Jim Conley, a man that some believed was Phagan’s actual murderer. Frank was convicted, most agree wrongly, of killing Mary Phagan and lynched in 1915. This tragedy reminded American Jews that they were still not secure in their status as successful middle-class white Americans and that they could find themselves at odds with both whites and African Americans, sometimes with fatal

consequences.¹ A Jew was, in some places, more of an outsider and an object of suspicion than African Americans were.

Riots in St. Louis provide us with a more local example of Jews' marginal status between black and white. In 1917, East St. Louis was the central base for much of the area's heaviest industry. Political and economic divisions had been brewing for some time when violence broke out in the early summer of that year. After an initial outbreak of violence on a smaller scale, East St. Louis erupted on July 2, with whites attacking and beating black men, women, and children in the streets, as well as carrying out lynchings and setting fires. By the time order had been restored, dozens had lost their lives and whole city blocks had been devastated.²

Jews did live in East St. Louis, and there was a synagogue at the edge of the riot zone, at 9th St. and Pennsylvania Ave., but we do not have evidence of whether or not the neighborhood's Jewish residents were involved in the violence. What we do know is that the whites of East St. Louis who tried to protest what was happening or to assist the victims were generally quieted by or turned upon by the mob.³ Additionally, in the days following the riot, the whites of East St. Louis generally showed little or no remorse.⁴ However, the Jewish community did express shock and disgust with the events that had occurred.

¹ For more information, see Jeffrey Paul Melnick, *Black-Jewish Relations on Trial: Leo Frank and Jim Conley in the New South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000).

² Elliott M. Rudwick, *Race Riot at East St. Louis, July 2, 1917* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 41-50 and Lorenzo Johnston Greene, Gary R. Kremer, and Anthony F. Holland, *Missouri's Black Heritage* (Saint Louis: Forum Press, 1980), 144.

³ Rudwick, 44-45 and 96-97.

⁴ Rudwick, 67-69.

St. Louis's Jewish newspaper, *The Jewish Voice*, carried two mentions of the riots in the days immediately following which indicated that perhaps Jews were not part of the white crowds that perpetuated the horrors of those July days. In fact, the *Voice* even expressed sympathy for the victims. In the first, only a few days after the riots, an article proclaimed, "East St. Louis' upheaval, the disgrace of the land, has caused, it was reported, the death of several Jews, though at the time of this writing, we were unable to ascertain their names or their number."⁵ The second reference comes from a republished letter to the editor of the *Denver Jewish News*, in which Oscar Leonard of St. Louis, Missouri made note that East St. Louis was "not connected with St. Louis." Leonard's letter expressed dismay that the nation was conflating East St. Louis, Illinois and its misdeeds with his home city across the river. He explained:

Please tell your people that St. Louis was the sufferer because of the misdeeds of East St. Louis. As a member of the Red Cross Emergency Committee, I can tell you that we worked very hard to take care of some ten thousand negro refugees, and are still working hard to adjust matters....⁶

The same letter referred to the incident in East St. Louis as a "pogrom."

These two small citations demonstrate that at least part of the Jewish community had sympathy for, as well as some identification with, the African American victims of the East St. Louis riots. Although American Jews were whitening themselves during this era and proudly proclaiming their status as patriotic Americans, they still understood the feeling of being marginalized and hated.

At the same time, however, American Jews were more accepted than ever before, as their economic success and patriotism demonstrated their status as truly American. In

⁵ *St. Louis Jewish Voice*, July 6, 1917, 3.

⁶ Letter to the Editor from Oscar Leonard, *St. Louis Jewish Voice*, July 20, 1917, 7.

his book, *Jazz Age Jews*, Michael Alexander describes the phenomenon of Jewish “outsider identification.”⁷ He explains that Jewish identity rested in exile and marginalization, a structure that Jewish success in the 1920s defied.⁸ For American Jews, the strange combination of acceptance and separation created an “anxious subculture.”⁹ During the period from 1917 to 1929, American Jews found two approaches to dealing with this anxiety. One solution was to embrace the separation and pursue the creation of a more exclusively Jewish state through Zionism.

Zionism was drawing a great deal of attention in 1917. Not only had Hadassah formed that year, but the month of June also saw the meeting of a national convention of Zionists in Baltimore. The growing Zionist movement represented “an antidote to assimilation” and “a response to anti-Semitism.”¹⁰ However, while some considered it a way to save the Jewish people, many others thought it was dangerously nationalistic and too unreligious. This split over support of Zionism actually mirrored the existing split between German and Eastern European Jews. Most of the early proponents of Zionism in the United States were Eastern European Jews, while the German Jews took the lead in opposing Zionism.¹¹

However, this pattern of support for Zionism changed in 1914, when Louis D. Brandeis joined the movement. Brandeis, already known throughout the nation as an important lawyer, was elected chairman of the Provisional Executive Committee for General Zionist Affairs. Brandeis, a successful Reform Jew, was able to draw many

⁷ Michael Alexander, *Jazz Age Jews* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 3.

⁸ Alexander, 6.

⁹ Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 214-215.

¹⁰ Sarna, 202.

¹¹ Thomas A. Kolsky, *Jews against Zionism: The American Council for Judaism, 1942-1948* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 24 and Sarna, 202.

other wealthy and successful Jews into Zionism and “managed to bridge the gap between German and East European Jews.”¹² By 1917, Brandeis had become a Supreme Court Justice, and his influence in the American Jewish community and in the nation meant that Zionism had an extremely powerful voice among its proponents.

However, there was still considerable concern from Reform Jews about the implications of Zionism. In St. Louis, the Reform community was still not convinced to lend it support to Zionism in 1917, although the movement had some strong roots in the city and was gaining strength in some parts of the Jewish community there. The St. Louis Jewish newspapers were less vehemently opposed to Zionism than they had been at the turn of the century, although they were still not by any means pro-Zionist.¹³ For example, the *Jewish Voice* did publish information from the Zionist movement in 1917, including a “Public Statement of the President of the Federation of American Zionists,” but they also included less positive statements from the editor: “Rabbi Stephen S. Wise has our high regard, yet we should like to see him somewhat less noisy in his Zionism.”¹⁴

So the controversy over Zionism continued through this era, with many individuals and organizations choosing sides on the issue. Hadassah and the National Council of Jewish Women gave Jewish women the opportunity to exercise their personal choice to pick an organization that reflected their own stance on the matter. Hadassah, founded by prominent Zionist Henrietta Szold, pursued Jewish nationalist aims at the international level, and as such, appealed to women who wanted their voluntarism to bolster Zionist goals. According to historian Erica B. Simmons, “American Jewish

¹² Sarna, 203 and Kolsky, 25.

¹³ Walter Ehrlich, *Zion in the Valley: The Jewish Community of St. Louis* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002), Volume II, 260-261.

¹⁴ *St. Louis Jewish Voice*, July 20, 1917, 7 and June 29, 1917, 4.

women started the Hadassah organization to turn Progressive ideas into a plan of action that they employed to advance the Jewish nationalist struggle in Palestine.”¹⁵

This, in essence, meant that those women who wished to combine Jewish issues with Progressive issues could choose between doing so in a Zionist way or in a non-Zionist way. The National Council of Jewish Women could thus maintain a Jewish voice that was not as controversial because it had no Zionist component. In St. Louis, the newly-resurrected NCJW had only one year before it would face competition from a local chapter of Hadassah. Although in general the two organizations rarely drew from the same pool of members because of the fact that NCJW’s rank-and-file were German Reform Jews who did not support Zionism in the first place, in St. Louis, “Hadassah became very popular also among women in the German Reform population.”¹⁶ So, by 1918, Jewish women in St. Louis who wished to become part of an organization that was Jewish in nature could join synagogue sisterhoods, Hadassah, or Council.

What set Council apart, then, had to be its particular activities and the fact that it was both Jewish and Progressive, while maintaining a more conservative middle-class American profile. It had activities that strongly promoted the same kind of social justice and Americanization that other non-Jewish women’s groups also pursued, while still presenting a Jewish face to the world. One of the first acts of the reformed St. Louis Council in 1917, was to pass a motion stating that “the principle activity of the St. Louis Section, Council of Jewish Women, be along lines of social welfare work for Jewish

¹⁵ Erica Simmons, *Hadassah and the Zionist Project* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 2.

¹⁶ Ehrlich, II, 265.

girls.”¹⁷ Throughout the 1920s, the group pursued many kinds of social justice work, while keeping gender and ethnic identity as potential foundation for their work.

From 1917 to 1929, several causes attracted the attention of reformers and social activists. The first of these, World War I, was an event that drew on feelings of patriotism and the desire to be seen publicly as a good American. St. Louis’s citizens responded heartily to the calls for wartime assistance, and the Jewish community was well-represented among the ranks of soldiers and homefront volunteers. According to Walter Ehrlich, despite the claims of “nativist and anti-Semitic propagandists,” Jews in St. Louis “did everything else that the general population was asked to do.”¹⁸ This included military service, fundraising, rationing, and increased production of many goods.

Women contributed to the paid labor force in St. Louis, as well as acting as unpaid volunteers.¹⁹ In the case of women volunteers, production of personal items for soldiers and activities for lifting the soldiers’ morale were also very important. Across St. Louis, women’s organizations mobilized to meet wartime needs. From the darning of soldiers’ socks to the raising of thousands of dollars for the Red Cross, women demonstrated dedication and resourcefulness in a time of crisis.²⁰

St. Louis’s Jewish women shared this experience with their non-Jewish counterparts, but their work does not show itself in the Council records for those years.

¹⁷ Motion by Mrs. D. H. Wolfort, Minutes of Board Meeting, May 12, 1917, Minutes of Board Meetings, 1917-1940, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-), Western Historical Manuscript Collection-St. Louis.

¹⁸ Ehrlich, II, 243-244.

¹⁹ Katharine T. Corbett, *In Her Place: A Guide to St. Louis Women's History* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1999), 212.

²⁰ William Earl Parrish and others, *A History of Missouri* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1971), Volume 4, 223.

Instead, because war work was more compelling than many other activities and not explicitly Jewish in nature, it did not act as a draw to increase membership and activities for the St. Louis NCJW. Instead, synagogue organizations, already well-established and not trying to re-establish themselves, were the groups that stepped in to contribute to the war effort. They provided the holiday services, parties, and festivals that welcomed servicemen and provided entertainment and comfort for those serving their country.²¹

It was not until after the war that the St. Louis Council began to build up momentum and membership. Its work during the years immediately after the war reflected the focus on social work and women and children's issues that it had initially set forth. However, it did not step into the battle being waged at that time over suffrage and women's "proper roles." Instead, the St. Louis NCJW remained true to the woman's club model of voluntarism that had prevailed when Solomon first started the national organization. In fact, in 1921, the St. Louis chapter would federate with the Missouri Federation of Women's Clubs.²² This model included many of the same goals as Progressivism, including working for the "collective good" while focusing on women, children, the elderly, and public health and hygiene, considered socially acceptable arenas for women's work.²³ For Council, this model often meant that public welfare projects garnered more of the organization's attention than Jewish revitalization projects. Some of the group's most popular and successful projects worked for general public benefit, following the model of successful middle-class women's voluntarism. Council members

²¹ Ehrlich, II, 245.

²² Minutes of Board Meeting, Feb. 14, 1921, Minutes of Board Meetings, 1917-1940, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

²³ Sandra Haarsager, *Organized Womanhood: Cultural Politics in the Pacific Northwest, 1840-1920* (Norman: University Of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 15.

trod the path of those they wished to emulate: native-born, white, non-Jewish women of the American middle-class.

In 1920, for example, the St. Louis Council's developed its first major post-war project: milk stations in public schools.²⁴ It also passed a motion to draft and present an ordinance for the purpose of raising the standard of the city's milk supply, which was one of the worst in the nation.²⁵ These projects of 1920 reflected the need to address public health and child welfare, in part because there was still a need to do so. These issues were not particularly Jewish, but were a way of continuing the Progressive tradition of the organization. During the same year, the group pursued other public welfare issues, such as the urging of elected officials to pass a motor vehicle licensing ordinance and to establish a permanent Court of Domestic Relations "similar to those in Chicago and New York."²⁶

Such projects were easy to promote and were, for the most part, uncontroversial because they promoted the wellbeing of all of the city's citizens in a general way. Additionally, these projects did not challenge accepted roles for women, nor did they call attention to Council members' status as Jews. Council would continue to pursue such citywide goals in St. Louis throughout the 1920s, including smoke abatement, fighting the problem of filth in the streets, solving the problems of unemployment, support of the arts through the local symphony, and the assistance of the Red Cross in order to help

²⁴ Motion by Miss Baer, Minutes of Board Meeting, October 8, 1920 and Minutes of Board Meeting, March 1, 1924, Minutes of Board Meetings, 1917-1940, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

²⁵ Minutes of Board Meeting, October 8, 1920, Minutes of Board Meetings, 1917-1940, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

²⁶ Motion by Mrs. Langsdorf, Minutes of Board Meeting, October 8, 1920, Minutes of Board Meetings, 1917-1940, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

those in need after major floods and other natural disasters hit the area.²⁷ All of these problems affected Jews as well as non-Jews, and fighting them was not specific to any one group. Council was an organization of St. Louisans fighting the city's problems. Council members also attacked some problems that affected more specific subsets of the city's populace.

Women, children, and immigrants were among the groups served by the projects of the St. Louis Council from 1920-1929. However, Council rarely made any statements or took any action that could be construed as controversial. It did not pursue any projects that endorsed Zionism, nor did it make any statements endorsing radical change in women's social roles, even when it did support the rise of individual women into new professional and political roles.²⁸ Among the other bills endorsed at that time were an extension of appropriation under the Maternity and Infancy Act, and an Illegitimacy Law to enforce paternal support.²⁹ These bills, along support for the Child Labor Amendment and a Community School Bill that Council supported that year, demonstrated Council's interest in addressing issues that affected children as well as women. While some of these issues did become controversial during the 1920s as anti-radicalism became a force in American life, they continued to garner support from some, but not all, middle-class white women's voluntary associations. As women gained more political power through

²⁷ Motions by Mrs. Irvin Bettman and Mrs. M. Sternberger, Minutes of Board Meeting, February 6, 1922; Motion by Miss Schwarz, Minutes of Board Meeting, February 7, 1927; Motion by Mrs. Oscar Marx, Minutes of Board Meeting, November 5, 1928; Motion by Mrs. M.J. Lowenstein, Announcement by Mrs. Oscar Marx, and Motion by Mrs. Ike Greenfield, Minutes of Board Meeting, October 3, 1927; and General Announcement, Minutes of Board Meeting, September 19, 1927, Minutes of Board Meetings, 1917-1940, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

²⁸ Motion by Mrs. Loeb, Minutes of Board Meeting, December 6, 1920, Minutes of Board Meetings, 1917-1940, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-). This motion was to write a letter endorsing the appointment of a woman as Assistant Prosecuting Attorney for the city.

²⁹ Minutes of Board Meeting, May 3, 1926, Minutes of Board Meetings, 1917-1940, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

suffrage, fear of women's direct political participation led to the development of antifeminism, while fear of socialism fed antiradicalism and fear of most reform activities. Even those activities that had once been associated with domesticity and maternalism became suspect when they challenged the established political and economic order.³⁰

In keeping with the tradition of Progressive women's social reform, the St. Louis Council of Jewish women continued to promote the welfare of children throughout the 1920s. Children's issues also provided a link for the group to pursue both immigrant and Jewish issues while maintaining their moderate approach. In addition to the milk program for poor children and the support for child labor laws, the St. Louis NCJW pursued several ways to promote the physical and mental well-being of the city's children. In November 1922, for example, Council's Board of Directors noted a need for more and larger Baby Welfare Clinics. It also endorsed a plan from the League of Women Voters to keep schools open "for supervised play and study hours."³¹

Throughout the 1920s, the group lent its support to other organizations working on child welfare, including the Park and Playground Association, the Girl Scouts, the Camp Fire Girls, the Children of America Loyalty League, and the National Child Labor Bureau. It expressed support for young people's symphony concerts and schools for the handicapped. In 1927, the group made plans to organize a Mother's Club for the "mothers of the Jewish children of the Neighborhood House." That same year, it also

³⁰ See Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) and Kim Nielsen, *Un-American Womanhood: Antiradicalism, Antifeminism, and the First Red Scare* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2001).

³¹ Minutes of Board Meeting, November 6, 1922, Minutes of Board Meetings, 1917-1940, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

initiated a Child Study group for immigrant mothers as part of its continuing work on behalf of Immigrant Aid.³² In fact, Council's immigrant aid relied heavily on the ideal of protecting women and children, in addition to the ideal of Americanization.

Americanization was of the utmost importance to Jews in the 1920s. Fear had led some Americans into a spiral of hatred during the 1920s: the Red Scare, the new Ku Klux Klan, and open anti-Semitism were specters that haunted American Jews.³³ The St. Louis Council itself demonstrated some concern about anti-Semitism. In December 1921, the organization offered assistance to the American Library Service in "any movement to combat religious prejudice." It also asked for information on ways in which the ALS was cooperating with B'Nai B'rith and the Anti-Defamation League "in combating anti-Jewish prejudice."³⁴ However, for the NCJW, the easiest course was to combine its work on behalf of those in need with promoting the idea of acceptance and "fitting in."

By the 1920s, Eastern European Jewish immigrants of the 1880s-1900 had given birth to a new American generation, but the older generation was not always fully Americanized. Further, after the war, there were still some new immigrants arriving in the U.S. who also needed to acclimate to their new home, although the changes in immigration law in 1924 meant that fewer Jews would be able to gain entry to America. Council's Americanization efforts and immigrant aid programs assisted the immigrants,

³² Minutes of Board Meeting, September 19, 1927, September 8, 1926, December 4, 1922, May 3, 1926, May 5, 1924, September 11, 1922, February 7, 1927, and January 3, 1927, Minutes of Board Meetings, 1917-1940, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

³³ Hasia R. Diner, *A New Promised Land: A History of Jews in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 78-79.

³⁴ Minutes of Board Meeting, December 5, 1921, Minutes of Board Meetings, 1917-1940, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

but it also kept the image of the middle-class Jewish establishment well scrubbed. As Mary McCune explains in her history of Jewish women's voluntarism:

...Council leaders also wanted to ensure that those who did manage to gain passage held the 'right spiritual attitude toward America.' Unit workers sought to 'spread the gospel of bodily cleanliness' among potential immigrants, no doubt to counter suggestions that Jews were filthy and diseased.³⁵

One of the best examples of the ways in which Council's Americanization combined the building of practical skills with the formation of certain attitudes about being part of the American Jewish community was the NCJW essay contest for immigrant women during the 1920s. From 1925 to about 1929, students in Council's English classes around the country participated in essay-writing contests on a variety of topics, including "My First Impressions of America" and "My Plans and Ambitions for My Children." Council's journal *The Immigrant*, edited by former St. Louisan Cecilia Rakowsky, published the winning essays, giving the essayists a sense of pride and the immigrant aid programs some positive publicity.³⁶

In 1925, the judges for the contest described the function of these contests. One of them stated:

Here at least, there survives the fervor of patriotism—the inspiring old dreams of our America. If some of them could become widely known, they should be a potent remedy for the narrowness and bitterness and selfishness of these days of our reaction....³⁷

³⁵ McCune, 89.

³⁶ Finding Aid, Essays of Jewish-American Immigrant Women, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

³⁷ Judges' Statements, Folder 1, Essays of Jewish-American Immigrant Women.

For the NCJW, such examples could be used to promote the idea that American Jews deserved acceptance as true Americans. Some of the winning entries were actually from St. Louis, where Council was working hard to assist immigrants. From 1920 through 1921, the St. Louis Council cooperated with the Conference of Jewish Organization on Americanization work, generally by contributing funds. In June of 1923, however, when Mr. Bach of the Jewish Community Center asked that Council “do the Americanization work for the entire Jewish community under the direction and at the expense of the Jewish Community Center,” the women of Council gladly accepted the responsibility.³⁸ The St. Louis NCJW conducted English classes as part of this work, like most other local sections, and thus had available student essays to send in for the contest.

The winning entries from St. Louis represent a broad range of immigrant experience. The authors’ time in the United State spanned from two years to thirty-four years. The women varied in age, from 29 to 53 years, and most of them had children. Some of the women had limited education in their native lands, while others did not. The essays share a common note of cooperation and getting along in American society, as well as concerns for the future and for the proper rearing of children. Taken as a group, the essays reinforce both Americanization and traditional middle-class American gender roles. For example, one essay by a Mrs. Weisman, a 46-year-old woman who had been in the U.S. for 34 years, proclaimed the most important day of her life to be her wedding day. She wore a white gown and had attendants, in the traditional American style. She even noted that they all went to have their photo taken. That day, she moved from the

³⁸ Letter from Mr. Bach and Motion by Mrs. Isaac Halpern, Minutes of Board Meeting, June 4, 1923, Minutes of Board Meetings, 1917-1940, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

two rooms she shared with her father, stepmother, and two boarders to a space she rented with her new husband.³⁹

In *Fighting to Become Americans*, historian Riv-Ellen Prell explains the link between marriage and Americanization:

The intimate link of Americanization and marriage through the young Jewish women created a stereotype that allowed gender to become coterminous with mobility. Twentieth-century marriage paradoxically became the setting for couples both to reproduce Jews and to produce an American lifestyle.⁴⁰

Mrs. Weisman's wedding was a way that she became, to herself, truly American. For some of the other winning entries, becoming more American related to customs and language. For Sarah Goldbart, a 33-year-old only in the country for a few months, the treatment she received from others made an important difference. She wrote, "Here people are treated as real people and feel that way toward each other, but in Europe they are treated more like animals." Goldbart summed up her feelings about America by appealing to a gender-specific image: "I felt like a baby who, till now, had suffered with a step-mother but had found her real mother at last. The real mother cherished and sheltered me...."⁴¹

Motherhood is an important theme to many of the winning essays. For Mrs. Sadie Schwartz, a 53-year-old who had been living in the U.S. for 30 years when her essay won in 1927, childrearing was critical to her life. She wrote, "My whole life's ambition was to rear my children well." As the mother of four well-educated children, Schwartz

³⁹ Essay by Mrs. Weisman, Folder 9, Essays of Jewish-American Immigrant Women.

⁴⁰ Riv-Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender, and the Anxiety of Assimilation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 60.

⁴¹ Essay by Sarah Goldbart, Folder 4, Essays of Jewish-American Immigrant Women.

wished to further her own education as much for their sake as for her own. She described her reasons for educating herself: “I should like to be able to discuss intelligently with my children, and if necessary, at times, to correspond with them in order that our family may be together. If I should be able to read and write well, it would make me the happiest mother in the world.”⁴²

Other essays that mention motherhood see self-improvement as a benefit to their children and being a good mother as a way to improve society. Mrs. Clara Myerson, for example, felt that becoming a citizen would benefit her children. In an essay entitled “How Can We Help To Make Our Country Better?” a Mrs. Berman cited a variety of things people could do, including obeying the laws, educating themselves, and being clean. She also noted that “...the new generation should be healthy.” She expressed the idea that children who grow up under bad conditions “become law breakers.”⁴³ For Mrs. Berman, parents held the key to improving or destroying society in the way they cared for their children. These concepts are not exclusively American and middle-class, but they did reinforce the ways in which Jewish culture and American culture could overlap and the ways in which Jewish immigrants could integrate themselves into American society. The question of Jewishness itself, however, rarely appeared in the winning essays. Many of the writers were attracted by the other topics, possibly encouraged by the teachers guiding them. As contestants, they may have been attempting to appeal to the judges by writing what they thought they judges wanted to read. The possibility even exists that for

⁴² Essay by Mrs. Sadie Schwartz, Folder 15, Essays of Jewish-American Immigrant Women.

⁴³ Essay by Mrs. Clara Myerson and essay by Mrs. Berman, Folder 10, Essays of Jewish-American Immigrant Women.

these women, Jewishness was taken for granted and was thus of less interest to them than the process of their Americanization.

Jewishness was one of the categories on which the contest entrants could write, but only one winning essay from St. Louis actually specifically addressed Judaism. Mrs. Anna Weisman extolled the virtues of Judaism in her essay from 1927. A mother of seven children, Mrs. Weisman had come to the U.S. from Russia thirty years before, when she was 17. Her essay indicated that Judaism need not be discarded in the name of Americanization. She noted that when she arrived here, she “rapidly became accustomed to the ways and the different religions of the people, of the United States,” but she remained deeply committed to Judaism and to having a Jewish home. A more Orthodox believer, she noted the tendency in the United States to “seek modern Judaism,” but she finally concluded that parents could set their children on the path of orthodoxy and that “the mother of the family must naturally let her faith be the outstanding part in her life as it is in mine.”⁴⁴ Weisman expressed no ambiguity about the role of Judaism in her life or about her devotion to orthodox observance. However, the organization responsible for preserving her essay did not have such an easy time defining its own connection to Judaism during the years of the 1920s.

Defining the religious and cultural identity of an organization as a collective of individuals is often challenging. In the case of the St. Louis NCJW, the task was more difficult because of splits present in the St. Louis Jewish community and the various denominations and synagogues present in the city. While the group spent more time on their public service and Americanization programs during the 1920s, it still maintained an

⁴⁴ Essay by Mrs. Anna Weisman, Folder 18, Essays of Jewish-American Immigrant Women.

underlying Jewish identity. Sometimes it pursued programs with a Jewish flavor, only to have those programs fail. Still, there is evidence of a Jewish identity during these years, even if it was sometimes more ambiguous than dominant. The Jewish identity of St. Louis Council was less pronounced during the 1920s, however, than it would be in later decades, when the desire to band together as a community would start to outweigh other factors.

One way in which Council still demonstrated an underlying Jewish identity was their observance of certain Jewish practices and their interactions as part of the Jewish community. During the 1920s, the St. Louis Council cooperated with other Jewish institutions around the city, especially for celebration of Jewish holidays. For example, in 1927, Council held Passover services at the Jewish Sanitorium. When October of the same year came around, services for “the holidays” (Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur) were to be held “some time this month in two institutions.” Finally in December of that year, services were held for Hanukkah at the “Old Folks Home.”⁴⁵

At other times, NCJW members refused to participate in activities that interfered with the celebration of the sabbath or Jewish holidays. In 1924, the first day of the holiday of Succoth fell on the day that Council had a regularly scheduled meeting. The group could not find a convenient time for rescheduling, so the meeting that month was cancelled altogether.⁴⁶ On another occasion, the group agreed to work with the city’s Board of Religious Organizations during “Girls Week,” but chose not to participate on

⁴⁵Report by Mrs. Alfred Levy, Chairman of Religion Committee, Minutes of Board Meeting, May 2, 1927 and October 3, 1927, Minutes of Board Meetings, 1917-1940, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-). Note that “Old Folks Home” most likely refers to the Jewish Orthodox Old Folks Home. See Ehrlich, II, 113.

⁴⁶ Motion by Mrs. Arthur Lieber, Minutes of Board Meeting, October 6, 1924, Minutes of Board Meetings, 1917-1940, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

Friday or on Saturday “because of the Jewish Sabbath.” One member specifically requested that her “no” vote on the above measure would be recorded in the minutes, so the decision clearly sparked some debate.⁴⁷ However, these debates and decisions were generally private or mostly confined to the Jewish community, rather than any kind of more broadly publicized activity.

Other private but clearly marked indicators also showed an underlying Jewish identity to the St. Louis NCJW, even when the group did not engage in largescale Jewish activities and programs. Each year Council members around the country celebrated “Council Sabbath” on the Sabbath before Purim (the holiday that retells and celebrates the story of Esther).⁴⁸ For Council Sabbath, Council members would be honored in synagogues and would often assist with decorating for services and the preparation of post-service refreshments. In St. Louis, NCJW members not only participated in this annual celebration, but they also requested that rabbis around the city honor them with the “privilege of having a member of the Council occupy each pulpit on Council Sabbath.” They even contemplated asking rabbis in 1928 to “allow two of our women to take charge of the services.”⁴⁹ This represents an interesting departure in terms of gender roles. While women did have a more equal role in Reform Jewish synagogue worship, taking charge of services or leading Bible study groups was not common in all parts of

⁴⁷ Motion by Mrs. Sigmund Livingston, Minutes of Board Meeting, October 4, 1922, Minutes of Board Meetings, 1917-1940, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-). Mrs. Major Seelig was the dissenter.

⁴⁸ Faith Rogow, *Gone to Another Meeting: The National Council of Jewish Women, 1893-1993* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 65.

⁴⁹ Motion by Mrs. Lowenstein, Minutes of Board Meeting, February 6, 1928, Minutes of Board Meetings, 1917-1940, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

the Jewish community and would have been unthinkable in the Orthodox Jewish community.

Jewish observance and culture such as Council Sabbath did appear in the organization's activities, but sometimes such Jewishness appeared to founder. For example, when the group tried to establish a Bible study in conjunction with the Temple sisterhoods in December 1920, the group voted to "postpone indefinitely" the calling of a conference of Sisterhoods for that purpose only a month later. No further mention of such a Bible study appeared in the records for nearly six years. When it did, the Chairman of the Bible Study Class "reported that her efforts had proven unsuccessful, and she deemed it advisable to discontinue classes." Classes only continued when five members of the Council Board agreed to assist with the classes.⁵⁰ In one somewhat more public example, the Council refused an opportunity to combine public service work and Jewishness. In 1922, Judge A.B. Frey wrote and asked that the St. Louis NCJW undertake "social service work amongst the Jewish prisoners at Jefferson City." However, the response was to refer him to the city's Temple Sisterhoods. No reason for the refusal to take on the project was listed in the minutes. However, it does fit the pattern of the organization to rarely combine social justice and general public welfare with Jewish activities during this period.

During the 1920s, the St. Louis NCJW "kept its head down," promoting programs that reinforced an image of caring middle-class American women. During this period,

⁵⁰ Motion by Mrs. Goldsmith, Minutes of Board Meeting, December 6, 1920; General Announcement, Minutes of Board Meeting, January 3, 1921; and Report by Mrs. Licht, Minutes of Board Meeting, January 3, 1927, Minutes of Board Meetings, 1917-1940, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

when Jews felt simultaneously accepted and marginalized, promoting themselves as upstanding middle-class Americans gave a sense of security to the members of the NCJW. Although Council did engage in Jewish activities, it did not ascribe to one single Jewish denomination or credo, nor did it single-mindedly focus on Jewish issues. In so doing, Council was able to keep members from varied backgrounds united in their work. It was also able to carry out work associated with non-Jewish middle-class women's voluntary associations. Council thus held the middle ground, leaving more controversial activities, such as Zionism, to Jewish organizations such as Hadassah, while relying on the synagogue sisterhoods to cover the daily work of Jewish observance and ritual maintenance. In this way, Council gave a non-threatening public face to Jewish womanhood in a time when American Jews were aware of their marginal acceptance and success. The next decade would bring more reasons to engage in work on behalf of the downtrodden as well as a stronger sense than ever of Jewish marginalization.

Chapter 4—Facing Haman’s Rise: Anti-Semitism, Race, and Migration

In June 1938, the Jewish Federation of St. Louis directed its Social Planning Council to appoint a committee to examine “problems incident to the location of Council House’s future operations.”¹ Council House was a recreational center run by the St. Louis Chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women, where young people could take classes and engage in activities to provide skills and experiences that would prevent delinquency and promote leadership. An individual who was willing to financially support an outpost program of Council House began the process of examining the Council House’s location in order to consider moving it. Although nothing happened in 1938, within a year, the Jewish Federation was again calling for a study.²

The resulting 17-page report contains some interesting findings and did recommend a move for Council House. It is in these findings and the justification for a move that this case becomes interesting. According to the report, there were two main reasons for the move: 1) the presence of African Americans in the existing neighborhood and 2) the diminishing Jewish population in that same area. The report was quite explicit in its concerns about the racial composition of the neighborhood, and it clearly indicated that those in charge of the study considered the Jewish clientele base for Council House to be a *white* clientele base. In one passage, it stated:

¹ “Report of Council House Study Committee of the Social Planning Council,” January 29, 1940, Annual Report, 1939-1940, Records 1895-1984, Folder 2, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-), Western Historical Manuscript Collection-St. Louis.

² Ibid.

All authorities agree that it was impossible to say when the rest of the area served by Council House might become Negro, but all felt it might happen any day.... From the above it is apparent that at an unpredictable date in the near future Council House will have no white clientele left to serve in its present location....³

At the same time, however, the report made it quite clear that the new location for Council House had to “be an area of Jewish concentration because of the agency’s ability to serve such a group.”⁴ Rather than simply expressing a concern about the fact that the population in Council House’s neighborhood was becoming increasingly non-Jewish, the report was quite clear about issues of race.

The Council House gave two primary reasons for its move in 1939-1940: “the sharp reduction of the Jewish clientele and the increasing pressure of the Negro population in the near proximity of Council House.”⁵ This reflects the two concerns pulling at Jews during this time: the need to maintain the Jewish community in the face of anti-Semitic hostilities and the need to find safety by blending in as part of the white middle class. However, the records actually showed reasons why the Council House should have been fairly secure in both its Jewish identity and in its relationship with the white non-Jewish community. For example, in 1937-38, the Annual Report for Council noted that Council House appealed especially to Jews. It stated,

A constant question put is that of the number of Jewish young people of Council House. A recent survey revealed that sixty percent of our clients are Jewish, 40% non-Jewish. Our own records show that the Jewish element is exceedingly more active at Council House than the non-Jewish.⁶

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Annual Report, 1937-1938, Presidents’ Reports, 1936-1958, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

At the same time, however, the Council House philosophy and activities in no way focused on anything specifically Jewish. In fact, its philosophy stated that “Council House is predicated upon the need for service in low income economic areas, and is currently concentrating its energies on the normal child, the group which is ignored more or less....”⁷ Activities included knitting and other craft classes, ballroom and tap dancing, storytelling, and sports.⁸ Jewishness did not seem such a concern for the group, yet it was important enough to precipitate the move.

The organization’s whiteness and relationship with the white community was also not in question, but became important during the move. For example, Council House’s Annual Report in 1939-1940 made it clear that the Council House had widespread community support. It explained,

Improved community relations were shown in the authorization of an increase in the Council House budget by the United Charities following a visit to the House...; by the increase in radio and newspaper publicity;...and the general “Climate of Opinion” among lay and professional people.⁹

The same report claimed that Council House had “created public good will.”¹⁰ Again, although the facts demonstrate little reason for the group to have had concerns about its status in the general non-Jewish white community, it still felt that the move was of utmost importance.

⁷ “Philosophy,” Summary Report of Council House, 1939-1940, Records 1895-1984, Folder 2, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

⁸ “Crafts,” Summary Report of Council House, 1939-1940, Records 1895-1984, Folder 2, and Annual Report, 1939-1940, Presidents’ Reports, 1936-1958, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

⁹ Summary Report of Council House, 1939-1940, Records 1895-1984, Folder 2, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

¹⁰ Annual Report, 1939-1940, Presidents’ Reports, 1936-1958, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

Both race and ethnicity were important to Council House in its decision to move.

The Summary Report on the move explained the importance of race to the decision:

[Council House's] sponsoring group, its board of directors and its staff have no Negroes in their constituency. At no time in its history has the agency given service to Negroes, nor has its support come from Negroes, other than Negro contributions to the United Charities Campaign, since its participation in the funds so raised. Consequently, it was felt that the agency...was not in a position to serve the Negro group.¹¹

However, at no point had the group explicitly stated that its purpose was to serve whites, or even Jews, exclusively. Council House did serve non-Jewish whites, and was therefore not a religiously-based entity. In fact, the only explicit description of its client base was economic and social—to serve “normal” children in a low-income neighborhood. While a group “taking care of its own” might have overlooked African Americans because they were of a different religious background, Council House was taking care of more than just the Jewish community. Race was referenced in the documents, and it was clearly an issue for Council House at this time.¹²

Although the move was predicated upon the issue of Jewishness, it was not an issue in the records before 1939. In the Report, however, the need to follow the Jewish community into the city's western suburb appeared urgent.¹³ The Summary Report on the move noted that Jewish population was decreasing in the neighborhood around Council House. In fact, in 1939, only 24% of the new club registrations were for Jewish

¹¹ “Reasons,” Part V, A, Summary Report of Council House, 1939-1940, Records 1895-1984, Folder 2, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

¹² For more information on the conflicts between homoreligious social services and race, see Ellen Herman, “The Difference Difference Makes: Justine Wise Polier and Religious Matching in Twentieth-Century Child Adoption,” in *Religion and American Culture* 10.1 (Winter 2000), 57-98.

¹³ “Report of Council House Study Committee of the Social Planning Council,” January 29, 1940, Annual Report, 1939-1940, Records 1895-1984, Folder 2, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

young people. The remaining 76% of new participants were non-Jewish.¹⁴ The group also made it clear that its new location had to be located in “an area of Jewish concentration because of the agency’s ability to serve such a group.”¹⁵

Council House’s sudden need to avoid African Americans and to join other Jews in their migration across the city could easily be seen as a form of racism and “white flight.” Generally, the move out of city centers into suburbs indicated a desire to flee racial integration, especially in the presence of housing restrictions that prevented non-whites from moving into new areas.¹⁶ In this case, however, the real presence of a concern regarding the Jewishness of the organization and its clientele indicates a slightly more complicated set of factors. The concern of maintaining the Jewish community was also an important influence in the decision-making process. Jews were not simply moving away from non-whites or non-Jews; they were also moving along with other Jews and with Jewish institutions as well. For Jews to live near other Jews could represent a way to maintain security through community bonds. Council was, during this period, more interested in keeping Jewish ties and less interested in blending in than it had been the decade before. The women of Council were, in some ways, looking for a stronger sense of community. They wanted to be “good neighbors” to other Jews as well as to middle-class whites.

¹⁴ “Reasons,” Part I, B, Summary Report of Council House, 1939-1940, Records 1895-1984, Folder 2, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

¹⁵ “Reasons,” Part II, 1, Summary Report of Council House, 1939-1940, Records 1895-1984, Folder 2, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

¹⁶ For more on suburbanization, see Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1985. Restrictions were in place in the Council House neighborhood, but not enforced. See “Reasons,” Part A, Summary Report of Council House, 1939-1940, Records 1895-1984, Folder 2, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

Interestingly, Council House inadvertently addressed its own needs when writing about its purpose in serving young people in 1939: “Two fundamental drives are common to adolescents, the desire to ‘belong’ and the need for security.”¹⁷ These two needs represent the combination of factors that characterize the 1930s for the St. Louis Council and for the St. Louis Jewish community in general. Neither wholly a case of “white flight” nor a desire to promote a distinctly Jewish identity, the Council House move demonstrated the way in which multiple factors could interact in the formation of Jewish identity for the middle class women of the NCJW. The study promoted a white identity that was also clearly Jewish. The Jewish identity of these women, then, became an important counterbalance to their status as white women in a Southern city. They wished to find belonging and security as part of the white community, but also as a strong community of Jews.

Why did the 1930s pose such a challenge for these women? What factors caused their need to assert their whiteness and Jewishness through moving the Council House to a new location? We have evidence that many in the Jewish community reached out to African Americans and tried to fight racism.¹⁸ However, we also know that the 1930s were a tenuous and frightening time for Jews in St. Louis and throughout around the

¹⁷ Summary Report of Council House, 6, 1939-1940, Records 1895-1984, Folder 2, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

¹⁸ Such activities occurred both inside and outside St. Louis. Most of it, however, occurred after the 1930s. For more information, see Mary Kimbrough and Margaret W. Dagen, *Victory without Violence: The First Ten Years of the St. Louis Committee of Racial Equality (CORE), 1947-1957* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000); August Meier and Elliott M. Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975); Mark K. Bauman and Berkley Kalin, *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997); Debra L. Schultz, *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); and Clive Webb, *Fight against Fear: Southern Jews and Black Civil Rights* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001).

world. The same marginality and hatred that plagued Jews in the previous decade only increased as anti-Semitism continued to rise during the 1930s. The act of “whitening” was one possible response to an atmosphere of anxiety. The 1930s brought identity problems to the St. Louis Council as the city changed and as the group’s members faced concerns about their status as white Americans. The women of the St. Louis NCJW struggled to clearly define their programs and themselves during the years from 1929 to 1941, as they faced local, national, and international crisis and change. They ultimately emerged with a stronger sense of their own identity and their social position as a voluntary association as the nation entered the 1940s and found itself embroiled in war.

During the 1930s, St. Louis was a city in the midst of upheaval, which affected the city’s Jewish community profoundly. It was, in fact, some of these developments that led to Jewish migration within the city and the urge to emphasize a white middle-class identity, the two issues at the heart of the Council House report. The economic problems of the Depression brought not only human suffering from poverty, hunger, and illness, but it also brought scapegoating and hatred. At the beginning of the decade, wages were falling and unemployment was rising. African Americans suffered special economic hardships, with their unemployment rates reaching as high as 40% by the end of 1931.¹⁹ Additionally, some St. Louisans took out their economic frustrations on African Americans. Racism appeared in the firing of African American workers “in wholesale lots,” and the unequal allocation of pay and pay increases to black and white workers.²⁰

¹⁹ Katharine T. Corbett, *In Her Place: A Guide to St. Louis Women's History* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1999), 224.

²⁰ James Neal Primm, *Lion of the Valley: St. Louis, Missouri, 1764-1980* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1998), 468-469.

As economic conditions worsened, people looked for someone to blame. Around the country, men like Father Charles Coughlin and Gerald L.K. Smith utilized mass media to spread their message of anti-Semitic hatred. Ordinary men and women also banded together in their effort to find a scapegoat. According to one historian, over 100 anti-Semitic groups sprang up during the 1930s, “mostly in response to the depression.”²¹ Leonard Dinnerstein eloquently sums up the crisis that faced American Jews during this period:

But in the 1930s the intensity of anti-Semitism, the appeal of hate organizations, and the popularity of demagogues combined with an escalation of serious physical abuse, especially in the cities of the northeast and midwest where more than 85 percent of all American Jews dwelled, to have an absolutely chilling effect.²²

In St. Louis, the Friends of New Germany emerged to openly blame Jews for the nation’s problems. This Nazi sympathizer organization, which would later change its name to the German American Volksbund, formed a St. Louis chapter in 1933 and started distributing anti-Semitic propaganda. At the corner of Arsenal Street and Grand Street, its members distributed stickers blaming the Depression on Jews. They also printed and distributed cards that read “Help Patriotic Americans Recapture the USA: Boycott the Jew.”²³ According to Walter Ehrlich, there were many other anti-Semitic groups in St. Louis as well, including the “Silver Shirts,” an American Nazi group headed by William Dudley Pelley, as well as a group headed by Gerald L.K. Smith.²⁴

²¹ Hasia R. Diner, *A New Promised Land: A History of Jews in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 79-80 and Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 134.

²² Dinnerstein, 126.

²³ Burton Alan Boxerman, “Reaction of the St. Louis Jewish Community to Anti-Semitism, 1933-1945” (Ph.D. diss., St. Louis University, 1967), 67-68.

²⁴ Walter Ehrlich, *Zion in the Valley: The Jewish Community of St. Louis* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002), Volume II, 241 and Dinnerstein, 111.

Along with such blatant and vitriolic displays of anti-Jewish hatred, there were also smaller events and instances that demonstrated that the 1930s was a more unwelcoming time for American Jews. In St. Louis, there were many who silently or vocally agreed with Hitler's attitudes toward Jews. Even Charles Lindbergh, the local hero who had made St. Louis famous with his record-breaking solo trans-Atlantic flight, publicly espoused pro-Germany and pro-Nazi sympathies, along with anti-Semitic rhetoric.²⁵ One local restaurant actually had a sign that proclaimed "No Dogs or Jews Allowed."²⁶ St. Louis's Jews could not ignore these frightening developments, and the community began to discuss its plight and the best ways to cope.

The Modern View, an Anglo-Jewish publication in St. Louis, printed international and national news stories of interest to the Jewish community, as well as local information for St. Louis's Jews. During the 1930s, it ran stories that mentioned some of the national developments regarding anti-Semitism, informing the St. Louis community of the growth of such attitudes. For example, in 1935, two stories appeared that demonstrated problems in other parts of the nation. One article explained that Sufi Abdul Hamid, a Harlem demagogue who had been acquitted earlier of inciting pogroms against Harlem's Jews, had been "convicted of preaching atheism and of selling pamphlets exhorting to religious hatred on the street without a license...."²⁷ Although the events of the article were not occurring in St. Louis, they did form part of a national context of

²⁵ Dinnerstein, 129-130.

²⁶ Ehrlich, II, 240.

²⁷ "'Black Hitler' Found Guilty of Atheism; Faces Prison or Deportation," January 24, 1935, *Modern View*, 15.

growing anti-Semitism²⁸ and were therefore of interest to the *Modern View* and its readers.

Only a week later, another article described Louis T. McFadden's campaign for president in 1936 on a Fascist platform, including McFadden's anti-Semitism. Although few took him seriously, such political views represented a terrible threat: "McFaddenism, as ridiculous as it may appear today, is a definite symptom of something happening in this country [emphasis added], and to ignore it is not statesmanship."²⁹ Although the *Modern View* rarely gave its readers explicit direction for fighting anti-Semitism, it did suggest that ignoring it would be very perilous. It urged its readers to be aware of world happenings that could signal problems for all Jews, everywhere.

Community leaders also urged St. Louis's Jews to think about the problems facing all Jewish people during this period and sometimes to take action. In 1935, Rabbi Samuel Thurman of United Hebrew Temple spoke on "America and the World Court—A Reply to Father Coughlin" to those who attended his Friday night services.³⁰ In 1939, Rabbi Gordon gave a sermon that urged parents to discuss anti-Semitism with their children because "he felt the problem of Jewish persecution was a grim reality which could not be ignored or minimized."³¹

At the same time, other sermons and editorials urged Jews to remember to see their problems in the context of the greater community. In January of 1935, C. Harley

²⁸ Hasia R. Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915-1935* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press), 1977, 79.

²⁹ *Modern View*, Jan. 31, 1935, 9.

³⁰ *Modern View*, Jan 31, 1935, 10.

³¹ Boxerman, 128.

Grattan urged readers of the *Modern View* to act in the interest of general social order rather than simply on behalf of Jewish concerns:

I should like to say that, first and foremost, the Jews should take note of their own internal incoherence as a group and recognize that they can solve nothing as *Jews*. They must rather ally themselves as their interests dictate, with those groups within the general population whose programs best promise to solve their problems.³²

Read one way, this could be seen as a call to blend in with non-Jewish society. During a period of such open anti-Semitism, the idea of more fully assimilating the Jewish community into the larger community may have held some appeal as a way to avoid calling attention to themselves as Jews. During the 1930s, the Jews of St. Louis did join with many of their neighbors in one way: they moved out from the center of the city towards the suburbs.

The move west towards the city's suburbs has been called an expression of "the desire to live among one's own kind,"³³ but it could also be seen as a way to live among other members of the middle class who were defined as white. Whether it was an attempt to merge into other, non-Jewish middle-class enclaves or a way to maintain a stronger Jewish identity by migrating with the rest of the community, the evidence points to a complex blend of factors that contributed to the decision to move: anti-Semitism, religious practice, socio-economic class standing, race, and increased physical mobility all had a role to play.

In a very basic way, Jewish identity has traditionally related to the area in which one lived. This occurred due to the establishment of official, government-sanctioned ghettos and shtetls in Europe, but also as a result of religious practice. Because of

³² "Not as Jews," *Modern View*, January 19, 1935, 9.

³³ Ehrlich, II, 433.

religious prohibitions against riding (eventually driving), carrying money, or walking more than two miles on the Sabbath, observant Jews lived in close proximity to one another and to the locations of their religious institutions. This enclosed world could also provide, as Irving Howe has noted, a self-perpetuating sense of insularity. As he explains, “Because the *shtetl* lived in constant expectation of external attack, all inner tendencies making for disintegration were kept in check.”³⁴

This was not the case in America, however, and American Jews encountered different challenges and new opportunities as a result of living in the United States. The creation of Jewish identity in the United States was not due to external threat, but to internal factors that arose as individuals negotiated the intersection of race and ethnicity in the American cultural landscape.

As American Jews experienced economic success and class mobility, and as Reform Judaism began to alter traditional Sabbath prohibitions, the clearly-identified boundaries of the traditional Jewish neighborhood began to break down. As Karen Brodtkin explains in her book, *How Jews Became White Folks*, “Although changing views on who was white made it easier for Euro-ethnics to become middle class, economic prosperity also played a very powerful role in the whitening process.”³⁵

At this point, the question of identity entered the geographic and physical landscape, and Jewish identity became linked to where one lived, both in terms of region and in terms of neighborhood. As one author explains it, there was, for some Jews, a

³⁴ Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the Eastern European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (New York: Galahad Books, 1976), 11.

³⁵ Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 37.

sense that living in a Jewish neighborhood gave one a stronger sense of identity than Jewish religious practice. She states, “For some Jews, geography superceded Torah.”³⁶

However, for some Jews, living in a Jewish neighborhood was not so important. According to Walter Ehrlich, a leading authority on St. Louis’s Jewish community, it was the economic success of the German Reform Jews of St. Louis that provided a foundation for Jews’ feelings of acceptance in that city.³⁷ Some of these Jews became very wealthy and very prominent, and they lived in neighborhoods with other well-to-do St. Louisans, rather than with other Jews. They also attended social events with the wealthy elite of St. Louis and sat alongside them on various community committees and boards, including the executive committee that began the planning of St. Louis’s 1904 World’s Fair.³⁸ In this way, some members of the German Jewish community of St. Louis moved in a world that did not have an explicitly Jewish character at all.³⁹ With the arrival of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, however, a vibrant and distinctly Jewish community emerged in St. Louis.

Like other immigrant groups in St. Louis, Jews from Eastern Europe established their own neighborhood. Known as “the Ghetto,” this Jewish neighborhood provided home to some non-Jews, but the businesses and religious institutions there were overtly Jewish. Because many of these newcomers were more Orthodox in their religious observance than their German counterparts, their community was, in some sense, a Jewish community apart.

³⁶ Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 4-5.

³⁷ Walter Ehrlich, *Zion in the Valley: The Jewish Community of St. Louis*, Volume I: 1807-1907 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 376, 381-382.

³⁸ Ehrlich, I, 392.

³⁹ Ehrlich, I, 394-396.

In the Ghetto, many of the signs were in Yiddish, and kosher butcher shops and Hebrew schools stood on practically every other corner.⁴⁰ This was definitely not the world inhabited by the middle-class, Reform German Jew. These two Jewish communities—German/Reform and Eastern European/Orthodox—lived in different neighborhoods, attended different synagogues, and sent their children to different schools, but in the early years of the twentieth century they had found some basis for interaction in their common self-identification as Jewish Americans.⁴¹ As both groups integrated themselves into American society and gave birth to new American generations, their differences waned somewhat. At the same time, their common heritage remained.

By 1930, Jewish individuals and families in St. Louis were beginning their migration to the city's western neighborhoods. While both the Reform/German community and the Orthodox/Eastern European communities inhabited the region of St. Louis known as the "Central Corridor," the Reform community was already moving to the south and west along that corridor by the first decade of the 1900s.⁴² By 1935, the Jews of the Ghetto were following suit, finding homes in the western suburbs of St. Louis. St. Louis was a residentially-segregated city during this period, and many restrictive covenants were in place to keep African Americans and "non-Caucasians" out of particular areas. This phrase was sometimes interpreted to include Jews. The first major legal challenge to these covenants in St. Louis did not occur until 1948 in *Shelley v. Kraemer*, and they were not entirely outlawed in St. Louis until several years later. It is interesting to note, however, that the initial Shelley case occurred in St. Louis in 1938.

⁴⁰ Ehrlich, II, 30.

⁴¹ Ehrlich, I, 279.

⁴² Ehrlich, II, 89-90.

It is also noteworthy that the neighborhood in which Council House was located did have restrictions—“a real estate owners’ agreement”—that prevented renting or selling property to African Americans. Those restrictions were not to run out until 1945.⁴³ Clearly, many landlords in St. Louis had begun to consider Jews to be whites, although that had not always been the case.

As Jewish individuals and their families moved to the western suburbs, many of their institutions followed. This was particularly important for the Orthodox synagogues because they needed a daily minyan (a count of 10 adult Jewish males) to participate in services and because their congregants would not violate the Sabbath to drive or to walk over two miles from home to attend services at their old synagogue, but would simply find a synagogue in their new neighborhood.

Out of a list of sixteen synagogues of various denominations that were holding services in St. Louis in 1935, six had moved to new quarters between 1925 and 1935. Several of those had actually moved in the year 1930.⁴⁴ This list of synagogues, which appears in a book entitled *The Book of Memories*, included several which made note in their histories of the need to move in order to be near their congregants. For example, Beth David Congregation, organized in 1908, proudly proclaimed itself a “pioneer” in northwest St. Louis: “It was the first to serve the influx of the new Jewish community that migrated from the Eastern part of the town in 1905.”⁴⁵ Another synagogue, Beth Hamidrosch Hagodol, organized in 1879, remained in the same location in the eastern part

⁴³ “Reasons,” Part A, Summary Report of Council House, 1939-1940, Records 1895-1984, Folder 2, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

⁴⁴ Z. Abrams, *The Book of Memories* (New York: Farlag “Yidin”/Hub Publishing Co., 1932). Housed in the Saul Brodsky Jewish Community Library, St. Louis, Missouri.

⁴⁵ Abrams, 93.

of the city until 1920, when they bought a private house to be converted into a synagogue four years later, because the “population moved west.”⁴⁶

Not all synagogues felt the need to move west so pressing. In fact, Shaarith S’fard Congregation, organized in 1886, remained in its 1905 location, in spite of changing neighborhood composition. According to the *Book of Memories*, “In 1929, when the neighborhood became settled by Negroes, a \$45,000 offer was made on the building, to be used as a Negro church. But the directorate rejected the offer, and to this very day the Shaarith S’fard serves as a religious center for downtown Jewry.”⁴⁷ However, the connection to the Jewish population and a Jewish identity were the reasons synagogues cited most often as the basis for their desire to move during this period.

As the Jewish residents of St. Louis moved west into the city’s suburbs, the institutions and organizations associated with the Jewish community also moved. The community moved in order to assimilate into non-Jewish middle-class life, but parts of it moved in order to maintain the community as a more complete whole. In the case of Council House, a Jewish institution’s heavily-documented desire to move included both the need to follow the Jewish community, most of which had already moved west before 1935, as well as the desire to flee the changing racial composition of its neighborhood. Thus the migration rested on two important issues in the minds of St. Louis’s Jews: anti-Semitism and Jewish survival. These issues were also on the minds of Council members throughout the 1930s, even before the group decided to move Council House.

The concern over anti-Semitism showed primarily in Council’s concern over refugees and world affairs. Although Council had been heavily involved in immigrant

⁴⁶ Abrams, 52-54.

⁴⁷ Abrams, 68-69.

aid for much of its history, war in Europe and growing problems for Jews there gave the work a new urgency. In October 1935, the national president of the group, Mrs. Arthur Brin, sent a message to her colleagues around the country. She spoke of Jewish survival and heritage and of those who “want to live as affirmative Jews.” She explained that “to them Judaism is not a burden.... It is a proud heritage. Its message to a world struggling for social amelioration and peace is as significant today as in ancient times.” She also touched upon the issue of global unrest: “We feel again that we are a people of destiny, deathless and unconquerable. On these Holy Days we sense the significance of the new tragedies, the new problems, the new triumphs which face us.”⁴⁸

The following February, Mrs. Freda Cronheim, the president of St. Louis’s local chapter addressed the issue of anti-Semitism in slightly more direct terms:

We must unfortunately as a people continuously meet the mighty waves of prejudice; we must ever and always realize that as individuals we add to the sum total of public opinion, but it is alas most unfortunate that our task is not easy. The brilliant address we were privileged to hear at our last meeting but emphasized, “Do we as Jews know our own heritage and our own responsibilities?”⁴⁹

These two women sounded a general call to their organization to pay attention to the growth of anti-Semitism and to fight it by acting publicly as good examples to non-Jews while remaining proudly and steadfastly Jewish. This was a much more direct approach than we saw in the 1920s, when emphasizing American identity was enough. Now

⁴⁸ Records, 1895-1984, Box 5, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Council members were actively emphasizing their Jewishness, and some of Council's work in the early and mid-1930s reflected such an objective.⁵⁰

During the period from 1930 to 1936, the St. Louis Council tried to be exemplars of Jewish charity and goodwill, to both the Jewish and non-Jewish communities, and it tried to promote Jewish values, although sometimes they exhibited a more assimilationist tone. Most of the group's activities during these years focused on peace work and social service. During 1930, the group jointly hosted a radio show with the city's synagogue sisterhoods on KWK on Saturday afternoons. The show gave a public face to Jewish women's volunteerism and publicized some of their activities. The activities included assistance to children, such as the School Friend program, which found "registered teachers to tutor children who have fallen behind in their studies." The group also continued its milk program through 1933, provided scholarships to young people, assisted the deaf and blind, promoted inoculation for diphtheria and smallpox, provided clothing to the unemployed, and worked with the VA Hospital and the Jewish Hospital to provide needed volunteer services and resources.⁵¹ All of these activities promoted a caring face to the public and filled some very important needs in the community. The tension between the non-Jewish community and the group's Jewish identity, however, did occasionally show itself in the records.

The task of simultaneously presenting a good example to the entire city while maintaining a strongly Jewish identity could be very challenging. A message from the

⁵⁰ Please note: there are few records for the early 1930s. There are no meeting minutes from May 1928-October 1930 and from May 1931 to October 1936, although there are some monthly bulletins from these years.

⁵¹ Bulletin, December 1, 1933, Box 6, and Minutes of Regular Meeting, October 13, 1930, Minutes of Regular Meetings, 1920-1957, Box 5, National Council Of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

Council President to the group's members in May of 1932 alluded to this: "The past two years have been difficult for all of us; difficult in our private lives, difficult in our relationship to each other and to the community."⁵² In 1934, a puzzling juxtaposition emerged in the Council bulletins. In October of that year, the Bulletin advertised a new topic for the Council Religious Group: "The problem of anti-Semitism touches all of our lives. To meet this an intelligent attitude and understanding of the situation is imperative. The Religious Group will study the broad subject of 'Anti-Semitism Today.'"⁵³ The following month, Dr. Theodore Carsell Hume spoke to Council about "War Clouds Over Europe."⁵⁴ The issues of Jewish problems at home and abroad were clearly important topics and expressed a Jewish identification. Then, in December of the same year, two small notices shed light on an identity that was rather different. In promoting a fundraising project, the following poem was used: "'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the town/Not a ticket was left, not a single 'let-down'!" Another ad for a fundraising activity asked "Do You believe in Santa Claus? If so—and even if you don't—buying from the Blind Display at the coming meeting will make these poor unfortunates believe in him."⁵⁵ Clearly, Council's outreach to the community involved them in such non-Jewish celebrations as Christmas. Although the Jewish community did not universally frown upon shallow participation in some Christmas activities⁵⁶, this

⁵² "Presidential Message," Bulletin, May 1, 1932, Box 6, National Council Of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

⁵³ Bulletin, October 1, 1934, May 1, 1932, Box 6, National Council Of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

⁵⁴ Bulletin, November 1, 1934, Box 6, National Council Of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

⁵⁵ "Council House News," Bulletin, December 1, 1934, Box 6, National Council Of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

⁵⁶ *Modern View*, January 17, 1930, 10.

does show a mixing of Jewish identity and values with the more dominant identity of the non-Jewish citizens of St. Louis.

As the decade wore on, the need to present a good example at home was overtaken by the need to think about the worldwide Jewish community. Council's activities began to reflect a growing concern about conditions in Europe and about the growing global crisis arising from Nazism and anti-Semitism. One excellent example of the kind of activities these concerns sparked is the Council Peace Group. Active throughout the 1930s, the group became even more vocal and busy at the end of the decade:

Despite the menacing threat in the air, our Peace Group has earnestly and doggedly kept on its way. It is this quality of tenacity, this persistency [sic] in striving towards an ideal that once again characterizes the nature of the peace work accomplished during this year.⁵⁷

One can also observe the effects of global events in the renewed efforts of the Immigrant Aid Committee. In May 1936, the National office sent out a letter urging Council members not to engage in conflict with Hadassah over the placement of German and Jewish refugees.⁵⁸ At the same time, Council was certainly a competitive player in the realm of immigrant assistance:

[the Committee on Immigrant Aid] has not only served as official greeters to both transient and permanent German refugees, but, in many cases, has secured affidavits and rendered assistance to those refugees desiring to come to St. Louis. The near future assures us that many more refugees will become our responsibility. It is comforting to know that this

⁵⁷ Annual Report, 1936-1937, Presidents' Reports, 1936-1958, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

⁵⁸ Minutes of Regular Meeting, May 11, 1936, Minutes of Regular Meetings, 1920-1957, Box 5, National Council Of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

group...will be instrumental in easing the difficult problems that beset the refugee.⁵⁹

Through the end of the decade, the group saw more refugees coming into the city, and more volunteers contributed to assisting them, including work with German Children's Aid and the St. Louis Committee for Refugees.⁶⁰

Jewish issues became more prevalent at the end of the decade as well. In 1937, connections with the local Board of Religious Organizations were active and strong, and Council's Religion Committee was also quite busy, holding religious activities and services at the Home for Aged and Infirm Israelites and the Fee Fee Sanitarium. Council's President credited religion as the source of the group's philanthropy: "...surely through all our work, the humanitarian impulse is the offspring of the teachings of our great religion."⁶¹ 1937 also saw the creation of a forum on Contemporary Jewish Affairs to confront "the religious problems facing [Council members] today."⁶² The Jewish Coordinating Council of St. Louis highlighted some of these problems in a report entitled "Handling Discrimination in Employment." Clearly the problem of anti-Semitism that Jews had faced at the beginning of the decade had not disappeared.⁶³ Of course, Jews were not the only ones facing various kinds of discrimination at the end of the 1930s in St. Louis.

⁵⁹ Annual Report, 1936-1937, Presidents' Reports, 1936-1958, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

⁶⁰ Annual Report, 1938-1939, Presidents' Reports, 1936-1958, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

⁶¹ Annual Report, 1936-1937, 1937-1938, and 1938-1939, Presidents' Reports, 1936-1958, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

⁶² Annual Report, 1937-1938, Presidents' Reports, 1936-1958, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

⁶³ Minutes of Regular Meeting, November 13, 1939, Minutes of Regular Meetings, 1920-1957, Box 5, National Council Of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

The African American community had also faced very harsh discrimination during the 1930s, both in St. Louis and across the nation. This period was one of alienation, frustration, and violence, and lynchings occurred in Missouri throughout the 1930s.⁶⁴ Even when violence was not open, tension boiled beneath the surface of race relations in the 1930s. Sadly, this included the relations between African Americans and Jews.

According to Murray Friedman, rising tensions between African Americans and Jews were an important part of the 1930s. He explains, “That black-Jewish antagonisms flared into the open in the 1930s hardly seems surprising, given the collapse of the nation’s economy and the lower classes’ struggle for survival.”⁶⁵ Hasia Diner also notes the problems present during this decade when she writes, “In analyzing the drift of the American Jewish scene and the current of race relations, 1935 emerged as a symbolic date when these two phenomena ceased to operate together.”⁶⁶ Both authors note that this is not to say that Jews and African Americans ceased to work together and to see common cause in their fight against discrimination. It is important to note, however, that any black-Jewish alliance that existed before or after was sorely tested by the problems facing both groups during the 1930s.

Perhaps the tension was borne of proximity. Diner notes that through the 1920s, African Americans and Jews often shared the same residential spaces in American cities.⁶⁷ In St. Louis, where residential segregation was the norm, Jews and African Americans

⁶⁴ Lorenzo Johnston Greene, Gary R. Kremer, and Anthony F. Holland, *Missouri's Black Heritage* (Saint Louis: Forum Press, 1980), 150-153.

⁶⁵ Murray Friedman, *What Went Wrong?: The Creation and Collapse of the Black-Jewish Alliance* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 89.

⁶⁶ Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land*, 238.

⁶⁷ Diner, *Struggles in the Promised Land*, 95.

often faced similar exclusions in restrictive covenants and related attempts to control residential settlement. However, as we have noted in St. Louis, despite anti-Semitism, some areas were opening up to Jewish settlement during the 1930s. Those who had the financial means were moving into the western portions of the city. In her discussion of similar migration events in Harlem, Diner notes that although violence was rare, "...the shifts in population from Jewish to Black did not take place without any controversy."⁶⁸ The Council House move certainly provides an example of such an upheaval.

In the 1930s, the St. Louis Council, especially its Council House project, found the need to belong and to find security overwhelming. In light of increasing anti-Semitism and racism during the Depression, its members wanted to quietly blend into the city's white middle class and to distance themselves from any non-whites. At the same time, the group found a new and compelling need to stand together with the Jewish community and to find pride in its Jewish heritage. This increase in Jewish identity was an indication of what was to come as global anti-Semitism became even more prevalent during the 1940s. The need to blend in, this time as patriotic Americans contributing to the war effort, would continue, while the need to stand strong as Jews in the face of trouble was only going to grow in the next decade.

⁶⁸ Diner, *Struggles in the Promised Land*, 97.

Chapter 5—Bringing Mordecai to the King’s Court: Jewish Identity, War, and the Dawning of a New Era

Like Esther, America’s Jews found a new strength in their Jewish identity during the 1940s. It was during this time that many American Jews altered their identity, never again feeling quite comfortable with the concept of having to hide or feel shame when publicly declaring their Jewishness. This new openness regarding Jewish identity had both global and local effects. With the creation of the nation of Israel, the decision to support a Jewish state became a matter of Jewish pride, rather than one of agreement with the abstract concepts or tactics of Zionism; the dreams of a Jewish homeland were now concrete and real.

At a more local level, Jews felt sharply the need to work against injustice and discrimination anywhere they found it. Nazi hierarchies and discussions of a “master race” caused alarm among those who noticed parallels in American race politics. Jews began to work for social justice in a more aggressive and personal way than ever before, vowing that they would never again stand by and allow hatred and bigotry to take hold as it had in Germany.

During these years, the Jewish women of St. Louis experienced a change in how they expressed their Jewish identity. They began to focus on being “good Jews” by expressing a pride in Jewish identity and by focusing on ideals of charity and justice that were rooted in their Jewishness. The change came primarily after the war ended and the full extent of the Holocaust began to be felt. The establishment of Israel also acted as a marker for changes in Jewish identity. If one compares the activities and Jewish

identification of the NCJW before and after World War II, one will find a more pronounced form of Jewishness in the latter period. One can also observe more work on behalf of social justice and equality, especially in terms of racial discrimination in St. Louis. For the women of the St. Louis Council, as for all of America's Jews, the events of the 1940s radically changed the way they felt and expressed their Jewishness. No longer content to "play it safe," the women of St. Louis's Council began to embrace clearly Jewish activities after World War II. They also began to take up the cause of justice for other peoples, especially African Americans, who had suffered from similar marginalization. In order to see this transition, however, one must examine the beginning of the decade and the war itself.

World War II brought dramatic changes to many aspects of American life. For the women of the St. Louis Council, the threat of their organization's decline, along with the need to promote their American identity while also addressing Jewish concerns brought special challenges. The importance of this struggle rests in the delicate balance between being a patriotic American organization and a thriving Jewish organization. There were mentions of the war's effects on the St. Louis NCJW on almost every page of every annual report for the war years. One of the biggest challenges for the organization was the mighty struggle to maintain membership in the face of competing interests. In April 1941, the Council's Vice President of Membership commented on the Council's success in maintaining membership:

In early February the membership Committee had signed as many new members as at the end of the last Council year, this in the face of the war

declaration with its many demands on people, pulling them away from organization work.¹

The challenges confronting the Council, however, were difficult to ignore. Members had less time for meetings, and the young men that had gathered at Council House were joining the Armed Services. Sometimes simply keeping volunteers from pursuing other war work was a challenge. The Jewish Hospital Receptionists, for example, had to drop their program in 1941 because regular workers were in such demand from other areas related to the war effort.²

Even with all the competition for volunteers, the Council maintained a very active constituency, but it was primarily accomplished through the development of their many programs that contributed to the war effort. The full-time nursery school took in children whose mothers were working industrial jobs, and the Civilian Defense Committee aided in salvage drives, helped recruit blood donors, and encouraged the purchase of war bonds.³ The Council also worked with the U.S.O. in order to provide activities for the men and women of the armed services.⁴ Overall, the number of Council endeavors grew as a result of active participation in war-related relief efforts and activities.

Although war-related activities and relief efforts increased the activities of the St. Louis NCJW, the war effort also represented a rival for the NCJW's membership. Issues of staffing and budget became problematic as the city's institutions and citizens funneled

¹ Annual Report of Vice President of Membership Service, April 13, 1941, Records 1895-1984, Folder 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-), Western Historical Manuscript Collection-St. Louis.

² Records, 1895-1984, Folder 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

³ Annual Report 1942-1943, Presidents' Reports, 1936-1958, Box 3; Annual Report, 1941-1942, Presidents' Reports, 1936-1958, Box 3; Council House Annual Report, 1942-1943, Folder 4; and Annual Report of Vice President of Social Service, 1942-1943, Records 1895-1984, Folder 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

⁴ Annual Report 1941-1942 and 1942-1943, Presidents' Reports, 1936-1958, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

their time and money into the war effort. The Council House Annual Report for 1943-1944 reported that "...we are handicapped during these war years by the twin difficulties of budget and skilled personnel."⁵ As the group looked toward the end of the war, the Annual Reports express concerns about the post-war shift back to civilian activities. The reports repeatedly mention the loss of volunteers, and there is a note of weariness in them by 1944. According to the Council House Annual Report for 1943-44, "Service to Council House is perhaps at the lowest ebb that it has ever been, certainly at the lowest point in the last five years...."⁶ Despite these challenges, however, the group survived through its focus on reliably appealing issues-- the war and traditional philanthropic programs.

Between 1941 and 1945, the Council's activities remained focused on their traditional interests of women, children, the poor, and the disadvantaged, but with an eye toward war service. Their charitable work was rarely explicitly Jewish in nature. Instead, as in the past, their work looked very much like the work done by other non-Jewish middle-class women's voluntary associations. By the time the United States entered World War II, the Greater St. Louis Chapter of the NCJW had been involved in such reform work for nearly a quarter of a century. The war had serious implications both for the city of St. Louis and for the women of the NCJW. Defense plans, mobilization, and the increase in production of war materials occupied the minds of many St. Louisans and demanded participation from every resident: "There was a job for each,

⁵ Council House Annual Report 1943-1944, Records 1895-1984, Folder 5, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

⁶ Council House Annual Report 1943-1944, Records 1895-1984, Folder 5, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

a job that could bring victory a little bit closer. Few St. Louisans were found shirking....”⁷ The St. Louis NCJW, like most other American voluntary associations, had to make the war effort its top priority, even when the war threatened the organization’s very existence. As one St. Louis NCJW document from 1943-44 states, “Our older clubs are constantly losing members to the war effort. Our club leadership has been and continues to be taken in the same way.”⁸ We do not have evidence to show what other specific organizations, if any, took Council members’ time and interest away from Council.

Even while focusing on the war, the maternalist focus on women and children and the nurturing of others is clear in the activities of the St. Louis NCJW. This harkens back to the organization’s work during the 1920s, when American identity was so important to its members. The activities of the St. Louis NCJW between 1940 and 1945 included many references to its philanthropic work on behalf of women and children, as well as other groups in need. The St. Louis Chapter focused on providing services for underprivileged children, as well as activities to promote children’s development. The Council House, a facility that acted as clubhouse, classroom, and meeting area, provided a space where Council members could sponsor a variety of children’s activities, including sewing classes, puppetry classes, and after-school clubs.⁹ The Council House Annual Report for 1939-1940 clearly stated the Council’s focus on children:

Council House is predicated on the need for service in low income economic areas, and is currently concentrating its energies on the normal

⁷ Betty Burnett, *St. Louis at War: The Story of a City, 1941-1945* (St. Louis: Patrice Press, 1987), 9.

⁸ Council House Annual Report, 1943-1944, Records 1895-1984, Folder 5, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

⁹ “Crafts,” Summary Report of Council House, 1939-1940, Records 1895-1984, Folder 2, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

child, the group which is ignored more or less by organized philanthropic agencies.¹⁰

The documents denoted a clear concern for the well-being of children and an emphasis on promoting that well-being. The Council House also demonstrated this focus in its motto “Youth is the Future.”¹¹

Council rhetoric also argued that supervision of the young was crucial, especially for the sake of providing moral guidance. This was a long-running theme in Council’s work with youth, especially through the national organization. This style of social reform work, one with a moral as well as a social program, also fit in with other maternalist groups and structures, such as rescue homes and settlement houses.

During the war, the Council further emphasized its concern for children by stressing the war’s potential negative consequences for youth. The 1941-42 Council House Annual Report expressed fears about the possibility of an increase in juvenile crime and delinquency as a result of the disorder of wartime. The report suggested that the best way to prevent such problems was the maintenance of regular recreation for children.¹² Delinquency became a theme in the early years of the war, as anxious experts, reinforced by the efforts of J. Edgar Hoover himself, warned the American people that the disruptions of the family caused by the war would lead to serious disturbances among America’s youth.¹³ The idea of women inculcating morality in the young had roots in

¹⁰ “Philosophy,” Summary Report of Council House, 1939-1940, Records 1895-1984, Folder 2, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

¹¹ Funding Brochure from 1941, Council House Annual Report, 1942, Annual Reports, 1941-1942, Folder 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

¹² Council House Annual Report, 1942-1943, Annual Reports, 1942-1943, Folder 4, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

¹³ James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America’s Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 28.

both the American and the Jewish concepts of womanhood and was thus a comfortable fit for the women of Council.

Supervision of children was more than a way to provide for moral guidance. During the war, this supervision also provided a means of helping the mothers of young children in St. Louis. In St. Louis, many women entered the workforce, especially in the defense industries.¹⁴ Although the St. Louis Council fit the model of women's voluntary associations who supported traditional notions of womanhood, the maternalism of the NCJW also led to a desire to provide assistance for mothers.¹⁵ The Council added several new aspects to its program during the early part of the war, and one of the first orders of business was to create a child-care center for pre-school children, especially those children whose mothers were working.¹⁶ One Annual Report from 1942 described the situation in this way:

...we found ourselves confronted by the tremendous need which the strains of war and the employment of women in industry had created. Demands were rife for a full-time nursery school—with a tacked-on period for children of working mothers!¹⁷

The more traditional focus of the group, in this case, overlapped with the war effort and aided women who were expanding traditional roles for women in the workplace.¹⁸

¹⁴ Burnett, *St. Louis at War*, 43.

¹⁵ Rogow, *Gone to Another Meeting*, 5.

¹⁶ Annual Report, 1942, Annual Reports, 1941-1942, Folder 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

¹⁷ Annual Report, 1942, Annual Reports, 1941-1942, Folder 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

¹⁸ For more information on the ways in which women's war work both built upon and challenged traditional gender roles, see Amy Bentley, *Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), D'Ann Campbell, *Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); Brenda Ralph Lewis, *Women at War: The Women of World War II- at Home, at Work, on the Front Line* (Pleasantville: Reader's Digest, 2002), and Doris Weatherford, *American Women and World War II* (New York: Facts on File, 1990).

The National Council of Jewish Women in St. Louis also extended the concepts of community outreach, generosity, and the nurturing of the less fortunate to include adults in need. As a group composed of middle class women in the tradition of settlement houses and other maternalist institutions, Council had a history of providing services to the poor, and it emphasized this in its Council House activities.¹⁹ Council also worked to provide adult education, especially for immigrants, and it provided educational programs to help women understand rationing and buying during wartime. Although immigration did drop during the war, those immigrants who did come to St. Louis could still take advantage of citizenship classes offered by the St. Louis NCJW.²⁰ Citizenship classes could be a form of uplift for fellow Jews, a means by which middle class Americanized Jews could help the incoming European Jews acculturate, in the hopes of helping them or their children eventually move up the class structure of American society. These activities were undertaken more as successful middle-class Americans than as Jews, however.

Even those comfortable in American life faced new challenges during the war. The Council presented the “How to Buy in Wartime” lecture series as a form of “consumers’ education” to assist housewives in their effort to cope with the food shortages that made traditional cooking a challenge.²¹ According to one source on St. Louis, “When first announced, the point rationing system seemed so complicated that

¹⁹ “Philosophy,” Summary Report of Council House, 1939-1940, Records 1895-1984, Folder 2, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

²⁰ Harry Schneiderman, ed., *The American Jewish Year Book 5699*, Volume 40, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1938), 558.

²¹ “Adult Education,” Council House Annual Report, April 1942, Annual Reports, 1941-1942, Folder 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

civil defense volunteers were enlisted to explain the procedure.”²² The NCJW also promoted the “Family Living” lectures, classes on domestic science led by a WPA specialist, as adult education for the mothers of the children under the care of the NCJW nursery school.²³

Another way to examine Council’s work for adults is through a look at how the group spent the money taken in by the Council Shop, a resale shop benefiting the Council’s projects. From April 1941-December 1944, the majority of Council Shop funds were allocated to Social Service projects, including work with and service to the blind and the Jewish Hospital (library, surgical dressings, etc.).²⁴ As part of providing services for adults, the Council also presented several classes in English and citizenship for immigrants and scheduled regular activities for their Service to the Blind program.²⁵ While all of these activities underscored the caring nature of Council’s public service and demonstrated a focus that one can describe as “maternalism,” the work of the St. Louis NCJW (especially in the form of immigrant aid) still related to issues of Americanization and Jewish identity.

The Council’s work, while undertaken in the name of the Jewish community and emphasizing Jewish values, was rarely explicitly Jewish in practice. Even in the midst of

²² Burnett, *St. Louis at War*, 58 and Annual Report of Vice President in Charge of Social Service, 1942-1943, Annual Reports, 1941-1942, Folder 4, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

²³ “Adult Education,” Council House Annual Report, April 1942, Annual Reports, 1941-1942, Folder 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

²⁴ “Distribution of Council Shop Funds from April 1941 through December 1944,” Annual Report 1943-1944, Annual Reports, 1943-1944, Folder 5, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

²⁵ “Distribution of Council Shop Funds from April 1941 through December 1944,” Annual Report 1943-1944, Annual Reports, 1943-1944, Folder 5; Annual Report, 1942-1943, Presidents’ Reports, 1936-1958, Box 3; Annual Report, 1943-1944, Presidents’ Reports, 1936-1958, Box 3; and Annual Report of Vice President of Social Service, 1942-1943, Records 1895-1984, Folder 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

a rise of anti-Semitism and concerns about promoting a positive image of the Jewish people, the Council did little to explicitly promote Jewish observance among its own members. For example, the organization encouraged women to buy war bonds and items from the Council Shop to give as Christmas gifts.²⁶ According to Burton Alan Boxerman, St. Louis did experience a rise in anti-Semitism that started in 1933 with the founding of a chapter of the Friends of New Germany, a notorious pro-Nazi organization, but the Jewish community of St. Louis had neither a unified response nor a plan of action to counter anti-Semitism.²⁷

In fact, the presence of anti-Semitism in the city might easily have inspired an already acculturated Jewish community to attempt to blend in and promote themselves primarily as patriotic white Americans, rather than as Jews. For example, in 1943, the St. Louis NCJW presented the Jewish People's Forum, a program of lectures and discussions for the adults in the Council House neighborhood. Although each session included the showing of a film related to the war effort, the initial meetings focused on Jewish custom and culture and the differences between Jewish and non-Jewish life. However, after the first seven meetings, the Forum altered its program, and the remaining discussions revolved around "discussions of governmental and political aims and purposes." The report on these meetings noted that "non-Jews constituted a sizeable (sic) part of the audience and a local school principal attended regularly."²⁸ Even when trying to promote

²⁶ Bulletin, December 1943, Box 6, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section, (1917-).

²⁷ Boxerman, "Reaction of the St. Louis Jewish Community to Anti-Semitism, 1933-1945," 300.

²⁸ Meetings of the Jewish People's Forum, December 5, 1943, December 12, 1943, December 19, 1943, February 27, 1943, November 14, 1943, November 21, 1943, and November 28, 1943, Annual Reports, 1943-1944, Folder 5, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

Jewish issues or culture, the group rarely emphasized its Jewishness if doing so lessened their standing as acculturated middle class whites.

The St. Louis NCJW did, in fact, demonstrate a more acculturated/ assimilated identity as the war progressed. Sometimes the group made an effort to expand its boundaries in an attempt to learn about non-Jews. The “Wanderers,” a group that promoted learning about other cultures, was started in 1943, and its existence demonstrates the fluidity of ethnic definition in the St. Louis Council’s activities. Describing the Wanderers, the Council House Annual Report stated, “...the group plans to visit as many ethnic settlements as feasible.... It is the purpose of this project to help our people to know the habits and customs of other races and religions.” The report also points out that “the people of the United States are gradually discarding policies of living in isolation and are coming to realize that wars are less probable if everyone concerns himself with the habits and problems of others living in distant lands.”²⁹ This passage implies that the ethnic settlements that were visited were not necessarily Jewish and that as Americans, not as Jews, the children involved needed to acquaint themselves with other cultures. The issue of balancing one’s American identity with one’s Jewish identity was a perplexing issue during the war, especially for the women of the St. Louis NCJW.

There was a change in identity taking place as the war ended, and the American and global Jewish communities began to prioritize new issues, including questions regarding displaced persons and the formation of the state of Israel. Jewish identity became an important topic for exploration. The activities of Council’s Contemporary

²⁹ “The Wanderers,” Council House Annual Report, 1943-1944, Annual Reports, 1943-1944, Folder 5, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

Jewish Affairs Committee reflect these new priorities. While initially this group supplied invocations for Council meetings in 1944 and 1945 and met in conjunction with the International Relations Group to discuss topics such as the American-Jewish Conference and the history of Palestine, it soon generated “enough interest...to indicate Council can support another study group.”³⁰ However, the following year was not a success for the new group.

Despite careful planning “to cover the broad aspects of Jewish life” in “a program that would appeal to all...members,” the Contemporary Jewish Affairs group initially struggled “under extreme difficulty.” Attendance was very low, and those in charge felt that a new plan would be necessary if the group was to survive at all.³¹ However, by the next year, attendance was up, and response was “enthusiastic.” Participants engaged in “lively discussions,” and even controversial issues elicited valuable interactions.³² For the members of Council, Jewish issues had a new appeal.

The Greater St. Louis Chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women was similar to other women’s voluntary associations in their reliance upon traditional views of womanhood. However, because of the constituency of the group, its definitions of womanhood were not simply those of the Protestant white middle class. During the war, increased anti-Semitism caused the American Jewish community to rethink its public identity and its cohesion. The war brought a new crisis that demanded the Jewish

³⁰ Annual Report, 1944-45, Presidents’ Reports, 1936-1958, Box 6, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

³¹ Annual Report, 1946-47, Annual Reports, 1946-1947, Folder 6, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

³² Annual Report 1947-48, Presidents’ Reports 1936-1958, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

community seek strength and safety within itself. A new form of pride, a kind of defiance in the face of those who wished to wipe Jews out of existence or any of their anti-Semitic sympathizers, began to emerge. Starting in 1945, St. Louis's chapter of Council took on new activities, and its self-definition took on a different tone. Council, simply put, became more publicly Jewish. There was, of course, a transition needed as Council moved away from the maternalism and war work in which it had previously engaged and embraced a new interest in Jewish identity and culture.

As the war ended, Council members began to show interest in the activities that would dominate their post-war lives: peace, social justice, and helping the Jewish community to pick up the pieces in a world torn apart by the Holocaust. However, as of 1945, the Committee for War Service still had more standing subcommittees than any other portion section of Council's structure.³³ Furthermore, there were apparently some problems carrying on with standard daily operations. During 1946 and 1947, "post-war economic uncertainties" and "shortage of funds due to the failure of Community Chest to reach its goal" created a situation in which some programs had to be eliminated, while others faced reorganization.³⁴ This reorganization reflected the new realities, however, and it was not long before the Committee for War Service had disappeared from the list of standing committees. Instead, the Department of Education and the Department of Social Service absorbed many of the same activities. These departments now included such subcommittees as International Relations and Peace, Contemporary Jewish Affairs, Social Legislation, Service to Foreign Born, and Post-War Services, which itself broke

³³ Yearbook, 1945-46, Box 5, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

³⁴ Annual Report 1946, Presidents' Reports 1936-1958, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

into such subgroups as Sewing, War Records, and Ship-a-Box.³⁵ After the initial post-war challenges, Council managed to settle into a successful program that integrated new global concerns with domestic social welfare and justice work.

There are many excellent examples of the ways in which traditional benevolence work on behalf of women and children did not disappear entirely, but instead took on an added dimension after the war. One such program, Ship-a-Box, collected a variety of items, such as “food, clothing, play materials and anything needed to help rehabilitate and rejuvenate” European children. This successful program started in 1945 and was shipping boxes out twice a month during 1945 and 1946.³⁶ This helped children recover from the horrors of war and Nazism. Similar examples were the homes that Council opened in Athens, Greece and Paris, France after the war to help girls who had been “victims of Nazis and war.”³⁷ Although these programs were fairly short-lived (the Athens Girls’ Home closed within three years, and the French Jewish community took over the Paris Girls’ Home within six years)³⁸, they combined Council’s traditional concerns and charitable works with their new international involvement on behalf of world-wide Jewry. Additionally, there was some understanding that Nazism and anti-Semitism had taken hold in Europe because of the economic troubles left in the wake of World War I. By keeping people from financial ruin, hardship, and hunger, the group

³⁵ Yearbook, 1946-47, Box 5, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

³⁶ Annual Report, 1945-46, Presidents’ Reports 1936-1958, Box 3; “The March of Council, 1893-1954,” American Jewish Tercentenary, 1954, Folder 1, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

³⁷ “The March of Council, 1893-1954,” American Jewish Tercentenary, 1954, Folder 1, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

³⁸ “The March of Council, 1893-1954,” American Jewish Tercentenary, 1954, Folder 1, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

was also preventing the rise of those who could profit from scapegoating the Jewish people.

One possible explanation for the new “Jewishness” of Council during this transition may also be found in the new acceptance of Jews in the United States and the increasing condemnation of anti-Semitism. 1945 was a year that marked new acceptance of Jews in American culture, when Bess Myerson became the first Jewish woman to represent idealized beauty as Miss America and Hank Greenberg became a hero to sports fan when he helped the Detroit Tigers take the American League pennant and the World Series victory.³⁹ As the world came to grips with the full extent of Nazi atrocities, anti-Semitism was seen as too connected to that evil to be tolerated in American culture. Popular films, like *Gentleman’s Agreement*, also demonstrated a new discomfort with anti-Semitism.⁴⁰

Another important factor in American Jews’ new concern for their brethren around the globe was also related to Hitler’s ugly legacy. The formation of Israel as a haven for displaced Jews became a source of interest and pride for many Jews, even those who had not been initially interested in Zionism. Council, for example, became involved in questions regarding Palestine as early as 1944. However, at first, Council was still put off by the issue of Zionism itself. In a series of letters and telegrams from early 1944, the position of the national organization gradually became clear, as did its growing interest in international Jewish issues.

³⁹ Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 273.

⁴⁰ Sarna, *American Judaism*, 273, and Hasia R. Diner, *A New Promised Land: A History of Jews in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 109.

The national office set Council's position on Israel, and it expected the local sections to hold to that position. Because of the need to act as a cohesive national organization with members from all walks of life and individual opinions, Council was reluctant to take any kind of political stance that might alienate any of its members. In response to an initial appeal from the American Zionist Emergency Council in February 1944, the national president of Council, Mrs. Mildred Welt, explained that despite their agreement with the issue at hand, "we cannot permit our Sections to register under the banner of any National organization whose platform would not be acceptable to all members of the National Council of Jewish Women."⁴¹ However, Mrs. Welt also emphasized the fact that "there is no doubt of our desire to add our strength to that of other organizations working for the abrogation of the British White Paper on Palestine."⁴²

The two major issues at hand during this time were the nullification of the British White Paper and the establishment of a Jewish Commonwealth in Palestine. The White Paper, presented to the world in May 1939, strongly limited Jewish immigration into Palestine for five years. From 1939 to 1944, only 100,000 Jews would be allowed into Palestine, after which time, the British would then reevaluate the situation.⁴³ This greatly upset many American Jews, Zionists and non-Zionists alike, especially as the war began to create such great numbers of Jewish refugees.

⁴¹ Letter from Mildred Welt to Mr. Henry Monsky of American Jewish Conference, February 2, 1944, Correspondence, 1944-1982, Folder 55, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

⁴² Letter from Mildred Welt to Mr. Henry Monsky of American Jewish Conference, February 2, 1944, Correspondence, 1944-1982, Folder 55, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

⁴³ Herbert Druks, *The Uncertain Friendship: The U.S. And Israel from Roosevelt to Kennedy* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001), 49.

By February 1944, the idea of an independent Jewish commonwealth had become a central cause for Zionists, who hoped that the exceedingly large numbers of DPs, or displaced persons, would lead the British to reevaluate in favor of a home to replace the ones lost by so many European Jews. It was, in fact, the chance for Zionists to finally realize their central dream. However, the joining of the two issues—abrogation of the White Paper and the establishment of a Jewish commonwealth—did cause some confusion.

Council, although previously not interested in supporting anything Zionist, found itself in a strange position. How could it support worldwide Jewry without promoting the Zionist solution? In a letter to Mrs. Edward Schweich, the president of St. Louis's local chapter of Council, National Council President Mildred Welt explained, "There has been confusion in many communities, because the efforts for the abrogation of the White Paper have been joined with the work for a Jewish Commonwealth. We must be true to our own policies."⁴⁴ In this case, their policies included safeguarding the welfare and interests of the Jewish people. This concern even transcended political splits between Zionists and anti-Zionists. By the end of February 1944, Council's stance was clear. According to the letter from Mildred Welt to all of Council's members:

The National Council of Jewish Women...unanimously supports all efforts toward the abrogation of the White Paper and in behalf of unlimited immigration into Palestine. We believe that the immediate and desperate plight of millions of European Jews can be relieved most effectively through these measures. Because our organization represents a cross section of Jewish womanhood of divergent opinions, we are not in a position to express ourselves on the matter of the Jewish commonwealth.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Letter to Dorothy Schweich from Mildred Welt, February 17, 1944, Correspondence, 1944-1982, Folder 55, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

⁴⁵ Letter from Mildred Welt to sections, February 18, 1944, Correspondence, 1944-1982, Folder 55, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

However, events were about to take place that strongly encouraged support of a Jewish state among all American Jews.

The support of the United States' government for the establishment of Israel rallied American Jews to support the new nation. Although it took some time and effort on the part of some devoted men and women, once the government and President Truman decided to lend their approval to the idea of a Jewish commonwealth, the tide changed rather decisively. President Truman had many friends among the Missouri Jewish community, and they, among others, appealed to him throughout the last half of the 1940s to assist the worldwide Jewish community. Because he was from Independence, many of Truman's closest contacts were from Kansas City, but he also had influential friends in St. Louis.⁴⁶ Truman was not won over to Israel's cause without a fight—there were many complications, and he had some serious misgivings. In one letter from 1948 to a Kansas City friend, Eddie Jacobson, he wrote, “The situation has been a headache to me for two and a half years. The Jews are so emotional, and the Arabs are so difficult to talk with that it is almost impossible to get anything done.”⁴⁷

The President did decide to support Israel, and he was the first world leader to publicly and officially recognize the new Jewish state on May 14, 1948.⁴⁸ With this act, the question of Israel became disengaged from purely Zionist aims. Now, every American and every Missourian could proudly say that it was American to support Israel.

⁴⁶ “To be released on delivery in St. Louis April 4, 1954—Fortieth anniversary celebration Samuel Thurman as Rabbi of the United Hebrew Temple in St. Louis,” PPP: Speech File, Box 725, 1954, Truman papers, Truman Library.

⁴⁷ Letter from Harry Truman to Eddie Jacobson, February 27, 1948, Correspondence File, Edward Jacobson Papers, Truman Library

⁴⁸ Druks, *The Uncertain Friendship*, 112.

However, this new support would not remain an important issue to American suburban Jews.⁴⁹ Once the battle over Israel was decided, American Jews turned their attention to other matters. As the end of the decade approached, American Jews began to turn their focus to social justice at home, including civil rights.

After the war, as anti-Semitism decreased, Jews began to see the inequalities and injustices that faced other Americans as a different kind of threat. American Jews saw that to eliminate discrimination against any group of Americans would make life better for all Americans. They also felt the sting of rhetoric that resembled Nazi arguments about one race's "inherent superiority." Finally, many Jews saw the pursuit of justice as their own religious duty: "Jews also felt that helping to make the United States a better place was part of their religious tradition of *tzedekah*, a quest for justice."⁵⁰

In the case of St. Louis, this work for equality, especially on behalf of African Americans began even before 1950, although there were some complications. The Jewish community of St. Louis had an inconsistent and sometimes troubled relationship with the African American community of that city, especially when Jews adopted the segregationist customs of their non-Jewish white neighbors. In addition to residential and educational segregation, other public facilities were segregated, such as lunch counters in the downtown shopping district. There were three major department stores in downtown St. Louis that had such lunch counters: Famous-Barr; Scruggs, Vandervoort, Barney; and Stix, Baer, and Fuller. The owners of at least two of these businesses happened to be

⁴⁹ Sarna, *American Judaism*, 334, and Diner, *A New Promised Land*, 103.

⁵⁰ Diner, 111.

well-to-do Jews who were also community leaders in the city of St. Louis.⁵¹ Many of the desegregation sit-ins occurred at these segregated lunch counters. There were still some St. Louis Jews who felt it was to their advantage to promote an idea of themselves as white and to maintain the status quo of living in a segregated city.

Despite the fact that some of the members of the St. Louis Section of Council clearly saw themselves as white and went to some effort to support that idea, the organization was strong in its support of desegregation and the fight for African American civil rights after World War II. One way in which the group took action was through political efforts to change public policy. During the years 1949 and 1950, two members spoke publicly in favor of civil rights advancements: one, Mrs. Robert Treiman, spoke to a committee of the Missouri legislature in favor of a bill that would permit African Americans to attend graduate and professional schools in the state; another, Mrs. Symard Kurtz, spoke to a committee of the St. Louis Board of Alderman on behalf of a Civil Rights ordinance.⁵² During 1950 and 1951, Council's Education Department took action on House Bill 135, which provided that "any child regardless of race, creed, or color may attend school of his choice within school district in which he resides." Council went to great lengths in support of this bill, including sending letters and wires, making phone calls, and even paying personal visits to representatives.⁵³

⁵¹ Mary Kimbrough and Margaret W. Dagen, *Victory without Violence: The First Ten Years of the St. Louis Committee of Racial Equality (CORE), 1947-1957* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 44.

⁵² Annual Report, 1948-1949, Annual Reports, 1948-1949, Folder 8, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

⁵³ Annual Report, 1949-1950, Annual Reports, 1949-1950, Folder 9; Minutes of Board Meeting, February 12, 1951, Minutes of Board Meetings, Box 4, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

Public moves for reform were not just political, however. Some of the suggested changes confronted racism's social basis as well. The group proposed an organized campaign:

to persuade the newspapers to refrain from using the word 'negro' in their news reports; and to persuade the large department stores to employ negroes on the same basis on which they employ white people, that is on qualification for the job.⁵⁴

The group did not limit its pro-civil rights activities to the arena of public policy, however. It also took action within its own organizational activities. During the 1948-49 year, the organization sent a representative to meetings that Council held jointly with the Council of Church Women and the Council of Negro Women. Council's Service to the Blind Committee integrated some of its luncheon meetings in order to "demonstrate in action Council's stand against discrimination."⁵⁵ There were, however, difficulties in taking this stand against segregation and discrimination.

Despite the belief by the women themselves that integration of the parties for the blind was an important step and the fact that the first party in February 1950 "met with great approval," problems soon arose: "repercussions were felt from both the white sightless and the drivers."⁵⁶ The board was unsure if the problem was related to the exclusion of African Americans or if it was possibly connected to differences between middle class and poor individuals. Possible tensions may have arisen due to the fact that the whites involved felt they were of a higher class standing than that of the African

⁵⁴ Education Department Annual Report for 1949-1950, Annual Reports, 1948-1949, Folder 8, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

⁵⁵ Report on the Department of Community Welfare, 1949-1950, Annual Reports, 1949-1950, Folder 9, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

⁵⁶ Minutes of May 19, 1950 Board meeting, Minutes of Board Meetings, Box 4, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

Americans involved. The documents are vague on this point. In the end, the board decided to bend to the wishes of the guests by only inviting African Americans to two parties per year, as opposed to each and every party.⁵⁷ However, the organization's stance on integration at every level remained intact.

Throughout the first half of the 1950s, the St. Louis Council worked in conjunction with other organizations to promote civil rights and equality, finding strength in numbers. It worked with the Council of Church Women, the Council of Negro Women, the Council of Catholic Women, the Council of Lutheran Women and the state-wide Advisory Council on Children and Youth. It called for equal opportunities in employment and education. It protested segregation in parks, playgrounds, and schools. In 1955, it sent a representative to the St. Louis Housing Authority "to ask that Federal Public Housing Projects be open to all who apply for housing, without discrimination."⁵⁸ However, in the case of overt individual and group confrontation, the group was sometimes unsure of what action to take.

When direct action was taken in 1949 and 1950 to desegregate St. Louis's public swimming pools, the Board twice refused to take a clear stance. In November of 1949, the Council board discussed a report on a "race riot" at the swimming pool, and declared that "the job of handling this situation not be a political plum, and be under the jurisdiction of the Human Relations Committee."⁵⁹ Several months later, in April of 1950, at another Board meeting, one member "reported attending the meeting of

⁵⁷ Minutes of Joint Meeting of New and Old Boards, May 19, 1950, Minutes of Board Meetings, Box 4, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

⁵⁸ President's Annual Report, 1951-1952, Presidents' Reports 1936-1958, Box 3, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

⁵⁹ General discussion and motion and Mrs. Edward Schweich, Minutes of Board Meeting, November 14, 1949, Minutes of Board Meetings, Box 4, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

American Association of Group Workers, March 28 on opening swimming pools on a non-segregated basis. A discussion was held on Council's stand in this matter. It was the feeling of the Board not to make a statement at this time."⁶⁰ Although not necessarily comfortable with making fast or radical changes in race relations, the women of the St. Louis chapter of Council did work for racial justice. They preferred working in conjunction with other organizations, making political change, and making slow changes at the individual level to other forms of civil rights activism.

Through their work on behalf of social justice in America and on behalf of Jews around the world, Council's members demonstrated a sense of the justice and charity inherent in Jewish culture. They lived out the ideals of *tzedekah* (charity) and *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) that informed their lives as Jews. The decade had seen them transform as an organization from a maternalist group working for society's less fortunate to a much more self-consciously Jewish voluntary association which also developed a focus on justice and humanitarianism. As the new era of the 1950s dawned, the National Council of Jewish women had witnessed the end of a war, the beginning of a nation, and the first battles in the next stage of a movement for legal equality for all Americans. The women of Council and the city of St. Louis would never be the same.

⁶⁰ Report by Mrs. Caplan, Minutes of Board Meeting, April 10, 1950, Minutes of Board Meetings, Box 4, National Council of Jewish Women, St. Louis Section (1917-).

Conclusion

Each year, when the story of Esther is repeated for the holiday of Purim, delightful chaos breaks out. The holiday is a raucous one, with masquerades and noisemakers and sweet treats. The villain is defeated and the heroine throws away her disguise, to embrace and be embraced by the Jewish people who claim her as their own. So the St. Louis Chapter of the National Council of Women entered the last half of the twentieth century, no longer content to pass as any other middle-class women's voluntary association. The organization is still active and still champions both Jewish causes and women's causes. However, the debate over Jewish identity and Jewish survival has not disappeared.

A recent blog by Jonathan D. Sarna on washingtonpost.com sparked a lively internet debate over what it means to be a Jew.¹ Politics in the Middle East, intermarriage, and decreasing birth rates all cause heated discussions and fierce disagreements about the current state of Jewish identity and the future of the Jewish people. The history of Jewish identity can inform our understanding of such debates, although it cannot provide any answers to the questions of what it means to be a Jew.

For the women of the St. Louis Council, the question of Jewish identity was not a simple one. The organization itself was an answer to the question, "How can we support, sustain, and assist the Jewish people?" The women who joined wished for a more Jewish

¹ Jonathan D. Sarna, "Can Secularism Save Judaism?" (January 10, 2008 on washingtonpost.com). See also David Deutsch, "When Is a Heeb a Heeb?" (Jan 16, 2008 in Jewish Daily Forward Forum on www.forward.com) and Steve Pollak "Who you calling 'secular?'" (January 25, 2008 on www.jewishliteraryreview.com).

form of middle-class women's voluntarism because they self-identified as Jews and wished to express that identity in a publicly beneficial way while still conforming to their role as middle-class, white American women. However, with all of these different roles—Jewish, female, middle-class, American, and white—the members of Council in St. Louis had to perform a complicated balancing act.

This project has been constrained by serious gaps in the primary source material. These gaps have limited my ability to pursue my research questions as thoroughly as I would have liked. With additional research, the project could go in a number of other directions and allow me to focus more intensively on some of these questions. Two possible approaches emerge, and each approach would require additional research to fill gaps that exist in the current study, strengthening it and giving it more depth and/or breadth.

For example, while retaining a focus on the city of St. Louis, this project could become an in-depth portrait of the identity of the Jewish women and men of that city. Such a project would require a “genealogical” approach, involving the acquisition of more specific information on members of Council who could be tracked via obituaries, newspapers, and synagogue records. The records from the local chapters of other organizations, such as Hadassah and B'nai Brith, could enable me to further explore identity development and expression among Jews from a variety of organizations and backgrounds. By comparing Jewish identity across organizations, I would be able to determine the ways in which St. Louis's Jews were forming and expressing identity in general. I would also be able to determine how Jewish identity transcended class and gender in St. Louis.

Another possible direction for this project would involve developing a comparison with another city of a similar size. Such an approach would strengthen my focus on race and region, as well as Jewish identity. Records from another Council chapter, such as the Kansas City chapter, would provide insight into the ways that this voluntary association served to define its members' identities in a variety of ways and contexts. This project would require much more primary source data from other sets of organizational records belonging to a Council chapter in a city other than St. Louis. A Council chapter in another Midwestern city such as Cleveland could highlight the ways in which St. Louis was a different city with different problems and challenges. Looking at a Southern city, such as Atlanta, would highlight issues of race and enable a comparison with St. Louis on the basis of Jewish identity as a white or non-white identity.

St. Louis's Council engaged in activities that appealed to various identities, emphasizing different faces at different times. They never completely cast off any of their different selves, but they did favor one over the others when they deemed it necessary or desirable. From 1919 to 1920, the activities of the St. Louis Chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women reflected these contextual identities. During the 1920s, Council members experienced the same feeling of marginalization that American Jews were encountering, especially due to increased incidents of nativism, racism, and anti-Semitism. This feeling led Council members to emphasize their identity as Americans and to engage in activities, such as Americanization classes, that promoted a public view of their organization as contributing to and blending in with middle-class

American culture. Council's work during this time resembled that of any other group of native-born, middle-class white women engaged in benevolence and reform work.

In the 1930s, the group chose to emphasize its white identity, again seeking inclusion in American middle-class culture. As Jews moved to the suburbs and worked to fit in with their non-Jewish neighbors, they also tried to avoid the growing wave of anti-Semitism that was accompanying the economic turmoil in the nation and the political upheavals abroad. Still, anti-Jewish rhetoric reminded American Jews that they were a people living under a threat. Fear of being perceived as different was balanced with the notion of obligation to the community. Council used its Jewish identity as a basis for some of its activities, although its members still engaged in the standard activities that were acceptable for "respectable" women of the American middle class.

The 1940s were the period of the most change for the group. The maternalist and patriotic war activities of the early part of the decade gave way to activities fed by a new sense of urgency and Jewish pride sparked by the aftermath of the war. It was during this period that the women of Council placed their most Jewish face forward, fully embracing Jewish activities and causes. They also moved into other activities that were apt to be more controversial, such as civil rights for African Americans. Rather than trying to blend in with middle-class white America, Council was embracing the marginalized and the displaced. It did not fully abandon its other identities or activities, but it chose to emphasize its Jewishness and the activities that would promote justice as well as *tikkun olam*.

St. Louis Council is an example of the various faces and identifications put forth by members of an ethnic or racial group that finds itself only conditionally accepted by

American society as a whole. However, unlike the “double-voiced discourse” described by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham², the women of Council engaged in a multi-layered discourse that reflected many simultaneously held identities. Additionally, unlike scholarship that shows whitening as a one-way process that occurs and then stops³, for the women of Council and the Jews of St. Louis, the process was not one-way, nor did it simply end. Instead, these women Americanized themselves (and others) and “whitened” themselves, but they eventually returned to their Jewish heritage in a much stronger and more public way. They emphasized their American and white identities early in the twentieth century, but they renewed their sense of Jewish identity and placed it at the forefront of their activities by mid-century. In that way, they turned the tale of Tevye’s daughters on its head... they gradually returned to the Jewish community, rather than abandoning it entirely. They were able to be united as Jews (one heart) while still having many identities (many souls). For American Jews, the question of what it means to be Jewish will continue to be asked and answered in different ways. Esther has set aside her mask, but she has not discarded it, and every year, American Jews will replay her masquerade and her redemption.

² Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race” in Darlene Clark Hine, Wilma King, and Linda Reed, eds, *“We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible”: A Reader in Black Women's History* (Brooklyn: Carlson Pub., 1995), 13.

³ See Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness* (New York: Verso, 1991), and Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

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Please note: Membership records for the St. Louis Chapter of Council were incomplete or entirely unavailable for the years 1919-1950. The absence of this data has limited my ability to draw conclusions pertaining to the make-up of the organization. Names of members have been drawn largely from letterhead and meeting minutes. This method has provided me with names of leaders, but not with names of rank-and-file members. Such information does not give a clear picture of the entire membership, nor did it enable me to track their other memberships and participation in the Jewish community of St. Louis.

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