

A Community Apart: Women's Experiences in
Waterville, Maine 1945-1970

Becky Muller
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Advisor: David Freidenreich
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“Goals for my daughter? Good Question. She’s a tough, spunky little girl and I’m glad. I want her to continue to have the courage to stand for her convictions. I want her to continue to be herself, in all its complexity—I want her to be proud and not to be afraid. I hope her life will fully integrate all the parts of herself—artist, Jew, female, mother—whatever she wants to be. I hope the world allows her to. I know it won’t be easy.”
– Ruth Knafo Setton

Jewish small town communities worked in various ways to both separate and integrate themselves within mainstream gentile culture. Social and residential proximity preserved and reinforced ethnic identities in society by reproducing the stereotypes of men and women and their roles in religious, social, and economic organizations.¹ Through the collection of oral history interviews, I have been able to identify experiences in the lives of Waterville’s Jewish women which point towards the creation of a women’s subculture in the years following World War Two (WWII). New groups of women arrived in Waterville, Maine, especially from 1945-1955 when the men who had gone to war returned with their war brides. When the women arrived in Waterville, they entered into a community that was fully established and integrated. However, these new women occupied mainly Jewish realms, as opposed to their husbands, who interacted with gentile society on a greater scale. Specifically in Waterville, Maine, women’s realms were relegated to the home; synagogue; Jewish volunteer organizations such as B’nai Brith, Hadassah and the Sisterhood; and family businesses. This subculture existed not only within the city of Waterville, but also more specifically, within the Waterville Jewish community. The women, although more involved, were not nearly as integrated within

¹ For more information on small town Jewish communities, see Lee Shai Weissbach’s book *Jewish Life in Small-Town America: A History*, or Hasia Diner’s *The Jews of the United States, 1654-2000*.

gentile society as their male counterparts. When the women were involved within the Gentile society, it was often as a result of volunteer opportunities that reflected the values of a Jewish ethic of volunteerism, and thus, the subculture within which they existed.

Life in Waterville, Maine

Waterville's Jewish population experienced little anti-Semitism. Jewish populations struggled to assimilate into their various communities before and after WWII. The ability of Waterville Jews to successfully integrate within gentile culture was especially important in their rise to middle and upper class society, and was an important facet of the Jewish community in that it greatly explained the ability of the Jewish men in particular, to rejoin, and become successful in the town once they returned from war. The ability of the Waterville Jews to integrate was often a direct result of the Jews' desire to become full members of their town. Men also worked in businesses which catered to both gentile and Jewish customers and, as a result, the Jews became well-known and appreciated members of society. Weissbach expounds upon this idea of relatively anti-Semitic small towns saying:

The most flagrant manifestations of prejudice were still more likely to target large masses of Jews in big cities, rather than the enclaves present in small towns. Moreover, East European Jews in small communities, like their German-Jewish predecessors, were known to the public as individuals, and this fact too, made it less likely that they would be subjected to the most vicious demonstrations of anti-Semitism. Jews in small towns seldom felt immediately threatened, even by the most openly anti-Jewish groups. One man who grew up in Haverstraw, New York, in the years just before World War II, for example, had a sense that while there was probably "latent anti-

Semitism within the community, it did not relate itself to the local Jewish population.”²

Many of the Jews in Waterville were well-known in their community because of their family businesses, and therefore, since they were known and liked, it made their experience of anti-Semitism less.

Phyllis Shiro, who arrived in Waterville in 1951 with her husband Burt, and Marion Hains, who arrived in 1953 with her husband Ben, echoed similar sentiments regarding their experience with anti-Semitism, both agreeing that they were rarely aware of the anti-Semitism living in Waterville. Phyllis does mention, however, that some of the only experiences she had with anti-Semitism was with her involvement at the Jefferson, a popular hotel her husband’s family owned and ran in Waterville. Phyllis speaks of the drunken tirades and violence against the establishment often culminating in the usage of the phrase “dirty Jew.” “I don’t know how that came about, calling Jews ‘dirty Jews.’ Why would they call them dirty? I never knew where that came from... I know it was because they weren’t educated, but why else? It had to come from somewhere.”³

One of the main reasons Waterville Jews experienced less anti-Semitism than their counterparts in other more metropolitan areas was the Jewish family’s ability to rise to the upper and middle class. The Jewish families who moved to Waterville began or joined a family business and were able to acquire substantial funds and gain respect in the community. With this respect and community acknowledgment of success that was

² Lee Shai Weissbach, *Jewish Life in Small-Town America: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005). Pg 273.

³ Muller, Rebecca, interview with Phyllis Shiro, March 2010.

beneficial to both the Jewish and gentile Waterville society came a greater acceptance of the Jewish community, which resulted in less anti-Semitism.

As with any study of minority groups within a relatively homogenous population, it is of paramount importance to examine the intersection of biography and broader social trends. Waterville, Maine, provides a fairly representative case study for exploring the challenges that specifically faced Jewish populations because it was once a booming industrialized city that slowly transitioned into post-industrialism. Prior to the Depression, Waterville was a city of diversified industry. Sara Arnon, the daughter of Giselle Miller, reflects upon her experience living in Waterville during the time of the mills:

There were a lot of mills in Waterville. Scott Paper Company, Keyes Fiber, Hathaway, Wyandotte Worsted. So yeah, there were a whole bunch. I do remember the whistle blowing, it was a mill town. And the mills worked on three shifts and you heard the whistle blow three times a day. And it kind of announced one shift was over, the next shift started. Growing up, you only heard it really if you walked past the fire department, because that's where the whistle was. Otherwise it was just a part of life, it didn't wake you up in the middle of the night even if it went off in the middle of the night. But yeah, men and women worked in the mills.⁴

Its many textile mills employed the majority of men and women in the city. Following the Depression, however, the mills slowly began to close due to financial instability, causing the loss of jobs for many people in Waterville. These people were then forced to leave the city and seek work elsewhere.

The Depression also affected the use of transportation systems. The cessation of public transportation resulted in a rise in the ownership of private automobiles. Since the

⁴ Muller, Rebecca, interview with Sara Arnon, April 2010.

majority of people in Waterville had not learned to drive because they had been dependent on the use of public transportation, an extreme separation occurred isolating Waterville from other communities and towns in Maine. Interstate 95 replaced the last passenger train to Waterville in 1960, and with the interstate came the Urban Renewal project whose aim was to give the “Elm City” a facelift by removing abandoned businesses and substandard residences. The removal of abandoned businesses and residences also brought the introduction of chain stores to Waterville’s downtown. This introduced a new element of competition to already existing businesses like Jewish owned Levine and Stern’s department stores.

Building Community: Women’s Relationships with other Women

Specifically looking at the situation of Jewish families following WWII provides an example of the way in which Jewish families in Waterville, Maine, tended to cluster in similar professions, and locations. When the first generation of Jews arrived in Waterville from Eastern Europe in the later part of the 19th and early 20th centuries, they stressed assimilation and Americanization as methods by which to combat anti-Semitism. When the Jewish families arrived in Waterville, the men started various businesses or became peddlers, and as a result, were the most involved in the community because of their interactions with gentiles in the workplace. Men were also involved in the community through assisting in family business, achieving higher education, volunteer activities, and by virtue of their attempts to integrate within Waterville society. Conversely, when the war brides arrived in Waterville, they struggled to find their place.

Since the spheres that had been already created for women were in the synagogue, volunteer opportunities and the home, the war brides became instantly segregated within the Waterville society. Because of this segregation, the women created a subculture that became a community apart from greater Waterville.

This example is not unique to Waterville however. In other communities with large groups of women who arrived post-WWII, the same pattern of isolation occurred. For example, in Bangor, Maine, a larger Jewish community that resembled the patterns in Waterville, Judith Goldstein in *Crossing Lines* stated that:

The Protestants ran the city and the Jews ran their businesses. They prospered in their own place in Bangor's life. While only a quarter of Bangor's 1,200 Jews still lived in the poorer areas around Hancock and York streets, they remained a self-contained group. A census taken by the Jewish Community Council in 1951 established that Jews owned or worked in over two hundred shoe, clothing and dry-goods stores; more than three hundred were self-employed; and fifty-one men and women...were professionals, mainly in medicine and law...Bangor's Jews were fulfilling many of their individual and communal goals...Closed off from participating in the larger Bangor world, except in business contacts and a few fraternal organizations, Bangor's Jews remained exclusively involved with their sectarian organizations and institutions...⁵

In Bangor, as in Waterville, the Jews had worked to create spaces where they were able to integrate within gentile society but still maintain their Jewish identities. Post-WWII, however, these spaces that before had been appropriately separated from greater society, had now become isolating and stifling for the newly arrived war brides.

⁵ Judith Goldstein, *Crossing Lines: Histories of Jews and Gentiles in Three Communities* (New York, NY: William Morrow and Company, Inc, 1992). Pg 124.

In addition to being resigned to social realms, the women also occupied residential realms. Sara Arnon spoke of the clustering of Jewish families on Johnson Heights, a street in Waterville saying, “there aren’t that many Jewish families in Waterville, so obviously a lot of them were on Johnson Heights...it was in walking distance from the synagogue.”⁶ In Waterville, most of the Jews seemed to live by the synagogue on Kelsey Street, Ticonic Street, or Johnson Heights. Being separated from the synagogue was difficult because the Jews were further away from the rest of the community and thus less available for the collection of a *minyan* or to assist in other synagogue events. In the case of some Jews, however, living farther away from the synagogue was a positive experience because they were still able to maintain their connections to the synagogue while having some separation from the Jewish community as a whole. Marion Hains mentions,

Of course we lived on the wrong street if you know what I mean...everybody had to live on the same street...if you lived on the same street, fine, you were a companion of theirs. But if you lived across town, I had someone say to me, “Oh, I get lost every time I come to your house.”⁷

Since Marion resided on the opposite side of town, off of Kennedy Memorial Drive, she lived on the “wrong” side of town, meaning the area that was overwhelmingly occupied by gentile families. This is significant because the center of Jewish life in most small town communities, and especially in Waterville, was the synagogue. Thus, the Jews who lived separate from other Jewish families were able to experiment with different facets of their identity rather than solely participating in the Jewish community.

⁶ Muller Rebecca, interview with Sara Arnon, April 2010

⁷ Muller, Rebecca, interview with Marion Hains, April 2010.

Residential proximity proved beneficial to the Jewish women because they were able to rely on their neighbors for help in child rearing. Marion Hains lived farther away from the other Jewish mothers and as a result was unable to use the assistance of Jewish women for help in child rearing as readily as her female Jewish counterparts who resided in close proximity to one another. As well, living on the other side of town meant that Marion did not spend as much of her time with the Jewish women, and as a result was more integrated and involved with the gentile community. Since the sub-community of Jewish women living around the synagogue was strong and interconnected as a result of being isolated from the gentile community, they developed close friendships with other women, many of whom were actually their relatives.

This closely connected community was helpful to the Jewish women in terms of socialization, and especially in child rearing. Women's roles as stay-at-home mothers were also extremely important to their integration within the gentile society. Phyllis Shiro and Marion Hains discuss the fact that they had hardly any time for other activities because their full time job was to be stay-at-home mothers. Phyllis reminisces that her neighborhood "was full of children, now they're all grown up and it's completely different, and we all went to each other's houses."⁸ This community, which allowed the women and children to socialize on a daily basis, added to the interconnectedness of relationships within Waterville by creating a space where, since the Jewish families tended to be in close residential proximity with each other, they would interact on a daily basis.

⁸ Muller, Rebecca, interview with Phyllis Shiro, March 2010.

For Giselle Miller, however, this interconnectedness and primary relationship with family was overwhelming. Giselle Miller moved from Oran, Algeria, and arrived in Waterville, Maine, in 1945 with her husband Howard. Sara Arnon, her daughter, discusses that when Giselle first arrived, she lived in Howard's family's house.

When she first came to Waterville in 1945, we lived on Ticonic Street, at the house my father grew up in... Picture this: war bride comes from a desert region of the world, hut region of the world, lands in America in November, therefore snow, and, when they looked at maps of America, my father showed her how close it was to Boston and New York. And it is, if you look at a big map... So we lived on Ticonic Street with his grandfather, my great-grandfather William Levine. His mother, Frieda Miller, her two bachelor brothers Ludy and Pacy Levine, his sister Glenyce Miller Kaplan, and relatives came and went... She was really busy learning English, figuring out how she could get out of Waterville, Maine, which she couldn't, missing her family, and being immersed in this wonderful family that she adored, but who were also very smothering.⁹

Living in the houses of their husbands was common for the war brides. Since the families were readjusting to life outside the military, they tended to live with their families for a time while getting grounded again. For Giselle, living with the Miller/Levine family was an experience that proved especially challenging. Since Giselle came from Algeria, the family had many preconceived notions about her Jewish knowledge. Sara reflected that Giselle was frequently quizzed on aspects of Jewish identity common to the Eastern European Jews, for example, specific foods. However, since the foods of the Jewish people in Algeria were much different than that of the Jewish people from Eastern Europe, she had a limited knowledge of these aspects of the faith her new family considered pivotal to Jewish identity.

⁹ Muller, Rebecca, interview with Sara Arnon, April 2010.

Since the war brides moved to Waterville without any prior knowledge of the town, and without any connections to it besides their husbands, they often felt extremely isolated in the beginning. For Giselle, her arrival in Waterville placed her in a town that not only was extremely different culturally, but linguistically as well. Giselle spoke Parisian French, but the people living in Waterville spoke Quebec French. As a result she felt even further isolated than the other war brides at that time because she could not speak their language. Sara reflected that her mother could not go anywhere, had nothing to do, “and she’s got a baby, and her best friend is a dog.”¹⁰ The insular community Giselle experienced was not the same way all the women experienced life in Waterville. Initially, there were many similarities between Giselle’s experience and that of the other war brides, however, the separation Giselle felt was much more extreme. She was able to integrate into Waterville just as the other women, but it took a bit longer.

Common among all the new war brides in Waterville however, was a general feeling of family duty and responsibility. The war brides had moved away from their families into a new town, joined a new community, in some cases a new culture, and had no friends or preexisting relations to fall back on. Their husbands, by virtue of being Waterville natives, had family, friends and even jobs to return to post-war, but the women who arrived in Waterville lacked all of these. Therefore, the connections the women held to their husband’s families were extremely strong, and formed the basis of the women’s new relationships in Waterville.

Religious Life: Women’s Role in the Synagogue

¹⁰ Muller, Rebecca, interview with Sara Arnon, April 2010.

Within Waterville, where the Jewish community was small, the synagogue served not only as a place of worship but also as a meeting-house and social center. For women especially, the synagogue was a place where they were able to meet and be involved in each other's activities. The building itself, however, was insufficient in accommodating the needs of the women and their families in regards to Hebrew School or enough space to hold meetings. As Myrt Wolman, who came to Waterville in 1946 with her husband Gordon, stated,

When I came, there was nothing. When I came, there was the little synagogue on Kelsey Street. I remember thinking when I came, when Gordon took me to the synagogue, I thought, "this is a synagogue?" We had to have Sunday school at the YMCA. We did not have a building in which to do these things so meetings took place at people's homes at the women's homes. So therefore it became social too. In other words, "in case you didn't want to do any work but let's go see Susie's house anyway," that kind of thing. You know how women are. But everybody had a job. There's always a nucleus of women that do everything. That doesn't happen with everyone.¹¹

Since the women were unable to find enough space to hold meetings for different organizations, clubs, or even social hours, they often went to each other's houses. By opening their houses as social centers, the women were able to strengthen the Jewish community by joining the religious and social spheres. Branching out into homes created new spaces for women to spend time with one another outside the synagogue.

The nature of small towns, especially following WWII, was such that populations began to undergo substantial changes. The Waterville community grew as a result of a

¹¹ Bhatti, Hasan, interview with Myrt Wolman, January 2010

new group of war brides entering the pre-existing Jewish community. Marion Hains explains, “They were all imports... You had a whole group that were friendly with each other, maybe they came from New York or the Midwest or something...”¹² Phyllis Shiro agrees with Marion saying,

Today there are a lot of young people from surrounding towns here, but we didn’t have much of that when I first got here, we didn’t have people from Canaan and Clinton and all the small towns. Everyone was basically from Waterville. And you must have seen that all of the girls came from other areas. The men, I guess, who wanted to find someone Jewish had to go somewhere else; there weren’t many of them here, so I guess that’s why a lot of the people came up from other places.¹³

The inability of men to find women within Waterville who were suitable for marriage was a common occurrence. Since the men had grown up and had close friendships with the women in Waterville, the desire to marry anyone from the town as less. As a result, there was a marked increase in marriage that occurred outside of Waterville, after which, the couple would then return to the town adding to the population flux.

This group of war brides, the women who had gotten married post-WWII outside Waterville, had in most cases achieved a higher form of education, which was generally afforded to only members of the middle and upper class. Since most of the war brides came to Maine from such affluent cities as Boston, in addition to the arrival of a new level of education, social and economic status, the war brides also offered new religious and cultural practices. In Waterville, Marion Hains explains extensive clashes that occurred within the synagogue because the new women “wanted somebody very

¹² Muller, Rebecca, interview with Marion Hains, April 2010.

¹³ Muller, Rebecca, interview with Phyllis Shiro, March 2010.

modern.”¹⁴ By modern, Marion meant that when the new war brides first arrived in Waterville, many of them came from Reform congregations to settle in the Beth Israel synagogue which was, at the time, largely Orthodox. This was quite a shift for some women who had been used to their synagogues where women were able to have more authority in the religious sphere. Originally in the Waterville synagogue, the women were seated separately from the men, and the services were extremely liturgical according to the Orthodox tradition. When the war brides arrived in Waterville, they desired a shift towards a more modern approach to religion. In order to achieve this shift, they began to alter the community to fit their own needs.

One of the most noticeable developments in the synagogue as a result of the new women was the creation of a Sunday school. Prior to the war brides, the population of children in the synagogue was extremely small. As many of the women explained, since they all moved to Waterville at about the same time, they all had children who were about the same ages. Since the war brides were used to having Hebrew education for children at their home synagogues, many of them felt it a shame that the children did not have that same opportunity here. Phyllis Shiro decided in the 1950’s that she would start a Sunday school. At that time none of her children were old enough to attend the classes, but she felt it important that when it came time for her children to receive their Hebrew education, there were opportunities available. She recalled, regarding her process to establish the Sunday school, “I wrote to a rabbi in New York, and he sent me the names of some books to start with...”¹⁵ Phyllis opened the Sunday school on the second floor of the YMCA building in downtown Waterville, located off of Main Street. The women

¹⁴ Muller, Rebecca, interview with Marion Hains, April 2010.

¹⁵ Muller, Rebecca, interview with Phyllis Shiro, March 2010.

taught the lessons and they instructed them in history, and traditional holidays and costumes. Even though it was extremely difficult to teach the Sunday school because they lacked substantial funding or even enough knowledge and training to teach the classes, Phyllis still recalls that “it was great, it was really good.”¹⁶ The Sunday school was a huge asset to the Waterville Jewish community, and until Phyllis started it in the 1950’s there had been no other Sunday schools in Kennebec County. Therefore, this Sunday school not only benefited the Waterville community, but Kennebec County as a whole because the families no longer had to travel to cities like Portland or Bangor to bring their children to Sunday school.

Ethic of Volunteerism: Women in the Community

One of the main tenets in Judaism is the preservation of an ethic of volunteerism. This mandate that one is involved in the community is one that describes the need of women to be involved in the synagogue, but also their desire to be involved in Jewish volunteer organizations outside the synagogue. Volunteer organizations were an incredible asset to the integration of the war brides following WWII because they put them in direct contact with the older women, and also the other new war brides. By working with the other women in volunteer organizations, the war brides were able to become immediately involved in the community and make social connections that served to sustain them throughout their initial adjustment period in Waterville.

¹⁶ Ibid.

There were three Jewish volunteer organizations in Waterville in which almost all women were involved: B'nai Brith, Hadassah, and the Sisterhood. Each organization was instrumental to the integration of the war brides into the community. As Myrt Wolman explained,

I came to Waterville in May of 1946. In June, I became secretary of Bnai B'rith. New blood, that's what they wanted. Young people. Because they were in a standstill too, they were waiting for the war to be over. And I was in Hadassah at one point too. I was president of the Sisterhood very briefly... My mother was in the Sisterhood or on the Council of Jewish Women, so this was a thing that just came naturally. And it was also a social thing to do in Waterville. We worked hard.¹⁷

The immediate involvement of women in B'nai Brith, Hadassah and the Sisterhood was a representation of the importance of the women's community in Waterville, especially following WWII. Each of the organizations had different charters, and was involved in different tasks. B'nai Brith was originally a fraternal organization in Waterville, but when the men began to leave for war in the 1940's, and also as they transitioned towards more involvement in gentile society through their family businesses, they began to have less time for involvement in the organization. As the men left the organization, the women took it up, eventually turning the club into a female organization. During this time as well, there is a rise in the involvement of men in more nonsectarian organizations such as Lion's Club. The goal of B'nai Brith, for the women, was socialization between Jews locally and nationally. One important aspect of the club, which many women reflect back fondly upon, were the recurring national meetings where women were able to meet and socialize with others outside Waterville, thus broadening their base of friends.

¹⁷ Bhatti, Hasan, interview with Myrt Wolman, January 2010.

Hadassah, a separate organization in Waterville, had socialization as its goal, but also sought to fundraise money for Zion. Following WWII, this organization was extremely important in supporting the Jews who had been left homeless as a result of the Holocaust. The women were involved in numerous bake sales, the making of cookbooks and ad books, throwing dances and social gatherings, and other fundraising efforts to support their fellow Jews locally and nationally. Many of the funds went abroad to Zion, but a portion of all that was fundraised also stayed in Waterville to support the synagogue and the Jewish women's organizations.

The Sisterhood, the last female organization in Waterville, was an important addition to the town. It arose from a trend towards a rise in female leadership in the synagogue, and the women's desire to be more involved in religious life. The goal of the group was to adequately represent the concerns of the women to the men in the synagogue and advocate for their needs. The Sisterhood also was instrumental in helping to economically support the synagogue ensuring its continued success.

The women in Waterville were involved in each organization, most taking leadership roles in each. Sara Arnon described her observations of the groups saying,

In those days in Waterville, every Jewish woman was involved in every one. They were involved in Hadassah, B'nai Brith, Sisterhood. You were secretary of one; you were a secretary of another the following year... In the years of volunteerism, that's how upper-class and upper-middle-class women worked: they volunteered, and they volunteered *ad nauseum*. So they were always running an event of some sort, whether it was a fashion show, or an ad book, whatever they were raising money for.¹⁸

¹⁸ Muller, Rebecca, interview with Sara Arnon, April 2010.

The volunteer organizations were extremely important to Waterville because they created a way for the women to socialize with each other in places that mimicked the workplace socialization of men. Since the women were unable to take part in the workforce as readily as the men were, the volunteer organizations became a method by which, as Sara explained, the upper and upper-middle class could become involved in the community outside their home. By the 1960's, since so many women were involved in all three organizations, it became unnecessary to hold three separate meetings weekly, and as a result, B'nai Brith and Hadassah melded into one organization, the Sisterhood remaining separate.

This shift towards a more intensified involvement of women in the synagogue was a trend that was not only experienced in Waterville, but was also a facet of the lives of Jewish American women in general. Sara Arnon supposed that,

I think that Jews especially, didn't want to lose their Jewish identity, but they wanted to assimilate in America. Therefore, their sisterhoods became as visible as the Protestant and Catholic counterparts, so that communities changed. Because post-World War II, the work of the women in the religious congregations, no matter what the sect was, became much more visible. Before then, it was really a man's domain. Women went to church to pray or something, but they weren't actively involved in congregations, including churches.¹⁹

One of the ways that the women made themselves more visible in the synagogue was through their involvement in Jewish organizations such as those explained above. This trend towards a new religiosity however, was something that affected the smaller towns differently as they competed for resources in economically unstable locations.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Persistent financial difficulties affected small Jewish communities throughout the country. These challenges forced them to increase their contact with other groups. For example, Lee Shai Weissbach points out in his research that many larger communities which housed more than one denomination of Judaism (Reform, Orthodox or Conservative) often split into two subcommunities with their own schools, clubs and even worship services. The size of the Jewish population in small towns did not lend itself to separate groups though, which were eventually forced to reconcile and work together to maintain the Jewish community as a whole. As Weissbach states, “the circumstances of small communities encouraged a kind of cooperation and created compromise that did not develop in larger communities, where different elements of the population could simply go their own ways.”²⁰ This communication and cooperation served to strengthen the Jewish communities in a way that allowed their preservation within the dominant hegemonic system.

Many of the Jewish women also became involved in organizations that were not directly associated with the synagogue. For example, Paula Lunder spearheaded a contingent of Jewish volunteers at the Colby Museum of Art, and many more volunteered at Thayer Hospital. Myrt Wolman reminisced that,

Because I’m the volunteer type and I want to do those things, certainly hospital appeals. Any other needy organization in town or in the area if necessary. I always felt very comfortable, very comfortable. Jew and gentiles, if that’s what you mean. But that was just what I wanted to do. Someone must have asked me if I wanted to become a member then I did and then I became more active than just a member at large. I’m a do-er!²¹

²⁰ Lee Shai Weissbach, "Community and Subcommunity in Small-Town America, 1880-1950," *Jewish History* 15, no. 2 (2001). Pg 111.

²¹ Bhatti, Hasan; Interview with Myrt Wolman, January 2010.

This desire to volunteer was common among the Jewish women in general. Each woman interviewed told many stories of her times involved in the many organizations around Waterville. Interestingly, the women tended to explain their experiences in these sectarian organizations as still being related to other Jewish women. For example, when Phyllis introduced her involvement at the art museum, she also mentioned the other Jewish women who were involved there as well. Myrt discussed a Jewish ethic of volunteerism that was taught in the Torah, and favored the involvement of Jews in volunteer opportunities in order to fulfill a religious duty.²² Even though the women involved with these community organizations were in contact with gentile women in the volunteer opportunities, they still remained in a semi-independent Jewish contingent. Therefore, even though the Jewish women were temporarily involved with other women outside their tightly knit Jewish social circle, they were not involved out of a desire to integrate within gentile culture, but rather because they were participating in the Jewish ethic of volunteerism.

Family Businesses: Women's Involvement in the Workforce

Women took their roles in volunteer organizations and the Jewish ethic of volunteerism to the family businesses as well. Since they were often unable to work for pay, they instead routinely volunteered in the stores. The women were most directly involved in volunteering at their husband's businesses. Marion recalls that she did not at

²² Muller, Rebecca; Interview with Myrt Wolman, May 2010.

all enjoy working in her husband's business and in fact it was something that she was literally dragged, kicking and screaming, to do.

If his employees had a problem, they'd lose their license, they couldn't drive or they'd be sick, I'd become the driver. I'd keep saying "no, I'm not going," and he'd say "yes you are, get in the truck, everything will be loaded up for you, they'll take it out when you get there," and as you're being led to the car, I'm still saying I'm not going, and I'd go down and deliver, that was it. Years later we could laugh about it, but it wasn't funny at the time, that was the last thing I wanted to do. But you have to do that when it's your own business.²³

Even though Marion strongly disliked being involved with her husband's butcher shop, she still reflects that it was something that she had to do because it was her family's business, and her involvement contributed to the success of the store.

Other women did not have quite as negative a reaction to being involved in their family businesses as Marion did. Giselle Miller loved being involved with the Levine store. She would arrive on Friday nights and viewed her involvement in the store as more of a social gathering.

She showed up on Friday nights and she was like a greeter. She smiled, she spoke with the employees and she would sell something if she had too. Mostly she stood behind the main wrap. And she would send the money up to the office. For us, going to the Levine store, it was like going to a second home. So it was a social gathering place aside from a place people shopped... but she didn't really work. It was more of a social thing for her to be there. She felt as though she was watching for shoplifters.²⁴

²³ Muller, Rebecca, interview with Marion Hains, April 2010.

²⁴ Muller, Rebecca, interview with Sara Arnon, April 2010.

Giselle enjoyed her work at the store, even though she was reduced to only a greeter and watching for shoplifters. Sara, her daughter, reflects that the Levine store was a social place, one where many people used to go on Friday nights to catch up with family and friends. Even people from outside Waterville would travel to the store on the weekends and experience the vibrant nightlife of downtown. Since Giselle was involved in the store, albeit minimally, she was able to interact with other Jewish women, thus easing her transition from Algeria to Maine. Volunteering in family businesses had a similar effect on other women as well, by becoming involved in the Jewish community outside the synagogue and Jewish clubs, the women were able to spend time interacting with the men as well, and thus their social circle gradually began to open from mainly women, to include their husbands as well.

The place of men in the workforce was significant in comparison to their wives. The men were involved in maintaining stores, selling items and facilitating most of the gentile interactions that occurred within their store. Since they were much more involved with the gentiles on a daily basis through the stores and also their involvement in many more nonsectarian organizations than the women, the men were much more integrated into the Waterville gentile community. Although the women were also involved in these nonsectarian organizations and in the workplace, they did so mainly out a Jewish ethic of volunteerism and family responsibility, not with the desire to become involved with the gentile community.

The stigma directly following WWII regarding women in the workforce was such that it was considered shameful for women to work. Therefore most of the women became involved in business through volunteerism instead. Sara Arnon explains that

“...post-war, it was almost like if you were middle to upper middle class and you were working, it was an embarrassment. Like, why were you working, wasn’t your husband able to provide enough for your family?”²⁵ This stigma was something that completely invaded not only Waterville Jewish society, but general American women’s society as well. The idea that a working woman was an embarrassment to her husband and her family caused many women to avoid roles in the workforce. Sara, when asked about whether women worked in Waterville, having been conditioned to believe that women were not supposed to work, was unable to think of those women who did. After a few minutes, she did remember that: “the Jewish women that worked, that I knew, owned Stern’s department, or Russikoff Jewelers. They owned these really good stores that did very well.”²⁶ However, it is important to note that these Jewish women that worked were involved in their own Jewish family businesses and, as a result, were not any more integrated into the gentile community than the other Jewish women.

In the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, a rise in the number of women in the workplace occurred. This trend is not unique to the Jewish families in Waterville, but rather was a change experienced by the greater community of women nationwide. In the mid-1960’s, Phyllis Shiro began to work in the school system under the new Title I program in Waterville. The Title I program created remedial math and reading programs for students in Waterville who were struggling academically. Phyllis began as a substitute teacher in the school district, but recalls that she was called in so much to work that she decided to become a full-time teacher. Phyllis took some classes in the Colby College Education Department to prepare herself for her new role as a teacher. Phyllis

²⁵ Muller, Rebecca, [interview with Sara Arnon](#), April, 2010.

²⁶ Ibid

was not the only woman who returned to work. Myrt Wolman, who had been running a small gift shop out of her basement, decided to move the shop to Sterns' department store in the early 1970's.²⁷ Phyllis and Myrt's movement towards involvement in the workforce represents a nationwide trend that saw an increasing number of Jewish women entering and completing college and attaining marketable skills useful in the workplace.

With the skills they acquired, the women began to enter the workforce in greater numbers than their parents' generation. Since women were becoming participants in the workforce, when they married, their families were able to more readily achieve middle class status, which resulted in "emotionally and materially privileged children."²⁸ This next generation of children furthered the rags to riches trope, the same stereotype that persists to the present day. In addition, women who started working young became "active agents with control over their own lives"²⁹ gaining the materials necessary to claim greater autonomy from their parents. The trends among women in the workforce shifted away from women who worked until they married or became mothers, towards a greater desire for lifelong employment.

This rise in employment led the Jewish families in Waterville to also gain much more wealth than the first generation of immigrants. With this wealth, the Jews were no longer working jobs such as cattle dealing or peddling, but rather were becoming employed as doctors and lawyers. This shift led the Jewish families to rise in class standing therefore transitioning to the upper middle class, a position that previously had

²⁷ Muller, Rebecca, interview with Myrt Wolman, May 2010.

²⁸ *Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture*, ed. Joyce Antler (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press 1998). Pg.54

²⁹ Joyce Antler, *The Journey Home: Jewish Women and the American Century* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1997).Pg.74

been occupied by only American-born families. Marion Hains comments that the Jews in Waterville “were not poor people, I can tell you that. They were business people, professional people, doctors, stuff like that. Several lawyers.”³⁰ The Lebanese and Franco-American families, conversely, were not as lucky as their Jewish neighbors. Since they were overwhelmingly forced to the outskirts of town during the Urban Renewal project, the Lebanese and Franco-American families came to occupy a space of town that was not as affluent as their Jewish neighbors and therefore, they lacked similar opportunities and did not rise as dramatically in class as the Jewish families.

Conclusion:

The Jewish women in Waterville, Maine, were extremely lucky. When they moved from their original homes to join this new community, they were met with an already established Jewish society. The men slid easily back into their roles in Waterville, but for the women it was a bit more difficult since they did not have any pre-existing relationships to return to. As a result, the war brides who arrived in the years from 1945-1955 worked together to create their own spaces within the community. These spaces included the home, synagogue, volunteer opportunities and family businesses. Within the home, the Jewish women were able to meet other women and create friendships that were pivotal to the raising of children. Also, since the women tended to cluster in residential proximity to each other, they were able to form a relatively self-sufficient and independent society of women that also included the synagogue and other women’s activities. Within the synagogue, the women grew to take ownership of

³⁰ Muller, Rebecca; Interview with Marion Hains, April, 2010.

several aspects of the building. For example, Giselle Miller was influential in the kitchen and was known by the church community as the leader of the Latke brigade on Hanukah. Other women took ownership over the physical synagogue through their role in decorating the building. Phyllis Shiro claimed ownership over the synagogue in a slightly different way with her creation of a Sunday school in the 1950s. All of these actions speak to the same desire the women had to take the new space they were given, and shape it to fit their needs.

Within volunteer activities, the women also developed relationships with each other. They held socials and ran fundraising campaigns, which in addition to helping them meet other women, also added to female visibility in Waterville. This visibility was a positive growth because it helped to strengthen the community of women by providing a sense of solidarity and showing that the women were in fact as involved as the men. The volunteerism also expanded into the workplace as more women became involved with family businesses. This involvement in the family businesses not only introduced the women to the skills necessary for running a business, but it also spurred the beginning of a desire for the Jewish women in Waterville to take roles in the workplace. Until the 1970s, many only volunteered in their family businesses, however, as more and more women became involved, the stigma against women in the workplace was reduced and it became more acceptable for women to take jobs.

This creation of a self-sufficient, self-reliant, and independent community of Jewish women in Waterville was positive for the development of the Jewish female identity because it provided the means for women who had just moved to the town to become immediately involved and integrated in Jewish culture. Had the women been

unable to create the various women's realms where they were able to claim autonomy, it would have been much harder for the arriving war brides to become functioning members of society. These essentially women's-only realms made it possible for the Jewish war brides to socialize with each other, meet new friends, find support when raising their children, and also provide a way for them to escape the constant observances of their husbands' families. Escaping the husband's family was important for the women, some of whom felt extremely stifled by their new family, and isolated from their old family. Therefore, this women's society offered to the Jewish war brides was an outlet for their personal development, and a place for them to experience Waterville society with other women who were in the same situation.

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