

# SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

Journal of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

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2013

Volume 16



# Southern Jewish History

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Articles appearing in *Southern Jewish History* are abstracted and/or indexed in *Historical Abstracts*, *America: History and Life*, *Index to Jewish Periodicals*, *Journal of American History*, *Journal of Southern History*, *RAMBI-National Library of Israel*, *Immigration and Ethnic Historical Society Newsletter*, and the *Berman Jewish Policy Archive* ([www.bjpa.org](http://www.bjpa.org)).

*Southern Jewish History* acknowledges with deep appreciation grants from the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation, New York, and the Gale Foundation, Beaumont, Texas.

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ISSN 1521-4206

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# The Arrival of a Provocateur: Responses to William Dudley Pelley in Asheville, 1930 to 1934

by

Seth Epstein\*

William Dudley Pelley relocated to Asheville, North Carolina, in early 1932. An author, screenwriter, and dabbler in progressive reform in the 1910s and 1920s, he was known for his unorthodox Christian beliefs after *American Magazine* published his article, "My Seven Minutes in Eternity," in 1929.<sup>1</sup> Pelley's move was prompted by the offer of a wealthy supporter to provide him with land "for a spiritual retreat" in the area.<sup>2</sup> He leased the Asheville Women's Club building just north of the city's downtown, where he established the Fellowship of Christian Economics, a short-lived school that promised to teach the application of "Christ's precepts to our modern industrial problems."<sup>3</sup>

Pelley's politics turned ugly as the Great Depression and his own financial difficulties deepened. His publications, which previously focused on Christian spiritualism, increasingly turned to antisemitism. Inspired by Adolf Hitler's ascension to the chancellorship of Germany, Pelley created the militaristic Silver Shirt Legion in January 1933. This organization promoted Pelley's messages of Christian economics as well as his admiration for Hitler, political antisemitism, and fascism.<sup>4</sup>

Pelley's praise of Hitler and embrace of antisemitic fascism made him notorious around the nation and in Asheville.<sup>5</sup> His presence concerned both Jewish and non-Jewish residents of the

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city. This article examines the collaborations between non-Jews and Jews that were designed to marginalize Pelley and disassociate the city from him and his distasteful reputation. The two most significant of these events took place in 1934. The first was the observance of Brotherhood Day in the city, a local manifestation of the effort by the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ) to associate tolerance with Americanism. The second centers on Pelley's prosecution for violating the state financial securities regulations known as the "blue sky laws."

*National and Local Perspectives*

Participants in these collaborations performed particular roles essential to the overall success of the effort to disassociate the city from Pelley. Each instance involved and enlisted the interdependent actions of Jews and non-Jews, and their motivations are worthy of attention. Historians of American Jewry have recently argued for the importance of local contexts and connections in shaping Jewish identity, particularly in smaller communities.<sup>6</sup> While endorsing this approach, historian Mark K. Bauman has also pointed out that tracing the involvement of southern Jews in wide-ranging "informal networks" and associations places them in the context of national and international movements and conversations.<sup>7</sup>

The NCCJ's 1930s and 1940s "war on intolerance" provided one such national network.<sup>8</sup> Many of its leaders believed that interfaith activism could be a tool to change American society. As Kevin M. Schultz has argued in his recent history of the interfaith movement, from its founding the NCCJ hoped to be "an active promoter of a new kind of Americanism." It harbored the "ambitious" goal of advancing a "new 'social order' centered on brotherhood and justice."<sup>9</sup> Historian Wendy Wall has noted the hopes of some activists engaged in the creation of what she has termed "ideological consensus" that their movement would significantly reshape not just social but economic relations in the United States.<sup>10</sup>

Historians have attempted to understand the shortcomings of the tolerance movement by focusing their attention on its elites.

Wall, for instance, has examined the ideas and projects in which its intellectual and organizational leaders engaged. Building consensus through formulations of tolerance meant defining some ideas as out-of-bounds or intolerable. Furthermore, invocations that treated tolerance as a personal characteristic reduced its effectiveness as a tool to redress inequality. Meanwhile, the attempts of those engaged in tolerance work to standardize difference often failed to address Americans' varied histories. Both Wall and fellow scholar Stuart Svonkin have noted that participants involved in such conversations rarely reckoned with power imbalances and the legal, economic, and cultural bases of their own privilege.<sup>11</sup>

The result was an emphasis on "comity" rather than "equality." As Wall reminds us, however, this outcome was not a foregone conclusion.<sup>12</sup> Incorporating the ambitions of local actors into the story of tolerance and the reformulation of American nationalism allows us to map more fully the course that this movement took. Attempts to disavow intolerance emerged from both far-reaching, coordinated efforts and the multiple local concerns that motivated different activists. Those motivations were not petty distractions but rather essential linkages between movement leaders who worked together in specific locales.

As this article will argue, in their way both Brotherhood Day and the legal proceedings against Pelley protected rather than reshaped Asheville's social and economic hierarchy. Activists participated in these endeavors in order to defend the image of the city and to preserve, not to dissolve, the relations and boundaries previously established between Jews and Christians. These efforts involved the city's religious, legal, and cultural authorities in a defensive action against what they considered the meddling of an interloper. The motivations that drew them into these efforts were not unique to Asheville. While most cities could not claim an antisemitic provocateur on Pelley's scale, many were likely populated with minor agitators. Furthermore, the 1930s saw a rise in anti-Catholic sentiment, as well as the creation of more than one hundred antisemitic organizations around the country.<sup>13</sup> Even without a proximate threat like Pelley, many religious and civic

figures were likely motivated by the desire to defend and define their positions in their own locales as well as the nation.

*William Dudley Pelley portrait.*

*Detail from a Wanted Poster, 1939, issued by the Sheriff of Asheville.*

*(Courtesy of the North Carolina Collection,  
Pack Memorial Public Library, Asheville.)*

### *Pelley in Asheville*

Pelley relentlessly publicized his idea of an antisemitic Christian commonwealth. As historian Leo Ribuffo has noted, Pelley's vision represented "a perverse contribution to the planning vogue of the 1930s."<sup>14</sup> Pelley himself compared his proposed national corporation with the War Industries Board of World War I. Ac-



ording to historian and Pelley biographer Scott Beekman, citizens would be “stockholders in this corporation, sharing the dividends,” although citizenship would be limited to those who qualified as Aryan. The corporate state would distribute goods and services based on its estimation of individuals’ worth, although a minimum amount was guaranteed to the racial citizenry.<sup>15</sup> An unsympathetic contemporary of Pelley claimed that he sought to turn “the nation into one great corporation.”<sup>16</sup>

Pelley’s plan did not envision the expulsion but rather the ghettoization of Jews, who would lose their right to vote in his corporatist nation. The controlling authority in the nation would designate one city in each state a “Beth Haven.” This haven had the dual mission of protecting Jews and neutralizing the grave threat they presented to the nation. Jewish men would have to reside in this city, but despite his professed concern for the Aryan race, he would have allowed Jewish women to reside outside these designated areas as long as they were married to men who fit the state’s racial requirement for citizenship.<sup>17</sup>

Pelley established the Silver Shirt Legion as the vanguard of his new Christian state in 1933, shortly after Hitler assumed power as Germany’s chancellor. The organization aspired to paramilitary and policing functions. Pelley encouraged the Silver Shirt chapters to act as outposts of surveillance to gather information on dangerous Jews who would later face the wrath of Pelley’s Christian corporatist state. Membership was limited to white Christians. From its headquarters in Asheville, it likely never surpassed fifteen thousand total members. While the organization had little impact nationally, Silver Shirts made their presence felt in specific locations, at times threatening individuals and defacing private property.<sup>18</sup>

Chapters were located largely in the Midwest and West, and Asheville was one of the very few sites in the South where the group established a foothold.<sup>19</sup> A September 1933 editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* claimed that the “Hitler of America” had attained a membership of one thousand “in the mountains back of Asheville,” but that number was almost certainly a gross exaggeration.<sup>20</sup> For many commentators, however, quantifying Pelley’s

strength was an ultimately unsatisfactory means of estimating the threat he represented. In September 1933, the *Southern Israelite* portrayed him as a star in the national and international antisemitic constellation. The *Israelite* asserted that Pelley was in "constant communication" with "Nazi headquarters in New York."<sup>21</sup> Although the periodical's editor, James Waterman Wise, scoffed at Pelley's claims that the Silver Shirts would "loom large" in happenings in the United States in 1933, he came to the conclusion that "Chief" Pelley was "a potential danger."<sup>22</sup> To support this assertion he had only to direct readers' attention to Germany.

Pelley's periodicals did not focus a great deal of attention on Asheville Jewry or the city itself. His writings were too grandiose in scope to spend much time on the events of a relatively small southern city.<sup>23</sup> He may have been hesitant to antagonize local authorities, although he bemoaned the refusal of an Asheville radio station to allow him access to the airwaves.<sup>24</sup> He did not ignore the city's Jews. He specifically attacked their participation in civic rituals and their ability to represent American citizenship.<sup>25</sup> *Pelley's Weekly*, a successor to his earlier journal, *Liberation*, also criticized Jewish efforts to counter antisemitic radicalism in the city. In 1936, two years after Asheville Jews had participated in ecumenical efforts to disassociate their city from Pelley, the periodical attacked Jews for supposedly fomenting disunity among an anti-communist "National Conference of Christian Ministers and Laymen" convention meeting in Asheville, which Pelley attended.<sup>26</sup> His journal crowed that Alvin Kartus, a Jewish lawyer who had played a role in Pelley's "famous" securities trial, had asked the city's First Christian Church to bar the antisemitic faction from meeting there, to no avail.<sup>27</sup> In the wake of the conference, *Pelley's Weekly* announced that the city was "aroused on the Jewish question—openly, publicly." The recent events had "vindicated" Pelley's warnings of Jewish power and "domination" of the country. The *Weekly* boasted that the city had become "fiercely Jew conscious."<sup>28</sup>

Pelley and his periodicals were prone to overstatement, to put it mildly. The extent to which Ashevilleans participated in the Silver Shirts or supported Pelley is unclear. One Jewish volunteer

remembered that when she assisted in the effort to discredit him she found that “not many people around” Asheville subscribed to his literature. She believed that residents “didn’t necessarily support [Pelley].”<sup>29</sup> While there may have been little active support of Pelley in the city (or, for that matter, in the country), it is possible that a greater number were sympathetic to some of his arguments, as another resident of Asheville held that “there were a lot of people [in Asheville] who agreed with” Pelley’s views.<sup>30</sup>

### *Reactions to Pelley Across Religious Lines*

Pelley’s presence threatened to disrupt the ordering of economic and social life in Asheville for both Jews and non-Jews. He upset the carefully crafted image of the city as tolerant, hospitable, and cultured. These were important characteristics for a tourist destination’s boosters to cultivate, and through the 1920s the Chamber of Commerce and others had labored to attach such adjectives to the city. Because of the city’s dependence on the tourist industry, the defense of its reputation would involve a wide field of authorities. Social relations had already likely been undermined by the economic and social dislocations of the Great Depression, which had greatly exacerbated the city’s own economic downturn that had begun in 1927.<sup>31</sup> Jews who involved themselves in the effort to marginalize Pelley did so in defense of the status they had enjoyed in the city.

Few Jews lived in Asheville prior to 1880, when the Western North Carolina Railroad reached the city. The resort town’s dramatic growth in the late nineteenth century coincided with the beginning of greater immigration from eastern Europe, and eastern Europeans were part of the first significant movement of Jews to Asheville. Both central and eastern European Jews were charter members of the first congregation in the city, Beth Ha Tephila, founded in 1891. The charter defined it as Conservative, but its leaders, who included prominent merchants, steered it towards a Reform orientation. Eastern European immigrants who arrived later in the 1890s provided impetus for the decision by some unhappy members to establish an Orthodox congregation, Bikur

Cholim.<sup>32</sup> Still, the ethnic divisions between these congregations were not always sharply drawn. Some residents were members of both congregations, and later eastern European immigrants did not necessarily join the Orthodox congregation, choosing instead to affiliate with the Reform congregation.<sup>33</sup>

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*Jewish reaction to Pelley in the Southern Israelite  
showing actual headlines from Liberation.  
(From the monthly Southern Israelite, October 1933.)*

As historian Leonard Rogoff notes, the growth of Asheville's Jewish population outpaced that of the city as a whole during the early twentieth century.<sup>34</sup> Asheville continued to attract a significant portion of North Carolina's admittedly small eastern European immigrant population.<sup>35</sup> There were about seven hundred Jews in Asheville in 1927, when the city as a whole had approximately fifty thousand people. Although the city's overall population had grown only marginally ten years later, it held 950 Jews, the largest enclave in the state. While approximately half the size of Charlotte, it was the home of 230 more Jews. Asheville had the state's largest Jewish population and likely the greatest proportion of Jews, then, when measured against its total population.<sup>36</sup>

As in many other cities, Jewish stores populated Asheville's downtown, from newspaper and cigar shops to department stores. The most notable of these was Solomon Lipinsky's Bon Marché department store, which began in the late 1880s. Its new building in 1923 embodied the city's post-World War I economic boom.<sup>37</sup> Like their neighbors, these businesses also experienced the economic catastrophes of the Great Depression. Because of the economic misfortunes of their members, both congregations faced significant challenges to their continued existence during the 1930s.<sup>38</sup>

During the interwar years, Jews were well aware of their distinct status. Questioned many years later, Asheville Jews distinguished between rare antisemitic incidents and the stable, if implicit, areas of social exclusion that informed relations between Jews and non-Jews during the 1920s and 1930s. One Jewish resident maintained that the exclusion of Jews from clubs, spaces, and areas reserved for elite Christian whites, while largely enduring and fixed, "didn't bother us. It was there."<sup>39</sup> No Jews lived in Biltmore Forest, the exclusive white Christian town just south of the city carved from George Vanderbilt's expansive estate.<sup>40</sup> According to Asheville resident Phyllis Sultan, "basically, you knew your boundaries, you knew you were never going to be in the Cottillion and you knew you were never going to be invited to anything at Biltmore Forest."<sup>41</sup> The Junior League excluded Jews, while the Biltmore Country Club admitted a small number of

them in the 1930s. According to one Jewish resident, because of economic conditions the club briefly “took in anybody,” although the organization later stopped granting Jews new memberships.<sup>42</sup> One resident reported that a woman and her son became Episcopalians and joined a Biltmore church in the ultimately disappointed hope of gaining membership to the country club.<sup>43</sup>

*Bon Marché Department Store, 1924.  
(Courtesy of the North Carolina Collection,  
Pack Memorial Public Library, Asheville.)*

The city’s ornate Rhododendron Festival of the 1930s represented both what was at stake in ensuring the profitability of the city’s tourist industry and the reputedly stable social boundaries that governed relations between Jews and non-Jews. The celebration, which ran from 1928 until World War II, served as the high point of the city’s summer tourist season, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors in June of each year. For the duration of the weeklong festival, Asheville was transformed into a “mythical kingdom of rhododendron” complete with a fictional royal court.

Southern states sent young white women to be presented as ambassadors to the kingdom.<sup>44</sup> In 1937, Cuba even sent a representative selected jointly by Asheville's Chamber of Commerce and Cuba's National Tourist Commission.<sup>45</sup>

The Rhododendron Festival depended on the labors of a wide circle of interested parties including the *Asheville Citizen-Times* and the local Chamber of Commerce.<sup>46</sup> Organizers pressured businesses to aid the festival by doing such things as buying and displaying rhododendrons in their shop windows. Jewish businesses prominently supported the festivities. Jewish-owned businesses like the department store Bon Marché entered ornate floats into the contests. As longtime resident Mary Parker later observed, Jews were important "underwriters" of the event but did not participate in the "social part" of the festivities. Only white Christian elites were elected to "royal" positions in the Rhododendron Court, and Jews were excluded from the yearly dance that honored the court and was broadcast via radio to affiliates around the country.<sup>47</sup> As Jewish residents later commented, exclusion from the social events of the festival "didn't bother us too much."<sup>48</sup> Growing up, they just knew that they would not be included in the "Rhododendron stuff . . . so it didn't bother us."<sup>49</sup> The festival and its exclusions proceeded throughout the collaborative efforts to marginalize Pelley.

Jews, however, did participate in several social or civic clubs. The first long-term rabbi of Beth Ha Tephila, Moses P. Jacobson, was a member of the exclusive literary society known as the Pen & Plate Club.<sup>50</sup> Jewish men participated in Kiwanis and Shriner organizations.<sup>51</sup> As noted earlier, Pelley focused little on Asheville in his periodical *Liberation*, but he did criticize the local Lions Club for allowing a Jew to carry the American flag in a parade.<sup>52</sup>

The clubs in which Jews were involved nonetheless often defined themselves as Christian. The optometrist, eastern European immigrant, and Reform temple member Samuel Robinson objected to the Christian invocations that began club meetings he attended.<sup>53</sup> Fellow member of the Reform congregation Leon Rocamora, however, painted Robinson as an outlier in these protests. While other Jews may have disliked these rituals, "[most] of us

would sit back and say this is pure ignorance on the most part. That's the way they are brought up."<sup>54</sup> As Rocamora's reaction suggests, Jews involved in civic groups chose not to disrupt the religious and cultural norms that defined those organizations and their places in them. Robinson's objections, on the other hand, illustrate that he was not satisfied being an object of tolerance. He desired more than just inclusion in a Christian space; he wanted a hand in defining that space. Even such spaces and associations of inclusion, then, also communicated Jewish distinctiveness.

*Pen & Plate Club 25th anniversary meeting, October, 1929.  
Rabbi Moses P. Jacobson (white hair) is seated in the front row to the far left.  
(Courtesy of the North Carolina Collection,  
Pack Memorial Public Library, Asheville.)*



Jews were conscious of Pelley's aggressive presence in the city's central spaces. Downtown retail storeowner Sidney Schochet, for example, recalled Pelley walking on Patton Avenue, one of the four main streets that terminate at the city's central civic space known as Pack Square. Schochet remembered that he was "always accompanied by 3 or 4 young, athletic looking guys" on his urban travels. He wore a uniform and sported "jack boots." Ruth Lowenberg recalled, "I know that we [the Jewish community] hated him. I knew that." She and other Asheville Jews were aware not only of Pelley's magazine, but also the location of his headquarters in their town.<sup>55</sup>

Jews in Asheville were concerned about Hitler's ascension to leadership in Germany as well as Pelley's local presence. Pelley boasted not only of his admiration for Hitler but of his connections to Nazi Germany. Reform Jews in Asheville went further, drawing parallels between Nazi Germany, Pelley, and the political culture of the United States, where they were cast as objects of tolerance. These connections informed the articulation of their identity as fundamentally distinct from the Christian majority and their status as vulnerable to that majority.

In 1930, Robinson, Jacobson, and another Reform congregation leader established the Temple Club, which quickly affiliated with the National Association of Temple Brotherhoods. The announcement of the club's formation in the *Southern Israelite* illustrated the many roles its leaders hoped it would serve. Its purposes included the promotion of "cultural and educational advancement among its membership" and the city's Jewish population as a whole. The club would buttress members' attachment to Judaism in part by strengthening "the spirit of comradeship between its members." Yet, the club spokesperson communicated a lingering ambivalence about the club's purposes, stating that it was "mainly" meant to encourage "religious activities."<sup>56</sup> It effected what historian David Kaufman has termed "social-religious consolidation" and provided a venue for its select members to express and discuss Jewish identity in ways other than through attendance of religious services.<sup>57</sup>

*Rabbi Moses P. Jacobson, 1930, left, and Samuel Robinson, 1931, right.  
(From the Southern Israelite, December 1930 and September 11, 1931.)*

Prompted by the visibility of Pelley and the specter of Adolf Hitler, in July 1933 the Temple Club devoted a meeting to debating the existence and implications of the relationship between Pelley, American democracy and culture, and Nazi Germany, in essence, the issue of the Jews' place in the nation. Club members took up the question, "Is a Hitleristic Form of Government Possible in the United States?" The debate blended Jews' local, national, and international concerns. These interrelated concerns underscored their status as a minority and their vulnerability in a mainstream culture. Two members answered in the affirmative and two in the negative. Unfortunately, the latter two speakers spoke with no notes, and their counterarguments were not rec-

orded. We do know that the "ladies" who were empowered to judge the debate called it a draw.<sup>58</sup>

Both "Yes" responders critiqued not so much marginal figures like Pelley as the flaws of "Anglo-Saxonism" and American democracy itself. Robinson, for instance, focused not on Pelley but rather on Bob Reynolds, who had recently been elected to the U.S. Senate. Reynolds, an Asheville native, would become known more widely for his isolationism and antisemitism in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>59</sup> While Robinson conceded that ideally "reason and logic should govern life," the senator's recent speech at a Chamber of Commerce function had led him to conclude that this was an unrealistic expectation.<sup>60</sup> As was the case with the senator's previous exhortations, this recent offering had been "bombastic, absolutely meaningless, and moronic to any intelligent listener."<sup>61</sup> In Robinson's presentation, Reynolds served as a tool to critique American culture more widely. He warned his audience not to write off the new senator "as unsymptomatic [*sic*] of the true state of the nation." It was tempting to ridicule and marginalize the senator. Robinson, however, regarded him as indicative of what he called the "barbaric common denominator that characterizes the Anglo-Saxon throughout this land of ours." The other signs were not limited to the South and included the "Ku Klux Klan movement," the practice of lynching, and the recent milk strikes organized by Farmer's Holiday organizations, which were centered in the Midwest.<sup>62</sup> These incidents, and others like them, were due to the pernicious impact of what Robinson called the Anglo-Saxon influence on the country.

This influence, moreover, was the basis for Robinson's suggestion that a "Hitleristic" government could flourish in the United States, whose inhabitants were "[psychologically] very little different" from Germans. Such predilection for barbarism, in the context of the mass suffering caused by the Great Depression, could encourage people to shed "the finer instincts of our society."<sup>63</sup> Robinson was drawing a parallel that white Christians rarely made in public. While white newspaper editors made comparisons between the KKK and Nazi mobs, they stopped short of doing so between the Nazi government and the American South.

By focusing on Reynolds, Robinson drew such a line and also articulated a sharp sense of Jews' distance from Anglo-Saxon culture.<sup>64</sup>

The other advocate for the "Yes" position, the merchant Marcus Sterne, invoked Pelley to an extent that Robinson did not. This may have been the result of a strategic decision between advocates for the same side of the debate who wished their arguments not to overlap. Sterne noted that men such as Pelley, who "publish the weekly paper we are so familiar with," were the poisonous leaders being created in this climate of unrest.<sup>65</sup> Like Robinson, he pointed to more acceptable and mainstream political practices in the United States as potentially allowing a demagogic dictatorship to gain traction. He termed Franklin Roosevelt's presidency a "one man dictatorship" and warned of the ability of politicians to manipulate the great mass of people who were once better off financially.

Those who answered in the affirmative to the evening's question chose to characterize the country's majority as vulnerable to demagogic distortion. They were simultaneously making an implicit claim about the vulnerable and distinct place of Jews within a land governed by the moral weakness of Anglo-Saxonism, a weakness easily exploited not just by hate groups but also potentially by American politicians.<sup>66</sup> The possibilities that existed to draw connections between Pelley, American government, and Nazi Germany in the early 1930s also created possibilities to define Jewish identity as distinct and their status as vulnerable.

Moses Jacobson emphasized both this distinctiveness and vulnerability in his Purim 1933 speech delivered a few months after Pelley began his Silver Shirt organization. The Beth Ha Tephila rabbi attempted to convince his audience to protect their place in the city. Typical of other Hebrew Union College graduates of the 1880s and Reform rabbis of his generation, Jacobson considered that Zionism could be conceived by non-Jews as incompatible with loyalty to one's country. He published his criticisms of Zionism in the Jewish press and expressed them during earlier meetings of the Temple Club.<sup>67</sup> During a Temple Club meeting Jacobson also declared Zionism to be immoral because its

fulfillment “would mean the ultimate eviction of [Palestine’s] entire present Arab population.”<sup>68</sup>

Pelley’s presence, though, appeared to prompt Jacobson to paint a picture of American and Jewish history that Zionists would have largely endorsed. He argued that Jews would always be vulnerable to the demagogic attacks and inflamed passions of non-Jews, no matter what status they had individually or collectively achieved. Jacobson’s address formulated an identity that was permanently at odds with the Christian majority. Whereas Zionists imagined an end to this condition through the establishment of a Jewish state, Jacobson rejected that solution. His speech also cast doubt on the feasibility of the ideal of assimilation, which had been a goal of classical Reform Judaism.<sup>69</sup> As this speech suggests, Pelley’s presence in Asheville deepened Jews’ understanding of themselves as separate and distinct from the surrounding Christian majority. The threat that he represented underscored their apparently perpetual minority and vulnerable status.

The rabbi called on his congregants to embrace and defend this status by acting against Pelley. He placed this responsibility within the context of Jewish religious history, duty, and identity. His speech implicitly questioned the often overstated but undeniable exceptionality of America as a place free from persecution for Jews. It placed Pelley within a long, biblical narrative of Jewish vulnerability and reaction against tyrannical authority. In some respects, Jacobson’s speech was a mirror image of the optimistic narratives analyzed by Beth Wenger. Wenger examines how Jews created narratives out of elements of their heritage in order to “weave themselves into the fabric of American life,” usually in an affirmation of the salutary exceptionalism of the United States.<sup>70</sup> In contrast, Jacobson juxtaposed the Purim story with Pelley to suggest that Jews were not only vulnerable but also politically isolated, even in the United States.

The rabbi drew local and international parallels with the lessons of the Purim fable. It was not so much that Jacobson believed that non-Jews in Asheville were hostile to Jews. He acknowledged that, “Jews as a body here are respected. They are classed with the

best of our citizenship." Jacobson further conceded that it would be easy to imagine that such a people "would be immune from all danger of a local general uprising."<sup>71</sup>

Even given these conditions, the Jews' position was vulnerable to demagogic distortion. "Any unscrupulous agitator," Jacobson claimed, could very quickly turn the previous Christian amity towards Jews "into the very bitterest enmity." For Jacobson, this vulnerability was not the result of any racial differences between Jews and others. Instead, "the mere fact of [their] distinct religious differences with the majority" was enough to permanently mark Jews as different and limit the support on which they could call. His decision to define Judaism in religious rather than racial or ethnic terms was typical of many classical Reform rabbis, particularly those in the Jim Crow South.<sup>72</sup> Their vulnerability was a permanent characteristic of their status as a religious minority. In case of trouble, Jews would find "no defender outside of [their] own ranks."<sup>73</sup>

Consequently, Jacobson urged his congregation to take seriously the threat that Pelley represented, if not the man himself. He acknowledged that Pelley cut a seemingly ridiculous figure, a "discredited and crazy" leader of a "crazy movement." It was not that he had a high estimate of Pelley's ability as a demagogue, exactly, but rather a gloomy appraisal of the ease with which others could be inflamed. Pelley was dangerous, for instance, for his determination to influence and fool "a presumptive cultured coterie who are open to any sort of fanatical suggestion." Although seemingly insignificant, the rabbi imagined Pelley as a "weed [that] may eventually choke a whole garden" if not pruned. Jacobson called on his audience to do just that by countering Pelley's lies and hatred. He returned to the Purim story, but noted that Jews could not rely on its fictional and "providential" conclusion in their own lives. Instead, he stated that Jews in Asheville could only count on themselves to counter and marginalize Pelley.<sup>74</sup>

Jacobson compared Asheville to Germany, but he refused to utter the name of its new chancellor. To do so would "desecrate any place that purports to bear the character of sanctity." Jews in Germany, Jacobson cautioned his audience, did not deserve any

portion of blame for German antisemitism. Instead, the sole reason they were targeted was that they were Jews. Their "brethren" in Asheville, then, could be targeted for the same reason.<sup>75</sup> The rabbi called on members of his congregation to act against Pelley in a way that preserved their status and diasporic history as outsiders. He called on Jews to defend their position in American society and in Asheville, not to demand a revision in that position.

Jews were not the only ones troubled by the presence of Pelley and his headquarters in Asheville. Non-Jews were also concerned that he could harm the city's carefully constructed image as a tolerant and progressive city that welcomed white visitors. Tourism, like other New South industries, depended on cultivating a new, moderate image of the South.<sup>76</sup> Asheville civic and business leaders undertook multiple efforts to create this impression. In successive years during the mid-1920s, the Chamber of Commerce sent a selection of Asheville's leading businessmen, including Jewish merchant Solomon Lipinsky, to different regions of the United States on "goodwill tours" in the service of a Babbitt-like brotherhood.<sup>77</sup> Promotional pamphlets also emphasized the city's cultivation. One advertisement, for instance, listed the city's landmarks of culture: "an opera house, a fine social club, a country club, a golf club, an art gallery, and a public library."<sup>78</sup> The volume of books lent by its library, testified another pamphlet, spoke "very highly of Asheville's cultural standing" while the presence in the city of "practically every denomination" of religion exemplified its cosmopolitan attitude.<sup>79</sup>

Demonstrating orderly race relations under the auspices of white supremacy emerged as another important task for city boosters. As historian Richard Starnes has noted, vacationers were not likely to choose a place known for having disorderly or violent race relations.<sup>80</sup> A tour book published just a few years after the violent white supremacy campaign of 1898 reassured readers that "[all] this agitation about the negro does not effect [sic] *Western North Carolina*, the mountainous part of the State, very much."<sup>81</sup> In 1926, a "Visitor" wrote to the editor of the *Asheville Times* to laud the tolerance and "fair-mindedness" of the city's white citizens who were attempting to free a young African American man

from prison. In the previous year, an Asheville jury had wrongfully convicted the prisoner, Alvin Mansel, of sexual assault. The actions of Asheville's "leading" whites, the author promised, had altered the "falsely pre-conceived ideas of treatment of such matters" in the region. The visitor assured readers that the publicity attending the case would generate more good will and business for the city than any "advertising conceived by your Chamber of Commerce."<sup>82</sup>

Jews also played a role in demonstrations of the city's tolerance and hospitable nature during the 1920s. The Central Conference of American Rabbis held its convention in Asheville in 1926. Jacobson, credited with bringing the group to the city, assured his gathered colleagues that Asheville was a "place of tolerance," free of racial and religious prejudice. The *Asheville Citizen* accepted with pride Jacobson's praise.<sup>83</sup> While it noted the presence of a minority in Asheville dedicated to fomenting "religious and racial bitterness," the paper predicted that it would wither in time. The gathering of some ninety rabbis and their families at one of the city's fine hotels represented the financial benefits of tolerance. During the convention, the *Citizen* recommended to its readers that the city collectively should be "proud of its Jewish population" for their contributions to its "social and material advancement." The conference was only the most recent example of the importance of Jewish residents to the area's economic development.<sup>84</sup>

Pelley's presence in the 1930s, however, had the potential to tarnish the city's well-cultivated image. Even during the Great Depression, as Richard Starnes has pointed out, tourism was a crucial element in the city's economy and the focus of an increasingly coordinated campaign at the state level.<sup>85</sup> The city's continued economic dependence on tourism translated into the need to defend its image against Pelley. His presence was no secret. The *New York Times* and other newspapers and periodicals reported on his actions while he lived in Asheville, creating and broadcasting the association between him and the city.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, despite Pelley's wealthy donors, the media portrayed Silver Shirts members as lower-class, unsophisticated, and parochial.



These were the very images and attributes against which the city's boosters and promoters had struggled.<sup>87</sup> Although many commentators assumed that Pelley's followers were mentally unhinged, criminal, or lower-class, historians have demonstrated that participants were "drawn from the lower and middle classes" equally.<sup>88</sup>

Even after Pelley was convicted of violating the state's financial securities laws, the stigma of serving as headquarters for Pelley continued to affect Asheville's reputation. Eric Sevareid, the future CBS correspondent, reported on the Silver Shirt organization in Minneapolis in 1938. His work illustrates how Asheville's status as a headquarters for Pelley's organization could cast doubt on the city boosters' claims. In a parody of a letter written by a Silver Shirt organizer to the "boss" back home in the mountains of North Carolina, Sevareid claimed that the inhabitants of Minneapolis were not as gullible as those who resided in the "hookworm belt." In characterizing the area as gullible and using a phrase associated with southern poverty and backwardness, Sevareid, in effect, conflated Asheville with the rest of the South. In contrast to the mountains of North Carolina, Minneapolis was a difficult place to recruit members because they read "newspapers and magazines and even books."<sup>89</sup> As Sevareid's sarcasm suggests, the city's reputation as the haven for Pelley's organization undermined the efforts of boosters who had labored to paint Asheville as a cosmopolitan and tolerant locale.

#### *Collaborations against Pelley*

In 1934 Jews worked with non-Jews in two specific instances to marginalize Pelley and to disassociate the city from him. These collaborations were meant to protect the economic and social ordering of the city against any possible influence that Pelley might gather. The leading Jews and non-Jews involved had overlapping but distinct motivations.

The city's observance of Brotherhood Day provides the first instance. The function took place at the Imperial Theater downtown. The meeting was only one of thirty-three nationwide Brotherhood Day observances classified by the NCCJ as a mass

meeting and one of only six such meetings in the South.<sup>90</sup> Such a production depended on the cooperation of many participants. The NCCJ pointed out this need for collaboration, noting that a successful Brotherhood Day required the assistance of a locale's leading figures. For instance, the conference suggested that local organizers ask editors to pen editorials on the appointed day, "expressing their sentiments on the subject."<sup>91</sup> The editor of the *Asheville Citizen-Times* obliged and used the opportunity to insist that Pelley was an unwelcome stranger unrepresentative of Asheville. The editorial offers a good illustration of how local interests interpreted and adapted the interfaith project.

Leading Ashevilleans spearheaded the event on Sunday, April 29, 1934, and the *Citizen-Times* promoted it prior to the date. The venerable and well-known minister of the city's First Presbyterian Church, Robert Campbell, agreed to participate along with Father Francis McCourt, pastor of the Joan of Arc Catholic Church, and Rabbi Jacobson. Campbell, who had presided at the downtown church since the 1880s, had been involved in many reform and civic organizations throughout the 1910s and 1920s and had served as president of the city's Interracial Committee.<sup>92</sup> Haywood Parker, a locally prominent attorney who was involved in charitable social services, served as master of ceremonies.<sup>93</sup> In this minutely choreographed event, each religious figure was introduced with a musical selection associated with his faith.

Pelley's presence in the city provided context for the proceedings, but none of the speakers explicitly referenced him, although Parker and Campbell did so obliquely. Parker compared the present climate in Asheville and the United States with the flu epidemic of 1918. He noted that "certain signs seem to indicate that we are threatened today" with the even more pernicious "scourge of religious intolerance." Campbell, speaking last, argued that "there are some differences which we must combat as unsafe." Among those who represented intolerable deviance were those who circulated "secret propaganda and violence of hate."<sup>94</sup> Unsurprisingly, Jacobson did not explicitly denounce Pelley. This omission mirrored the expectations of the NCCJ, whose leaders

trusted Protestants to take the lead in combating intolerance aimed at Catholics and Jews, lest the conference be perceived as merely a mouthpiece for those minorities.<sup>95</sup>

Apart from the allusions to Pelley, the three principal speakers endeavored to explain that a commitment to tolerance would threaten nothing essential to people's lives or beliefs but would rather protect American traditions. Jacobson argued that tolerance would not pose a threat to the nation because it would distinguish between beliefs and ideals. If "men would range themselves under" the latter, he held, their overriding similarities would become apparent.<sup>96</sup> Father McCourt, whose turn was signaled by the playing of "Ave Maria," attempted to make use of this supposed consensus to protect society. According to the *Citizen*, McCourt asked his audience to take united action against moral threats such as the "salacity and obscenity of 'most moving pictures,' much advertising and general social life." He urged Protestants and Jews to "cooperate with Catholics in signing the 'Legion of Decency' pledges." Campbell also urged citizens to regard tolerance as a tool to protect the United States. The title of his speech, "Making America Safe for Differences," was one suggested by the national organization. It could just have easily been titled "Making Differences Safe for America." He assured his audience that the practice of tolerance would not disturb the country's "high standards." Instead, it could protect those norms by combating things deemed intolerable.<sup>97</sup>

The *Citizen-Times* editorial that appeared on Brotherhood Day reaffirmed both local relations between Jews and Christians and the city's image as a tolerant location by disavowing Pelley. It made the speakers' implicit repudiation of Pelley more explicit while still refraining from mentioning Pelley's name. The author acknowledged that there was a "stranger in our midst" who had brought the city into ill repute. This unnamed stranger, who was clearly Pelley, used Asheville "largely as a mailing address" to spread his intolerance. The paper asserted that "those who live here know that he does not speak the sentiments of our people. He enjoys neither local support nor local countenance."<sup>98</sup> The editorial also reminded readers of the economic benefits of

brotherhood, without which “no prosperity, no social or economic progress” would come to Asheville.<sup>99</sup>

A much more explicit and lengthy attempt to draw a sharp line between Pelley and the city ran as an investigative story the same day on the newspaper’s front page. Willis Thornton, a staff correspondent from the Newspaper Enterprise Association and not part of the paper’s regular staff, wrote the article. A short introduction to the long article stated that Thornton “was sent to inquire into the Silver Shirt business.” Perhaps an outside writer would appear to have more credibility in reporting on the relationship between the city and Pelley. The article’s subheading announced that “Asheville Fails To Get Excited Over Being Headquarters.” The story repeatedly noted residents’ lack of enthusiasm for the Silver Shirt movement. In the first paragraph, the author states that Asheville is an example of “a place that is not excited over, or seriously concerned with” Pelley. Similarly, his movement “never gained any following in this region.” Finally, Thornton wrote, “membership is almost non-existent” in the city, which was chosen as the headquarters of the Silver Shirts only because Pelley, earlier concerned with spiritualism, had established himself in Asheville in 1932. The article was not meant solely for the city’s residents and visitors; rather it was carried in all newspapers that subscribed to the services of the Newspaper Enterprise Association.

The second notable collaboration also took place in the spring of 1934. This effort eventually resulted in Pelley’s conviction in early 1935 for violating the state’s financial securities regulations known as the blue sky laws, so named because they targeted corporations that counted the empty sky as their only assets.<sup>100</sup> As biographer Scott Beekman indicates, this legal effort may have been spurred by the May 1934 visit of House Un-American Activities Committee member Charles Kramer, who subpoenaed Pelley’s records.<sup>101</sup>

Just as Jacobson had urged in his 1933 Purim sermon, Jews in Asheville worked against Pelley. Speaking of the episode many years later, residents asserted both a collective and individual impetus for countering the Silver Shirts. Longtime resident and shop

owner Sidney Schochet claimed that the B'nai B'rith sought to "get [Pelley] somehow or another." He credited one of the first Jewish lawyers to practice in Asheville, Alvin Kartus, for the legal strategy of prosecuting Pelley for violation of the state's securities laws. Kartus, a member of the Reform congregation and, by the end of the decade, president of the Southeastern District Grand Lodge of B'nai B'rith, used his relationships with other local lawyers to pursue Pelley.<sup>102</sup> According to Schochet, Kartus "got [Pelley's case] on the docket. He got the charges made."<sup>103</sup> In a somewhat hyperbolic oral history, another Ashevillean said that Kartus had once been "the biggest stinker that God ever made," but that when he returned to Asheville "he got to be a different person and he personally destroyed the Silver Shirts."<sup>104</sup>

*Alvin Kartus.*  
(From the Southern Israelite,  
February 17, 1939.)

Other Jews played important roles in preparing charges against Pelley. A local judge apparently allowed Kartus access to Pelley's records for a weekend. According to Asheville resident Sarah Goldstein, she, her sister Jennette, and her friend Hilda Finkelstein assisted this effort by spending a weekend copying the names of Pelley's subscribers to help build a case for securities fraud. In addition, Orthodox congregation member W. W. Michalove was reported to have been "sort of like an undercover agent" who also helped make possible the prosecution of Asheville's fascistic interloper. Jews would not have been able to accomplish so much, however, if they had been the only ones concerned with Pelley's presence in Asheville and the publicity it brought. If Kartus did indeed come up with the charges against Pelley, for instance, prosecutor Zebulon Nettles still had to agree to indict him.<sup>105</sup>

Pelley was tried in January 1935. The local newspapers and national press including the *New York Times* provided extensive coverage of the proceedings. Judge Wilson Warlick remarked from the bench that he had received "numerous letters and telegrams" from around the country. While Jews were following the case closely, many letters also apparently called for "justice for Pelley."<sup>106</sup> Two lawyers, Robert R. Williams and Thomas Harkins, aided Prosecutor Nettles. Despite the assistance of these non-Jewish attorneys, Pelley's lawyer, Robert H. McNeil, tried unsuccessfully to contend that the trial constituted a "private prosecution" against Pelley carried out by conspiratorial New York Jews.<sup>107</sup>

Toward the end of the month, Pelley was found guilty of two of the three charges against him: advertising stock unregistered with the state of North Carolina and advertising stock in an insolvent company. The state failed to prove that anyone had paid money for the unregistered stock, the most serious of the three charges. Still, the maximum possible sentence for Pelley was five years and a fine of one thousand dollars for each guilty count. Responding to his lawyer's prayer for judgment, Warlick offered leniency to Pelley, suspending his one- to two-year sentence on the condition that he remain on good behavior and not

*Pelley exiting the elevator of the Buncombe County  
Courthouse after his 1942 federal sedition conviction.  
(AP Wirephoto, courtesy of the North Carolina Collection,  
Pack Memorial Public Library, Asheville.)*

publish “materials relating to the sale of stock” for a period of five years.<sup>108</sup>

After the trial, Pelley’s headquarters remained in Asheville. Although he moved to Seattle in 1936, he continued to spend time in Asheville. His prediction that September 16 of that year would prove pivotal in the struggle between the Christian Silver Shirts and the Jewish-controlled New Deal proved mistaken.<sup>109</sup> Pelley ran for president that year as well, but he and his running mate only qualified for the ballot in Washington State.<sup>110</sup> His legal problems worsened in the 1940s. In 1940, shortly before the suspended sentence attached to his 1935 conviction expired, he was arrested for violating its good-behavior provision. His legal entanglements did not end until 1950, when he was paroled into obscurity after being convicted of sedition in 1942 in federal court.<sup>111</sup>

*Maintaining the Status Quo Means Change*

These legal and cultural collaborations between Jews and non-Jews to disassociate Asheville from Pelley clarify the significance of the 1930s and 1940s “war on intolerance” and the interfaith movement. Local participation should not be taken for granted but has to be understood on its own terms. The local context has been neglected in histories of the interfaith movement, which have focused on leaders, intellectuals, and experts in the Northeast and Midwest.<sup>112</sup>

In understanding the difficulties encountered by those engaged in this movement to alleviate inequality and create what many hoped would be a new social order, those local contexts are as crucial as the conceptions of tolerance. In Asheville these motivations were focused on defending the status quo. The effort to counter Pelley involved different religious, cultural, and legal authorities whose efforts were assisted by the vocabulary of tolerance. The three main speakers at the first annual Brotherhood Day observance, for instance, each in his own way assured the audience that tolerance did not threaten any critical part of either the nation or their lives. As historian Dan Puckett has demonstrated, southern white reactions to Hitler similarly stopped short of commenting on the Nazi regime, which might



have challenged or threatened the established white supremacist political order.<sup>113</sup>

As Puckett further shows, in other southern communities like Birmingham, Alabama, Nazi atrocities encouraged Jews to support Zionism.<sup>114</sup> In Asheville, Pelley's presence prompted Jews to compare the United States with Germany and therefore provided opportunities for them to draw sharp and permanent distinctions between themselves and Christian—or "Anglo-Saxon"—America, depending on the commenter. In 1926 the "ultra Reform" Rabbi Moses Jacobson proudly called Asheville a place of tolerance.<sup>115</sup> Seven years later, in his Purim speech, it was exactly this characteristic that worried him. Jews' status as objects of tolerance was inherently vulnerable. Faced with the local threat of Pelley, Jews chose to defend their place in the city rather than attempt to remake it.

The determination by Asheville Jews in the 1930s to protect their status, however, involved them in civic and ceremonial life in new ways. The 1934 Brotherhood Day event signaled the beginning of their regular civic and ceremonial presence, which had previously been sporadic. Later in the 1930s, Jews began participating in Lost Cause ceremonies, attaching themselves to the South's civil religion and simultaneously making a claim to their rightful place in Asheville.<sup>116</sup> In early May 1937, D. Hiden Ramsey, the general manager of the *Citizen-Times*, spoke to the local B'nai B'rith. A flyer advertising the talk promised that Ramsey would "bring a message of special interest" to the chapter and the Jewish population as a whole. Ramsey urged the B'nai B'rith to demonstrate its gratitude to Zebulon Vance, the Civil War and post-Reconstruction governor whose Gilded Age address "The Scattered Nation" advocated Christian tolerance of Jews. An obelisk still graces Asheville's main civic square in honor of Vance, the city's most famous native son prior to Thomas Wolfe.

Asheville Jews contributed a bronze tablet that summarized Vance's accomplishments. Previously, only his surname, carved into the monument itself, had identified the structure.<sup>117</sup> The tablet more fully explained the monument's significance. Its unveiling was the focus of a 1938 ceremony, which was broadcast over the

radio and attracted an audience of “several scores.”<sup>118</sup> The same Alvin Kartus who had worked so effectively against Pelley represented the B’nai B’rith and spoke words of tribute at the dedication. Ramsey’s newspaper gave credit to the chapter for the tablet’s placement and reported that it represented but the most recent attempt to repay the debt that North Carolina Jews owed Vance.<sup>119</sup> Jews participated in such ceremonies honoring Vance on a yearly basis through World War II and beyond. Thus during the uncertain and unstable 1930s, their desire to defend their status in the city proved to be an engine of change.

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## NOTES

The author thanks the anonymous reviewers, whose insightful and helpful comments guided revisions of this article. Thanks are due as well to the Leo and Lillian Gross Scholarship fund at the Jewish Studies Department at the University of Minnesota, which made possible the research that contributed to this article.

<sup>1</sup> Scott Beekman, *William Dudley Pelley: A Life in Right-Wing Extremism and the Occult* (Syracuse, NY, 2005), 53; Stephen E. Atkins, *Encyclopedia of Right-Wing Extremism in Modern American History* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2011), 68.

<sup>2</sup> Beekman, *Pelley*, 67.

<sup>3</sup> *Asheville Citizen-Times*, June 3, 1932.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>5</sup> Leo Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia, 1983), 178.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Drake, “Kristallnacht and North Carolina: Reporting on Nazi Antisemitism in Black and White,” *Southern Jewish History* 13 (2010): 81–118; Lee Shai Weissbach, *Jewish Life in Small-Town America: A History* (New Haven, 2005); Leonard Rogoff, *Down Home: Jewish Life in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Mark K. Bauman, “Beyond the Parochial Image of Southern Jewry: Studies in National and International Leadership and Interactive Mechanisms,” in *New Essays in American Jewish History*, ed. Pamela S. Nadell, Jonathan D. Sarna, and Lance J. Sussman (Cincinnati, 2010), 138, 146.

<sup>8</sup> Richard W. Steele, "The War on Intolerance: The Reformulation of American Nationalism, 1939-1941," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 9 (Fall 1989): 9-35.

<sup>9</sup> Kevin M. Schultz, *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to its Protestant Promise* (New York, 2011), 32.

<sup>10</sup> Wendy Wall, *Inventing the "American Way": The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 2008), 9.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67; Stuart Svonkin, *Jews Against Prejudice: American Jews and the Fight for Civil Liberties* (New York, 1997), 5; see also Marc Dollinger, *Quest For Inclusion: Jews and Liberalism in Modern America* (Princeton, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Wall, *Inventing the "American Way,"* 8-9.

<sup>13</sup> Schultz, *Tri-Faith America*, 22.

<sup>14</sup> Ribuffo, *Old Christian Right*, 67.

<sup>15</sup> Beekman, *Pelley*, 84; Ribuffo, *Old Christian Right*, 68.

<sup>16</sup> Harold Lavine, *Fifth Column in America* (New York, 1940), 173.

<sup>17</sup> Ribuffo, *Old Christian Right*, 70.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>20</sup> "The Silver Shirts," *Los Angeles Times*, September 13, 1933.

<sup>21</sup> Klaus Meyer, "Nazidom in the United States," *Southern Israelite*, September 1933, 32.

<sup>22</sup> Bertram Jonas, "An American Hitler: Exposing 'Commander' Pelley of the Silver Shirts of America," *Jewish Chronicle*, September 21, 1933, 2.

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, "By All Means Let the Jews Rescue their Brethren!" *Liberation*, April 15, 1933; "What High Mentors Say of 'The Emptiness of Israel,'" *Liberation*, May 6, 1933; "The Jewish Question Reaches the Floor of Congress!" *Liberation*, June 17, 1933; "Do the Jews of America Wish us to Reply with a Boycott?" and "How Hebrews Throw Gasoline on the Anti-Semitic Fire," *Liberation*, August 5, 1933.

<sup>24</sup> "WWNC Refuses Silver Shirts Use of Radio Facilities," *Liberation*, May 20, 1933.

<sup>25</sup> Sidney Schochet, interview conducted by David Schulman, April 10, 1994; Leo Finkelstein, interview conducted by David Schulman, February 10, 1994, both in Jewish Heritage in Western North Carolina Oral History Collection (hereafter cited as JHWNC), in the D. H. Ramsey Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina, Asheville (hereafter cited as RLSC); "WWNC Refuses Silver Shirts," *Liberation*.

<sup>26</sup> Albert E. Kahn, *High Treason: The Plot Against the People* (New York, 1950), 211.

<sup>27</sup> The *Southern Israelite* termed the uproar over the conference "one of the most serious manifestations of religious hatred that has ever reared its vicious head in the South." See "Violence Flares in Asheville, N.C.," and "Termites of Christianity," *Southern Israelite*, August 21, 1936, 1, 2. Interestingly, the latter article refers to Asheville as "once the stamping ground" of Pelley, suggesting that it was no longer. This editorial considered the incident to be a "threat to American Jewry on Southern soil."

<sup>28</sup> "Asheville Feels Jew Duress," *Pelley's Weekly*, September 2, 1936, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Sarah Goldstein, interview conducted by David Schulman, March 4, 1994, JHWNC.

<sup>30</sup> Marilyn Blomberg Patton, interview conducted by Sharon Fahrner and Jan Schochet, February 23, 2004, Jewish Businesses in Western North Carolina Oral History Collection, RLSC (hereafter cited as JBWNC).

<sup>31</sup> Kevan D. Frazier, "Big Dreams, Small Cities: John Nolen, the New South, and the City Planning Movement in Asheville, Roanoke, and Johnson City, 1907-1937" (Ph.D. diss., West Virginia University, 2000), 181; Bill Moore, interview conducted by Dorothy Joynes, February 20, 1993, Voices of Asheville Oral History Collection, (hereafter cited as VOA), RLSC; see also Nan K. Chase, *Asheville: A History* (Jefferson, NC, 2007).

<sup>32</sup> Leonard Rogoff, "Synagogue and Jewish Church: A Congregational History of North Carolina," *Southern Jewish History* 1 (1998): 43-81.

<sup>33</sup> Rogoff, *Down Home*, 213.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>35</sup> According to the 1910 census, there were seventy-two Russian immigrants in the city, slightly more than one-tenth of the state's total of 711. A decade later, that number was 120, which was approximately thirteen percent of the state's total of 932. See Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Buncombe County, North Carolina; Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Buncombe County, North Carolina.

<sup>36</sup> From a population of 28,504 in 1920, Asheville reached 50,193 by 1930. By 1940, though, that number had grown to only 51,310. Asheville Jewry, on the other hand, went from 250 in 1918 to 700 in 1927 and then to 950 in 1937, which may have represented a high point. In 1950, there were an estimated 600 Jews in the city. Weissbach, *Jewish Life*, 338.

<sup>37</sup> Rogoff, *Down Home*, 133.

<sup>38</sup> *The Golden Book of Memoirs: Fiftieth Anniversary of Congregation Beth Ha-Tephila* (Asheville, NC, 1941), 27; "1899-1949, Congregation Bikur Cholim 50th Anniversary," 15, RLSC, accessed July 29, 2013, [http://toto.lib.unca.edu/booklets/congregation\\_bikur\\_cholim/defaultcongregation\\_bikur\\_cholim.htm](http://toto.lib.unca.edu/booklets/congregation_bikur_cholim/defaultcongregation_bikur_cholim.htm).

<sup>39</sup> Phyllis Sultan, interview conducted by Sharon Fahrner and Jan Schochet, July 24, 2005, JBWNC.

<sup>40</sup> Dorothy Zagier Fligel and Joan Zagier Rocamora, interview conducted by Sharon Fahrner, August 10, 2004, JBWNC.

<sup>41</sup> Sultan interview.

<sup>42</sup> Leon Rocamora, interview conducted by Sharon Fahrner, August 4, 2004, JBWNC.

<sup>43</sup> Estelle Marder, interview conducted by David Schulman, March 30, 1994, JHWNC.

<sup>44</sup> "Sponsors' Ball Will Be Elaborate Social Event," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, June 9, 1935. See also "Elaborate Program Is Arranged For Festival," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, June 10, 1934; "Official Souvenir for the Rhododendron Festival and Circus Program, June 11-16, 1934," Asheville Chamber of Commerce Collection, North Carolina Collection, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville.

<sup>45</sup> "King and Queen Chosen For Rhododendron Fete," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, May 23, 1937.

<sup>46</sup> In the late 1930s, the Chamber of Commerce advertised the festival in Asheville's African American newspaper, the *Southern News*, by noting that the local Negro Welfare Council had "arranged the participation of their race" in a variety of activities. See "An Invitation," *Southern News*, June 11, 1938.

<sup>47</sup> Mary Parker, interview conducted by Dorothy Joynes, February 18, 1993, VOA; "Hundreds Are Engaged In Preparing For Fete," *Asheville Citizen*, June 8, 1935; "Radio Network To Broadcast Festival Ball," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, May 26, 1935. This article boasts that "civic leaders [were] elated over nation-wide publicity." It was the "first time that a Festival event has been given this nation-wide radio publicity."

<sup>48</sup> Fligel and Rocamora interviews.

<sup>49</sup> Sultan interview.

<sup>50</sup> Untitled speech, October 3, 1932, Moses P. Jacobson Papers, Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati. In 1932 Jacobson was nearing the end of a long career as a Reform rabbi. He was ordained by the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati in 1886. He was the rabbi of the Reform B'nai Zion congregation in Shreveport, Louisiana, for eighteen years. Jacobson began serving as rabbi of Beth Ha-Tephila in 1922 and continued until 1934 when he retired as the congregation's first rabbi emeritus. Attendees at the 1932 event praised his high standing among the city's Jews and Christians. See "Asheville Rabbi Announces Retirement From Ministry," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, August 30, 1934; "Southern Notes," *Southern Israelite* 7, no. 22, October 31, 1932, 11.

<sup>51</sup> Rocamora interview.

<sup>52</sup> Schochet interview.

<sup>53</sup> Rocamora interview. Robinson also contested racial norms at work and at home. He was one of the few Jews in Asheville who appeared to have treated African Americans significantly better than other whites did. An optometrist, Robinson saw all patients on a first-come, first-served basis and addressed African Americans as "Mr." and "Mrs." His family also paid domestic workers twice the wages paid by their neighbors. Robinson, as a result, incurred resentment from neighbors, whose hired workers knew about the wage disparity. As an immigrant, he may not have been as acculturated to southern racial codes, although he was certainly aware of those codes. See Michael Aaron Robinson, interview conducted by Sharon Fahrer and Jan Schochet, July 17, 2003, Home Front to the Frontline Oral History Collection, RLSC. See also Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, 2006), 59.

<sup>54</sup> Rocamora interview.

<sup>55</sup> Schochet interview; Ruth Lowenberg, interview conducted by David Schulman, April 19, 1994, JHWNC.

<sup>56</sup> "Southern Notes," *Southern Israelite*, September 19, 1930, 22.

<sup>57</sup> David Kaufman, *Shul with a Pool: The "Synagogue-Center" in American Jewish History* (Hanover, NH, 1999), 274.

<sup>58</sup> Temple Club Minutes, July 10, 1933, series 5: Men's Organizations, Temple Club, Beth HaTephila Collection, (hereafter cited as BHTC), RLSC.

<sup>59</sup> Julian M. Pleasants, *Buncombe Bob: The Life and Times of Robert Rice Reynolds* (Chapel Hill, 2000), 138–139. Leo Finkelstein defended Reynolds, who assisted the chapter's efforts to help a German Jew immigrate to Asheville. See Finkelstein interview.

<sup>60</sup> Letter to Max H. Crohn, July 6, 1933, BHTC. The debate took place on July 10, 1933.

<sup>61</sup> Samuel Robinson, "Answering 'YES' to the Question," speech typescript, July 10, 1933, BHTC.

<sup>62</sup> Everett E. Luoma, *The Farmer Takes a Holiday: The Story of the National Farmers' Holiday Association and the Farmers' Strike of 1932–1933* (New York, 1967); A. William Høglund, "Wisconsin Dairy Farmers on Strike," *Agricultural History* 35 (January 1961): 24–34.

<sup>63</sup> Robinson, "Answering 'YES.'"

<sup>64</sup> Dan J. Puckett, "Reporting on the Holocaust: The View from Jim Crow Alabama," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 25 (Fall 2011): 219–251. In the 1930s, motivated by Nazi measures, Jews made comparisons between those measures and lynchings in the South. This recognition, Eric Goldstein argues, motivated them to protect their vulnerable status as whites. This parallel also coincided with Jews' (and other Americans') decrease in faith in America and American democracy. At other times, Jews and white supremacist defenders of Jews were loath to make comparisons between anti-Jewish measures and violence like Russian pogroms and lynchings of African Americans. This was particularly true in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Jews recognized that the violent Jim Crow society white southerners were constructing also made their own racial status more uncertain. See Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 55, 158.

<sup>65</sup> Marcus Sterne, "Is a Hitleristic Form of Government Possible in the United States?" speech typescript, BHTC.

<sup>66</sup> Temple Club Minutes, July 10, 1933, BHTC.

<sup>67</sup> Dan J. Puckett, "In the Shadow of Hitler: Birmingham's Temple Emanu-El and Nazism," *Southern Jewish History* 11 (2008): 1–40. Zionism had support in Asheville in the 1920s and 1930s. See "25th Anniversary Of B'nai B'rith Lodge Here Is Celebrated," *Asheville Citizen*, December 8, 1937; "Zionist Group to Hear Cowen," *Asheville Citizen*, May 10, 1928; Moses P. Jacobson, "Jew and Gentile," *Reform Advocate*, June 18, 1932, 417.

<sup>68</sup> Moses Jacobson, "Reform Judaism and Zionism," *Southern Israelite*, December 1930, 16, 36 (quote). An unpublished manuscript of this article is in BHTC. Jacobson's retirement in 1934 likely had more to do with the congregation's dire financial straits than his anti-Zionist position. He had already voluntarily decreased his salary in 1930 due to members' financial setbacks, and after his retirement the congregation nearly disbanded. See *Golden Book of Memoirs*, 27.

<sup>69</sup> Puckett, "In the Shadow of Hitler."

<sup>70</sup> Beth Wenger, *History Lessons: The Creation of American Jewish Heritage* (Princeton, 2010), 9.

<sup>71</sup> Moses Jacobson, "Praeterea Consejo Germaniam Esse Delendam," speech or sermon typescript, March 9, 1933, 1, 2, Jacobson Papers.

<sup>72</sup> Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 30, 88.

<sup>73</sup> Jacobson, "Praeterea Conseo Germaniam Esse Delendam," 2, 3.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>76</sup> Richard Starnes, ed., "Introduction," *Southern Journeys: Tourism, History, and Culture in the Modern South* (Tuscaloosa, 2003), 5. See also Edward Ayers, *The Promise of a New South* (New York, 1992); Karen L. Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill, 2011).

<sup>77</sup> "The Board of Trade of Asheville, NC: What It has Done, What It is Doing, What It is Trying to Do"; "Asheville's first Annual Goodwill Tour, 2/1925"; "Western North Carolina's Second Annual Goodwill Tour, 3/16-28/1926/ under the Auspices and Direction of the Asheville Chamber of Commerce," Buncombe County Pamphlet Collection, North Carolina Collection, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville.

<sup>78</sup> Frank Presbrey, *The Land of the Sky: Western North Carolina, Asheville Plateau* (Buffalo, NY, 1920), 9.

<sup>79</sup> Asheville in "The Land of the Sky," 38, 41, D. H. Ramsey Library Special Collections & University Archives, accessed July 27, 2013, [http://toto.lib.unca.edu/booklets/asheville\\_land\\_of\\_sky/asheville\\_in\\_the\\_land\\_of\\_the\\_sky.htm](http://toto.lib.unca.edu/booklets/asheville_land_of_sky/asheville_in_the_land_of_the_sky.htm).

<sup>80</sup> Richard Starnes, "'A Conspicuous Example of What is Termed the New South': Tourism and Urban Development in Asheville, North Carolina, 1880-1925," *North Carolina Historical Review* 80:1 (2003): 52-80.

<sup>81</sup> Holman D. Waldron, *With Pen and Camera Thro' the "Land of the Sky": Western North Carolina and the Asheville Plateau* (Portland, ME, 1902).

<sup>82</sup> "A Visitor Approves," *Asheville Times*, June 26, 1926.

<sup>83</sup> The *Asheville Citizen* covered the convention extensively, with front-page stories reporting on the convention's proceedings and multiple positive editorials. "Race Prejudice Not Rife In State, Rabbi Declares," *Asheville Citizen*, June 23, 1926. See also the *Asheville Citizen*, June 22-26, 1926.

<sup>84</sup> "Tolerance in North Carolina," *Asheville Citizen*, June 23, 1926. The editorial could have been referring to the KKK, which was very active during this period in Asheville as elsewhere and had held its own convention in Asheville two years earlier.

<sup>85</sup> Richard Starnes, *Creating the Land of the Sky: Tourism and Society in Western North Carolina* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 2005), 186, 90; Starnes, *Southern Journeys*, 140.

<sup>86</sup> The *New York Times* ran eight articles on Pelley and his economic and political difficulties between April 25, 1934, and January 23, 1935.

<sup>87</sup> "Manners For Millions," *Asheville Citizen*, April 5, 1938; Fred Seely, Jr., "Outside Influences," in *Our Appalachia*, ed. Laurel Shackelford and Bill Weinberg (New York, 1977), 171-172. Seely characterized the city's residents as "provincial" and recalled that "quite a bit of education" was necessary to convince them to "accept the tourists."

<sup>88</sup> Beekman, *Pelley*, 99-101.

<sup>89</sup> "Night Shirts Washed Up," *Minneapolis Journal*, August 4, 1938, cited in Eric Severeid, *A Reporter Tells the Truth about the Silver Shirts: An Exposé of Un-American Activities in Minneapolis* (Minneapolis, MN, 1938).

<sup>90</sup> Paul Patton Faris, "Report on the Promotion of Brotherhood Day, 1934," 3, Brotherhood Week Collection, National Conference of Christians and Jews Records, Social Welfare History Archives, Andersen Library, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. Most of the six southern "mass meetings" were in cities either similar in size or smaller than Asheville, which had a population of just over fifty thousand in 1930. The exception was Dallas, Texas. The others were Hot Springs, Arkansas; Augusta, Georgia, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and Columbia, Missouri. See Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930, Buncombe County, North Carolina.

<sup>91</sup> Memo, Mr. Wallach to Mr. Faris, March 21, 1934, Brotherhood Week Collection.

<sup>92</sup> Lt. L. A. Oxley to Miss Adelaide Ruffin, February 11, 1929. Records of the Department of Public Welfare, Consultant for Negro Work, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh.

<sup>93</sup> Mary Parker, interview conducted by Sarah Judson and Helen Wykle, December 5, 2001, Oral History Collection, RLSC; "Colored Citizens Park," minutes, proceedings of the Board of Commissioners, no. 21, July 17, 1925, 293, Office of the City Clerk, Asheville.

<sup>94</sup> "Speakers Appeal For Religious Tolerance On Brotherhood Day," *Asheville Citizen*, April 30, 1934.

<sup>95</sup> Schultz, *Tri-Faith America*, 30.

<sup>96</sup> "Speakers Appeal For Religious Tolerance"; Moses Jacobson, "Brotherhood Day Address," Jacobson Papers.

<sup>97</sup> "Speakers Appeal For Religious Tolerance."

<sup>98</sup> "Brotherhood Day," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, April 29, 1934.

<sup>99</sup> "Silver Shirt Forces Meet Difficulties: Asheville Fails To Get Excited Over Being Headquarters," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, April 29, 1934.

<sup>100</sup> Louis Loss and Edward M. Cowett, *Blue Sky Law* (Boston, 1958); Jonathan R. Macey and Geoffrey P. Miller, "Origin of the Blue Sky Laws," *Texas Law Review* 70 (December 1991): 347-397.

<sup>101</sup> Beekman, *Pelley*, 107.

<sup>102</sup> "Strength in Unity," *Southern Israelite*, April 28, 1939, 35.

<sup>103</sup> Schochet interview.

<sup>104</sup> Ed Petterson, interview conducted by David Schulman, March 22, 1993, JHWNC. Historian Leonard Rogoff also credits Julius Levitch. Rogoff, *Down Home*, 240.

<sup>105</sup> Goldstein interview; Ruth Lowenburg, interview conducted by David Schulman, April 19, 1994; Anne Michelove Kolodkin, interview conducted by David Schulman, March 22, 1994, all in JHWNC. Anne Kolodkin noted that "W. W. Michelove had posed 'as a member and operating as an undercover agent for the Secret Service.'" Schulman, who lived in Asheville, noted that "a couple of people have mentioned to me that they thought that Bill Michelove was sort of like an undercover agent" who worked to bring about Pelley's prosecution. See Marder interview.



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<sup>106</sup> "Jewish Angle Injected Into Pelley's Hearing," *Asheville Citizen*, January 15, 1935.

<sup>107</sup> "Pelley Defense Fails to Prove 'Persecution,'" *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, January 15, 1935.

<sup>108</sup> Beekman, *Pelley*, 109; Ribuffo, *Old Christian Right*, 71. In addition, Pelley was forced to pay a fine as well as court costs, totaling about seventeen hundred dollars. See Pelley, *The Door to Revelation: An Autobiography* (Asheville, NC, 1939), 469.

<sup>109</sup> Beekman, *Pelley*, 113.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 133; *State v. William Dudley Pelley: In the Matter of the Imprisonment of William Dudley Pelley*, North Carolina Collection, Pack Library, Asheville.

<sup>112</sup> Svonkin, *Jews Against Prejudice*, 4; Wall, *Inventing the "American Way"*, 7.

<sup>113</sup> Puckett, "Reporting on the Holocaust," 219–251.

<sup>114</sup> Puckett, "In the Shadow of Hitler," 1–40.

<sup>115</sup> Schochet interview.

<sup>116</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865–1920* (Athens, GA, 1983), 13. See also Karen Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville, FL, 2003); David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA, 2001); Cynthia Mills and Pamela H. Simpson, eds., *Monuments to the Lost Cause: Women, Art, and the Landscapes of Southern Memory* (Knoxville, TN, 2003).

<sup>117</sup> The United Daughters of the Confederacy received permission from the city and county commissioners in December 1937 to erect "a suitable descriptive marker" on the obelisk. See "Marker for Vance Monument," minutes, proceedings of the Board of Commissioners, no. 21, December 2, 1937, 205.

<sup>118</sup> "Tablet is Unveiled to Zebulon Vance in Fitting Exercises," *Asheville Citizen*, May 14, 1938.

<sup>119</sup> "Bronze Tablet Will Be Unveiled Friday on Vance Monument," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, May 8, 1938.