

Jewish Fraternal Organizations of the early 20th Century

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Our ancestors created a wide variety of organizations to provide mutual support, from religious to social, educational, insurance and burial services. “Landsmanshaften” brought together individuals who came from the same town in Europe. Sometimes established as lodges of a fraternal organization, like the Independent Order, Sons of Jacob. These organizations paralleled existing American ones incorporating the pomp and secrecy of Masonry, Pythians and Odd Fellows.

These organizations provided a safety net through life and health insurance and offered social opportunities to lead and to be recognized. Hundreds of thousands of our immigrant ancestors participated during the heyday of these organizations in the first half of the 20th century. Most were male-focused. Women participated through auxiliaries and occasionally fully independent orders. Understanding these organizations provides important insights into the lives of our immigrant ancestors.



Over a score of major Jewish Fraternal Organizations were formed between 1840 and 1920, including

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> American Star Order Improved Order of B'nai B'rith (now, B'nai B'rith International) Independent Order Ahavas Israel Independent Order B'rith Abraham Independent Order B'rith Sholom Independent Order Free Sons of Israel Independent Order of American Israelites Independent Order of Free Sons of Judah Independent Order of Sons of Abraham Independent Order of Sons of Benjamin Independent Order United Israelites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Independent Order Western Star Independent Order, B'nai B'rith Independent Workmen's Circle of America Jewish National Workers' Alliance of America Kesher Shel Barzel Order of B'rith Abraham Order of the Sons of Zion (now, "B'nai Zion") Order of the United Hebrew Brothers Progressive Order of the West United Order of the True Sisters, Inc. Workmen's Circle (or "Arbeiter Ring")
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Five of these organizations continue: B'nai B'rith International, Independent Order Free Sons of Israel, B'nai Zion, United Order of the True Sisters, Inc. and Workmen's Circle. The Independent Order, Free Sons of Israel is just a shadow of its former self. There were over 3,000 Landsmanshaften in the New York area alone with many hundreds more across the U.S. and Canada. Almost all disappeared by the middle of the 20th century. These organizations served the important purposes of providing mutual support, including financial support, and assisting our ancestors in learning the English language and American culture. As our immigrant ancestors and their children entered the American mainstream, they had less need for them.

Over a score of Jewish College Fraternities and Sororities were formed between 1880 and 1920, including



Fraternities

- Pi Lambda Phi, 1895, Yale U.
- Zeta Beta Tau, 1898, JTS/CCNY
- Phi Epsilon Pi, 1904, CCNY
- Sigma Alpha Mu, 1909, CCNY
- Phi Sigma Delta, 1910, Columbia U.
- Tau Delta Phi, 1910, CCNY
- Tau Epsilon Phi, 1910, Columbia U.
- Beta Sigma Rho, 1910, Columbia U.
- Kappa Nu, 1911, U. of Rochester
- Phi Beta Delta, 1912, Columbia U.
- Omicron Alpha Tau, 1912, Cornell U.
- Phi Alpha, 1914-1959, George Washington U.

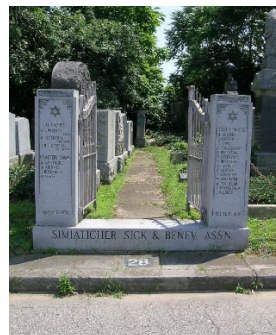
Alpha Epsilon Pi, 1914, NYU

- Alpha Mu Sigma, 1914, Cooper Union
- Sigma Omega Psi, 1914, CCNY
- Sigma Lambda Pi, 1915, NYU Commerce
- Sigma Tau Phi, 1918, U. of Pennsylvania

Sororities

- Iota Alpha Pi, 1903, Hunter College
- Alpha Epsilon Phi, 1909, Barnard College
- Phi Sigma Sigma, 1913, Hunter College
- Delta Phi Epsilon, 1917, NYU Law
- Sigma Delta Tau, 1917, Cornell U.

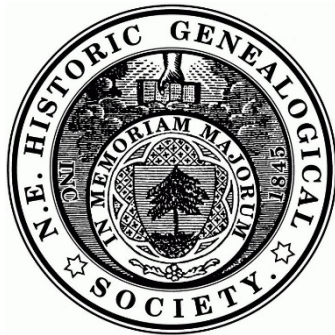
As our ancestors entered U.S. colleges in material numbers in the last decade of the 19th century, they found that they were generally not welcome in existing college fraternities. They addressed this by forming their own. As college fraternities were better integrated, most of these Jewish fraternities and sororities disappeared or became egalitarian themselves. Six primarily Jewish fraternities survive; Pi Lambda Phi, Zeta Beta Tau, Sigma Alpha Mu, Tau Delta Phi, Tau Epsilon Phi and Alpha Epsilon Pi. Four sororities survive; Alpha Epsilon Phi, Phi Sigma Sigma, Delta Phi Epsilon and Sigma Delta Tau.



One of the benefits of these fraternal organizations was death and burial support. Organizations provided payments to assist the surviving widow and children and maintained cemeteries or sections in cemeteries where members could be interred.

If your ancestor was buried in a cemetery section marked off by a gate of a particular Landsmanshaftn, he likely came from the area of Europe of the Landsmanshaftn. For example, if you find the ancestor buried in the "Stoloner" section of the Waldheim cemetery in Chicago, they he likely came from Stolin, Belarus. If buried in the "Kishinover-Bessarabier Aid Society" section of that cemetery, he likely came from Chisinau, Moldova.

You might also want to research the organization to learn more about the environment in which your ancestor lived. Newspapers, yearbooks, encyclopedias, community books and archives might all be resources for this information.



While many of the records for the various Jewish fraternal organizations are gone, some have survived. They are scattered in archives across the country including the Center for Jewish History, AJHS, New York; the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati; the Philadelphia Jewish Archives Center, Temple University Library; the Jewish Heritage Center at New England Historic Genealogical Society, Boston and the Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life (Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley)

Some of the college fraternities merged into surviving organizations. The Zeta Beta Tau fraternity absorbed several over the years. These organizations may be able to provide you with information about your ancestors who were members of the surviving organization. Other sources of information include the American Jewish Yearbooks (published every year since 1899), Jewish newspapers, Jewish community books, and various online databases.