

Bagels, Beaches, & Bombers:  
Florida's Jewish Community From 1929 – 1945

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Mark and Sharon, who have supported me throughout the years in every way during both the good and bad times. I could not have accomplished this triumphant goal without your unending love. A son could not ask for two more loving and dedicated role models.

I would like to thank my sister, Jacqueline, for always standing by my side, making me laugh, and being my best friend from the moment you were born. My grandfather, Dan Marshlack, for always pushing me further, and teaching me to never settle for less than perfection. All of my aunts, uncles, and cousins, for showing me what a magnificent blessing family is. Dr. Ray Arsenault, Dr. Julie Armstrong, and Dr. Susan Fernandez, for reigniting my passion for history and the past.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	ii
Introduction .....	1
Chapter One: From Depression to Dayenu: Florida’s Jewish Community, 1929-1938.....	7
Chapter Two: Exiled from Eden: Florida, the S.S. <i>St. Louis</i> , & the Final Solution.....	42
Chapter Three: Torah! Torah! Torah! Pearl Harbor & the Emergence of Florida’s Modern Jewish Community.....	82
Bibliography .....	122
About the Author.....	End Page

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this thesis is to recount the history and discover the beginning of modern Florida's impressive Jewish community. While it is believed that Jews have lived in the state under Spanish, British, Confederate, and American flags, the Hebrew population did not see rapid expansion until the mid-twentieth century. Therefore, I will seek to examine the various events and people who influenced the massive waves of migrations, and show how World War II is responsible for creating the lasting affinity between Jews and the Sunshine State. This study will also provide insight into today's population distribution, voting trends, and various other aspects of the growing influence Judaism has on Florida's affairs.

Oral interviews conducted by myself as well as other academics will accompany newspaper articles, journals, and countless other primary sources that will lay the foundation of my research. By looking at government released population statistics and breakdowns, records from the War Board, and histories released by synagogues across the state I will piece together a picture of the foundations of the Jewish community from 1929 through World War II. Drawing on scholarly work that examines Florida's social history, I will link the stories of these individuals with a broader picture of what trends were taking place across the state.

It will become clear to the reader that no other event in the state's history weighed as heavily on America's Hebrew population as World War II. Undisputable evidence will link the number of servicemen and women training on Florida's beaches with a generation that sought a new paradise to call home after achieving victory in the Pacific and Europe. Armed with this important data, we will now be able to examine why certain areas such as Boca Raton, Miami Beach, Jacksonville, and Tampa have been chosen as Hebrew havens. We will be able to understand how organizations, communities, and congregations were formed, and why certain districts flourished much earlier than others. This work paves the way for more research on the topic, which has been overlooked for far too long.

## INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, America and the promises of democracy and freedom have enticed countless scores of immigrants from every corner of the world to relinquish all of their possessions, rebuild new lives, and embrace the grand ideals of equality and liberty for all. Word of this wondrous experiment assuring life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness resonated as a beacon of hope for the oppressed, enslaved, and persecuted masses across the globe. Men, women, and even children have traversed rugged terrains and brutal oceans, endured hunger and thirst, and died to reach the shores nurtured by the Mother of Exiles. The United States represented the last best hope for a world that no longer seemed to be eternally expanding and quickly welcomed the advantageous remunerations of exploitation and tyranny. While every generation and each individual underwent their own odyssey, they all believed in the notion of American exceptionalism, and longed for their chance to become a proud citizen of the “shining city on a hill.” These sentiments were best described by the eloquent writing of F. Scott Fitzgerald. “Its varnished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.”<sup>1</sup>

An overwhelming majority of those who voyaged to the United States made the journey on their own. The standard model held by most ethnic groups called for the male

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<sup>1</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 165.

to leave his family behind in the Old World and procure a job in the land of plenty. After a few years of saving up money, they sent for other male family members who were capable of working to expedite the process of covering the cost of transporting an entire household. In many cases the next in line included brothers, brother-in-laws, or oldest sons. Women, young children, and the elderly were generally the last to set foot on American soil unless the prospect of marrying your daughter to aid in the process of relocation seemed promising. Families withstood the intense pressures placed upon their members in order to provide children and themselves with the chance to achieve the dreams that beckoned them from the failed practices and despotic regimes they fled.

One group in particular deviated from this model throughout history almost exclusively. Jews boarded ships, walked across mountain ranges, and left Europe, northern Africa, Asia, and South America in groups. Beginning as early as 1654, vessels delivered Hebrew immigrants to America's shores in increasing numbers. The first unit which consisted of twenty-three refugees from Recife, Brazil quickly paved the way for others to join them. Their numbers steadily climbed, until the mid-nineteenth century when mass migrations from Germany began, delivering a liberal, educated population that laid the foundation for the two largest branches of Judaism today, Conservative and Reform. German Jews were followed by an exorbitant amount of Russian, Polish, Galician, and Romanian Jews fleeing the programs. By 1924, two million Jews had arrived from Eastern Europe. A mounting anti-immigration sentiment in the United States resulted in the adoption of the National Origins Quota of 1924, severely limiting entry from many regions.

The circumstances and conditions surrounding their desire to leave their homelands dictated that they undergo the passage as swiftly as possible. Originally it was their expulsion from Europe through measures such as the Spanish Inquisition. These policies were trailed by anti-Jewish uprisings in Russia, confinement to ghettos across the Pale of Settlement, and a horrific lack of access to food and other vital living necessities. Even after the United States implemented numerous closed door policies, Jews sought refuge on America's shores as the Nazi Party and Adolf Hitler rose to power and quickly consumed entire countries. Prior to aiding in the Revolutionary War to assist the colonies in their fight with Great Britain, the New World watched as families of Jews grasped for acceptance since they had nowhere else to turn. The vile clutches of anti-Semitism had already consumed most of the globe, and the rumors of religious acceptance and equality embedded a new found hope to a people who felt they had finally found a new home.

Though the history of the American Jewish community certainly does not include universal acceptance, they have encountered far less xenophobia and bigotry and been provided the opportunity to flourish and excel as a part of the unique melting pot that is the United States. Developing unparalleled tight-knit communities in cities such as New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Miami, treasured pieces of culture and law have survived countless attacks over the centuries from local dogmatists, as well as those abroad. Outside of the ubiquitous enclaves, life for these men and women was much more arduous; however it was indisputably better than what they left behind. Services and personnel they previously took for granted were exchanged for tolerance, access to food, and the chance to achieve their own version of the American dream. Forced to make these sacrifices, Hebrews in the Land of the Free faced new obstacles. Maintaining

their identities, traditions, and opposing assimilation, while embracing all their newfound liberties.

Historians have debated for decades as to when Jews first appeared in the Sunshine State. While some claim that they began to step off ships with the earliest Spanish settlers in the sixteenth-century as conversos, others believe that it was not until 1763 when Joseph Palacios, Alexander Solomon, and Samuel Israel settled in Pensacola. Regardless of the exact date, one thing remains certain. Hebrews who chose Florida as their home prior to World War II were enticed for reasons other than a flourishing and convivial Jewish community. Dr. Henry Allen Green even went so far as to declare that the state “was neither a Promised Land nor a new Diaspora.”<sup>2</sup> During the lean Depression years only three cities in Florida were home to more than 1,000 Jewish residents, Tampa, Jacksonville, and Pensacola. With such diminutive numbers, the trivial population represented a mere fragment of the rapidly expanding American Jewish presence.

Today the southernmost state is home to more Jews than the rest of South and claims the most densely populated Jewish neighborhoods outside of Israel. Hundreds of synagogues have been founded across the state’s sixty-seven counties, while small towns and villages now boast strong Jewish communities. Rabbis, cantors, and chaplains can now be found performing Bar Mitzvahs, Brit Milahs, and burials in Lakeland as well as Palm Beach. Religious schools, kosher groceries, and mikvahs allow Florida’s estimated 1,000,000 Jews to fulfill ancient religious obligations in St. Petersburg as well as Gainesville. Though the southern tip of the peninsula enjoys strong Cuban Jewish numbers, and the northern panhandle vaunts many more Russian Jews, La Florida has developed an unrivaled melting pot with countless burgeoning and thriving districts.

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Henry Allen Green & Marcia Kerstein Zerevitz, *Jewish Life in Florida* (Coral Gables, MOSAIC Inc), 1991.

The emergence of modern Florida's impressive Jewish population can be linked back to a single event which set in motion a tidal wave of immigration that has been met with nominal resistance. While synagogues and congregations saw slight growth throughout the Depression, America's entrance into World War II exposed a new land of milk and honey to the men and women who were previously confined to the shtetls of the great northern metropolises. Transported from crowded streets with blistering winters, overpopulation, and skyscrapers that blocked out the daylight, GIs found an Eden where the golden rays of an exuberant sun shined down on exotic palm trees, quaint communities, and abundant opportunities. Delivered to the shores of the southernmost state for intensive training, personnel from every branch of the military quickly developed a lasting affinity with a paradise they had only previously seen in advertisements of magazines and newspapers or heard described on the radio. After achieving victory in Europe and the Pacific, a generation returned home focused on starting a new phase of their lives, one many chose to do in the Sunshine State.

In the twenty-first century it is hard to imagine Florida without the robust Hebrew communities that have become synonymous with places like Miami Beach, Boca Raton, and West Palm Beach. Becoming kings of the condominiums, sovereigns of the sand and sunshine, and rulers of illustrious restaurants, Jews have developed into an integral part of the state's social makeup. From Key West to Pensacola and Naples to St. Augustine, this peninsula has seen triumphant expansion since President Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared war on the Axis powers and vengeance for the craven attacks on Pearl Harbor. Accompanied by exploding populations from across the Gulf of Mexico and South America, Jews have helped repaint the political, social, and religious layout of La

Florida. Linking sunshine with the Sabbath, bagels with beaches, and Disney with the dreidel, Judaism has discovered countless ways to thrive and flourish outside of New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Accompanied by age old traditions, unique cuisine and customs, and the desire to no longer search for a home free of intolerance, Jews have forever found a home in the Land of Sunshine.

**FROM DEPRESSION TO DAYENU:**

**FLORIDA'S JEWISH COMMUNITY, 1929-1938.**

The sun's golden rays pierced through the few scattered clouds that divided Florida's sandy beaches and its rich azure skies. Emerging from the dawn, every Florida sunrise brought with it another chance for northerners to migrate to America's newest playground. These new neighbors were accompanied every day with a renewed chance of hope and optimism that the United States might finally overcome the challenges suffocating the vibrant nation. The Great Depression imposed previously foreign obstacles on the young democracy, and changed the lives of its citizens in every region, including those that called the Sunshine State home. Though many believed the state's population was full of retirees, rednecks, and uneducated masses, Florida's men and women were resilient. In the years leading up to the recession, multiple hurricanes pummeled La Florida, and the state's land boom dissipated almost as quickly as it emerged. The Great Depression destroyed the lives of countless families and chipped away at the dreams that beckoned men and women from around the world to the land of the free and the home of the brave.

The Sunshine State has assumed numerous roles over the course of the last couple of centuries; however it has always been able to retain the image of Eden that was bestowed upon it by the earliest explorers. Florida's history is a majestic saga filled with swashbuckling pirates, mysterious fountains of youth, and futuristic spaceships that transport you out of this world. As manifest destiny drew Americans across the continent,

the state's verdant dreamscape inexorably allured families south in search of paradise. Many believed that vacations to the southernmost state embodied the "American Dream." To the men and women who traversed continents, sailed across seas and risked their lives, the Land of Sunshine was a beacon of hope amidst a sea of despair. Susan Orlean may have said it the best, "Florida was to Americans what America had always been to the rest of the world-- a fresh, free, unspoiled start."<sup>3</sup>

Florida's melting-pot is composed of individuals from every race, religion, and ethnicity from every corner of the globe, including nearly one-million Jewish residents. Though it is believed that Jews entered the state as *conversos* as early as the sixteenth-century, the first recorded evidence of their presence was in 1763. While other Southern states such as Louisiana and South Carolina boasted extensive communities, Florida's Jewish population remained stagnant. When the Sunshine State was welcomed into the Union on March 3, 1845 there were less than one-hundred Jews in a population of 66,500. Today La Florida is home to more Jews than the rest of the former Confederacy combined and houses the most densely populated Jewish neighborhoods outside of Israel.<sup>4</sup> Although the Roaring Twenties land boom sparked an increased interest in Florida, nothing ignited the state's Jewish population like World War II, or united them like Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

During the Depression years America's Jewish populace was churning in the country's Northern metropolises. New York City and Chicago were home to more than

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Orlean, *The Orchid Thief* (New York: Random House, 1998), 17.

<sup>4</sup> North American Jewish Data Bank, *Center for Judaic Studies and Contemporary Life: National Jewish Yearbook, 2008* (Storrs, CT), p.72

half of the United States' Jewish population.<sup>5</sup> In these urban arenas, Jews, Italians, Irish, and other ethnic groups subsisted among themselves. Restaurants, groceries, and tailors varied from neighborhood to neighborhood and catered to the families living on the surrounding blocks. For most of the South, including Florida, the distribution of each state's Jewish population was much more diffused. While forty percent of the Sunshine State's Hebrew residents dwelled in Jacksonville,<sup>6</sup> the only other cities to have a substantial community were Pensacola and Tampa. The rest were dispersed all across La Florida and had to travel great distances to reach a synagogue, kosher grocery, or Hebrew school.

Black Tuesday (October 29, 1929) signaled the beginning of the longest, most widespread, and deepest depression of the twentieth-century for America. The economic fallout affected Jews from Miami to New York and influenced many of their decisions over the next decade. Accompanying the poverty and destitution, the Sunshine State's Jewish community was also confronted by the Ku Klux Klan, callow deed restrictions, and exclusive social clubs that only received wealthy white Protestants. Lack of access to rabbis, kosher food, and Jewish guilds segregated Florida's Jews from each other as well as their religion. However, amidst all of these burdensome barriers, communities in Sarasota, Tampa, and Pensacola found a way to persevere. Jews in Tallahassee, Saint Petersburg, and Fort Lauderdale banded together and welcomed new synagogues, families, and liberties. While the United States endured one of its darkest decades,

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<sup>5</sup> Jay M. Eidelman, *Ours To Fight For: American Jewish Voices from the Second World War* (New York: Museum of Jewish Heritage, 2003), 13.

<sup>6</sup> Herman Koren, *Histories of the Jewish People of Pinellas County, Florida, 1883-2005, Hebrew Dates 5643-5766* (Clearwater, Fla: Temple B'nai Israel, 2007), 64.

Florida's Jewish population established roots that allowed it to later flourish as the world plunged into war.

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According to the 1930 census, America's southernmost state was home to around 1,500,000 people.<sup>7</sup> Since the turn of the century, La Florida's population had undergone many changes. Blacks continued to leave in increasing numbers in search of better lives above the Mason-Dixon Line. Tampa's Ybor City had a vibrant, ethnically diverse population that included Italians, Latinos, and Jews. While many European immigrants only ventured south after trying their luck in the nation's northern urban strongholds, most of Florida's Latino community were direct implants. Across the bay, Pinellas County's Tarpon Springs had already developed rich Greek roots around the city's sponge docks. A new and unique Florida culture was flourishing. The Sunshine State's newest identity was blossoming outside of the hotels and resorts built by Henry Flagler and Henry Plant. Though power resided in the North, deep in the heart of Cracker Country, the Pork Chop Gang could already see the state's future.

Tourism helped the Sunshine State persevere while jobs disappeared, banks closed, and cities like Key West beseeched the federal government for essential funds. Visitors ventured south on steamships, airplanes, and trains. Tropical weather, deep-sea fishing, and sporting events invited Americans from every region and every status to furlough in paradise. At no other time in history were so many people one paycheck from disaster. With no federal funds for higher education, graduating high school students applied for jobs instead of colleges. Smaller towns across the state had no work to offer

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<sup>7</sup> U. S. Bureau of the Census. *1930 Census of Population and Housing, 1 April 1930*, available from <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1930.html>; Internet; accessed 24 March 2010.

teenagers, so many left for tourist refuges in the urban areas. After graduating early from Lakeland High School because the city couldn't afford to pay teachers, Willy Wolfson left "in 1934 with \$8.05 in my pocket. I drove my Model T with no windshield to the Gulf. It took me from 7:30 till 4:00 in the afternoon. My brother had gotten me a job as a carhop."<sup>8</sup>

Flashy billboards and delivery trucks called tourists to "Stay through May." South Florida's splendid winters attracted high society elites that arrived on opening day of the Hialeah Race Track in January, and returned home around the end of April. Rebounding much more swiftly than many previously imagined, the Sunshine State pressed on through the tumultuous 1930s. Advertisements lured visitors with images of youthful adventurers bathing in the tropic sun, hotels and resorts that portrayed rest and relaxation, and palm trees that appeared as if they could stroke the sky. Though the Depression lingered in smaller towns like Cocoa Beach, the state as a whole evaded the brunt of the recession. Describing Florida's status in 1933, Nelson Poynter wrote, "a visitor in Florida today hears less about the Depression, sees less fear, privation, destitution, unhappiness and ill health than almost anywhere in the land. It may be the sunshine as they claim, it may be pioneering blood in their veins, but the Floridians seem to have extraordinary powers of recovery."<sup>9</sup>

During the Depression, the Sunshine State's Jewish population was dwarfed by almost every other state in the South. Hovering around 7,000, only Pensacola,

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<sup>8</sup> W.W. Wolfson, *The First Jews in Lakeland*, personal interview by Gary Mormino, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Nelson Poynter, "Florida's Depression," in *St. Petersburg Times*, 30 Nov. 2008, sec. 1C, p. 4.

Jacksonville, and Tampa were home to more than 1,000 Jews each.<sup>10</sup> Growing urban areas like Miami, Saint Petersburg, and Orlando began to see the first signs of substantial communities. Upon moving to their first permanent address on Arlington Avenue, Congregation B'nai Israel vacated their former rented room in the back of an old brick building that housed Sam's Radiator Shop and The Cavalier Restaurant. Saint Petersburg's first synagogue featured black wrought iron adornments that shined like onyx in the Florida sun, white alabaster walls that looked as creamy and pure as ivory, and steps that guided you to a prodigious *Magen David* above the entrance.

The Great Depression played a salient role in altering the distribution of Florida's Jewish population. Smaller municipalities throughout the state felt the unmitigated force of the economic collapse. Many of the programs initiated by the Roosevelt Administration and New Deal targeted urban areas. Towns and villages outside of the Sunshine State's convalescing metro regions lingered behind and pleaded with the federal government for aid. Jewish merchants in struggling regions lost their stores, homes, and friends as they set out to start a new life. As a teenager leaving Florida's quiet northeast coast for the aggregating metropolises in the South, Ruth Elsasser still vividly remembers, "In solemn silence my mother, my three teenage brothers, and I waited in the car as my father walked slowly up the sidewalk to the front door of the family home. In an anguished moment he locked it for the last time. Tears filled his eyes."<sup>11</sup>

While Tampa, Orlando, Pensacola, and other conurbations witnessed abiding resettlement of the nation's Jews, Miami's growing synagogues reported prolific new

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<sup>10</sup> American Jewish Committee. *1929 American Jewish Year Book, 17 August 1929*, available from <http://www.ajcarchives.org/main.php?GroupingId=10063>; Internet; accessed 4 April 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Ruth Elsasser and Barbara Guinta, *The Rubins: A Jewish Family in Cocoa* (Hialeah, Fla: Our House Publications, 1996), 1.

membership rosters. The contemporary Mecca for American Jews enticed families from other states, as well as families from every region in La Florida. Those that vacated New York and Chicago chose Miami and Miami Beach because the largely close-knit community boasted multiple organizations that could assist and support new citizens. Smaller cities were not capable of offering new comers the same securities. They could not afford to be overly accommodating, as they had to buttress congregants already in the region that had lost their source of income and homes. Those who were lucky enough to still have stores "diversified their shops and expanded their merchandise in order that they might ride out the storm." Yael Greenberg states that communities banded together so they could "stick it out for as long as they could."<sup>12</sup>

Goldie Jacobs Schuster arrived in Saint Petersburg in 1920. Growing up in a city without a rabbi, she had to wait for one to come by boat to be confirmed. A woman of small stature, Goldie barely broke one-hundred pounds in her winter coat, and only claimed five feet in height because of the thick chocolate brown hair that curled around her left cheek. Goldie and her husband Harry moved to the beach as pioneering merchants and opened the first grocery on Treasure Island. They supplied the island's visitors with food, kerosene, and potable water, since the water available contained too much salt. Flourishing even prior to having a bridge connecting the barrier island to the rest of the state, the Schusters invested their income into a second venture. Their St. Petersburg Drug Store hosted one of the first post offices on the beaches. Joe DiMaggio, Lefty Gomez, Whitney Ford, and Phil Rizzuto were some of the familiar faces during

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<sup>12</sup> Yael Greenberg, *Identifying Patterns of Intra-Cultural Development: Jewish Merchants in Ybor City, 1891-2001* (M.A. Thesis, University of South Florida, 2001), 4.

spring training.<sup>13</sup> Prior to Harry enlisting in the Navy, or Goldie becoming the first person to chronicle the region's Jewish community, the Schusters were one of Florida's first Jewish families to venture to remote regions in search of the American dream during the Depression years.

Although a preponderance of Jewish citizens moving during the 1930s sought out the comforts provided by metropolitan areas, the decision was not universally uniform. Men and women seeking refuge also turned to rural communities. Families choosing this avenue turned to the land itself for sustenance as well as livelihoods. Julius Buchman joined a number of other Jews who moved to places like Plant City and Lakeland in order to pursue agricultural interests. The most prominent of these men was Harris Wishnatzski, who relocated his family to Polk County to oversee the exporting of strawberries from his New York-based produce business. Still a leading produce exporter today in the twenty-first century, the Wishnatzski legacy exemplifies the bountiful history of Florida's bucolic Jewish pioneers during the Depression years. As smaller municipalities and towns welcomed more Jews, new synagogues and organizations appeared, such as the Lakeland Jewish Alliance in 1934.

Jews continued to flock to Florida's urban areas throughout the decade. Though the numbers were not as impressive as they had been during the booming twenties, they remained consistent. In addition to kosher restaurants, synagogues, and extensive support networks, the draw of similar faith backgrounds was compelling. Many parents moved their families to budding cities so their children had an easier time finding other members of the tribe to date, marry, and have children with. "The family sought a setting that would be comfortable for them as Jews for their years in Palmetto had been very trying,"

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<sup>13</sup> Koren, 122.

explicates Florence Sinclair. "Social life for young people had almost been non-existent."<sup>14</sup> Many towns' lack of roads and bridges prevented teenagers from easily meeting other Jews their age. Larger regions with Jewish community centers and federations hosted mixers and social events so young adults from multiple congregations could intermingle. A myriad of individuals dated in other municipalities so they could travel and see other parts of the region. Bernice Katz recounts "dating across the bay. Even if the experience was horrible, you got a fun trip out of it."<sup>15</sup>

Many of the younger couples who had settled throughout Florida in the 1920s and 1930s began to develop into families. An overwhelming majority of their children attended classes at public schools in districts across the state. Although some Jewish parents believed that their brood were in danger by sending them to schools where there might be fanatics, an extremely diminutive amount of religious intolerance was encountered. The lack of bigotry in the state's education centers caused men like Abe Katz to be dismayed when they entered the armed forces after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. "My wife and I went through public school. We only experienced one episode where we were belittled for being Jewish. I went through a culture shock when I entered the military because there was so much hatred."<sup>16</sup> Traditional education was supplemented in the afternoons and on the weekends when the children attended religious schools.

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<sup>14</sup> Florence S. Sinclair, *From Confederacy to Federation: A History of the Sarasota-Manatee Jewish Community* (Sarasota, Fla: The Federation, 1992), 12.

<sup>15</sup> Bernice Katz, interview by author, personal, St. Petersburg, FL, October 17, 2004

<sup>16</sup> Abe Katz, interview by author, personal, St. Petersburg, FL, October 17, 2004

The taxing recession affected synagogues throughout the state in a number of ways. Still in their infancy, many congregations did not have endowments, long lists of donors to call upon, or rainy day funds. As Jewish merchants closed their doors, it became exceedingly difficult for *shuls* to collect dues from their families. Lack of income from members made it almost impossible to afford rabbis, *chazzans*, and mortgages. Hebrew schools throughout Florida merged classes and condensed lessons, but many couldn't afford new books. In large cities, synagogues even amalgamated schools as a last ditch effort. "My uncle Hyman Jacobs used to walk through the neighborhood every Sunday since we all lived close, and collect a dime from every family," remembers Bernice Katz. "At one point Temple Beth-El and Congregation B'nai Israel joined schools. However, it did not last long since we were Conservative and they were Reform."<sup>17</sup>

Even though the experiment of joining congregations failed in Pinellas County, it proved to be very beneficial and was successful in other districts. Not only did communities band together to support education, they also united for religious ceremonies, *Shabbat* services, and other holidays. Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox families shared clergy regardless of the denomination. In cities across Florida, Jews had the option of following whatever rabbi was around or no rabbi at all. It is still possible to see the successful joint ventures of Tallahassee's assemblages in Rabbi David Max Eichhorn's diary:

The fact that it was, as the paper correctly said, a "mixed Congregation" never caused any major difficulty. It was agreed from the beginning that services would be held on the second day of Rosh Hashanah for those who cared to attend. It was agreed further, that if any disagreement arose with regard to ritual, a Congregational vote would be taken and the will of the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

majority would prevail. In my three and a half years, only one such occasion arose. It was the question of the men keeping their heads covered during the services. The majority voted as follows: Those who wish to keep their heads covered will do so, and those who do not wish to keep their heads covered will not do so. There was one caveat, to wit: hats were not to be worn in the synagogue. Those that wished to keep their heads covered were to wear skullcaps, yarmulkes.<sup>18</sup>

The Sunshine State's Jewish families were stalwart and had encountered economic hardship before. Those that ventured to the South after failing to achieve prosperity in cities like New York and Chicago weren't the only immigrants who endured destitution and adversity. In the early 1860s Florida welcomed a group of émigrés from Bavaria, Westphalia, and other German states. Most of these men and women lived and worked at the lumber camps near Milton, Florida. Milton was a national center of lumber operations after the Civil War.<sup>19</sup> As Pensacola was refashioned and re-born, the families traveled to the city, where they opened taverns and dry goods stores and founded Temple Beth-El. Utilizing their carpentry skills, they erected a synagogue in the 1930s to house their growing congregation. The Temple Beth-El sanctuary, still used today, was fashioned and inspired by the Art Deco craze sweeping the state. The elegant interior included intricate inlaid wood patterns, sleek external lines, and radiant cut-out designs.

The state's chic auberges offered visitors a chance to live, breath, and eat all of the splendors that Eden had to offer. As Florida's acclaim soared among vacationers, it hastily became manifest that the Sunshine State's verdant dreamscape was only going to be shared among America's white "Gentile clientele." "Every Room with a View without

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<sup>18</sup> Claire B. Levenson, *Temple Israel of Tallahassee, Florida, 1937-1987* (Tallahassee, Fla: Peninsular Publication Company, 1987), 22.

<sup>19</sup> Temple Beth-El. *The History of Our Congregation*, 17 June 2003, available from <http://templebethelofpensacola.org/aboutus/history/>; Internet; accessed 12 April 2010.

a Jew,"<sup>20</sup> "Atmosphere Congenial to You," and "No Jews or Dogs" accompanied racial epithets on pamphlets seducing Northerners to La Florida's exotic destinations. From The Tides and Vinoy on the Gulf Coast to the Flamingo and Nautilus on Florida's Atlantic seaboard, many of the state's premier resorts were off-limits to Jews. The all-too-familiar signs were prevalent in advertisements, billboards, and land deeds, which were not eligible to "persons of Semitic origin."<sup>21</sup>

Restricted hotels did not just impede local citizens looking to enjoy restaurants and the beach. These exclusive policies made it daunting for Jewish visitors to Florida to find lodging in desirable areas; accommodations were almost unattainable during the winter tourist season and summer vacation. In 1936 Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau traveled to Fort Lauderdale for a meeting regarding the Coast Guard. After a long journey, and an even more protracted day full of meetings, Morgenthau was received by a bigoted hotel manager. Making an atypical exception, the manager agreed to tolerate and allocate him a room, but said his "Jewish staff members would have to find a place of their own."<sup>22</sup> Filled with sheer disgust, Morgenthau refused to stay at the establishment and had to find accommodations outside of the city limits.

La Florida's Jewish community was confronted with an anomalous opportunity after the state was crippled by hurricanes and devastated by the Great Depression. Faced with insolvency and economic ruin, many of the previous land-owners and business-men that refused to deal with Hebrews began to reconsider their practices. As property values

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<sup>20</sup> Polly Redford. *Billion-Dollar Sandbar: A Biography of Miami Beach* (New York: Dutton, 1970), 214.

<sup>21</sup> Seth H. Bramson, *L'Chaim! The History of the Jewish Community of Greater Miami* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2008), 42.

<sup>22</sup> Cleveland Amory, *The Last Resorts* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973), 63.

plummeted, affluent northern Jews erected new hotels in previously Gentile-exclusive areas. Jewish-owned resorts were also accompanied by new restaurants, theaters, and housing developments. "Even along the great oceanfront estates, the choice was between taking in Jewish millionaires or somehow making do with no millionaires at all,"<sup>23</sup> remembers Seymour Liebman. With a renewed sense of vigor, Jews began to venture out for the first time into foreign industries.

Just as it does at almost every Jewish holiday and life-cycle event today, food played a principal role in the lives of Florida's Jews. The state's lack of roads and bridges made it exceptionally complicated, if not impossible for many to adhere to the draconian dietary laws. Kosher meat and dairy products were at best not fresh after being transported for hours on boats and small trucks to the state's more remote regions; at worst they were spoiled. In larger cities, Jews opened baronial restaurants and affable delis which transplanted scrumptious matzo-ball soup, mouth-watering mile high pastrami sandwiches, and ambrosial potato *latkes*. Jewish merchants in smaller cities opened soda fountains in their stores. These establishments catered to everyone from visitors to locals and even embraced blacks. While the Anchor Inn on Madeira Beach offered kosher catering, Weiss and Sawit's legendary Joe's Stone Crabs served up *treif* at impressive rates.

Miami Beach's enthralling Art Deco district flourished in the mid-1930s and helped revitalize the vibrant city after the Depression. Engineers, construction workers, and artists transformed the growing tourist destination into one of the state's most sublime treasures. While other cities and states were still struggling with the burden of vast

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<sup>23</sup> Melanie Shell-Weiss, *Coming to Miami: A Social History* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), 260.

unemployment rates and countless hungry families, much of the Sunshine State felt they were headed in the right direction. Joining architects of every faith, Jews began to raise hotels on both of the state's littorals. Receiving privileges that were previously only open to a select few also meant that all of Florida's Hebrew citizens and visitors now had access to Eden.

Pinellas County's Jewish proprietors had opened the Anchor Inn, the Sekon n' Palm Hotel, and the Hotel Madeira to affray the existing provincialism. Looking to expand access to the beaches for the region's Jewish community, Jacob and Harriet Miller purchased the land at 3200 Gulf Boulevard from Tomas Rowe, the architect of the Don CeSar Hotel.<sup>24</sup> The Millers had previously attempted to procure land for a resort, but were repeatedly thwarted by narrow-minded land owners and deed restrictions. Drawing insight from each of their previous attempts, the Millers tricked Rowe by reversing their name, and opened the Hotel Rellim. "The beaches needed to be for everyone," recounted Jacob and Harriet's son Irwin. "This was the major reason Dad opened the hotel."<sup>25</sup> The Rellim quickly became the meeting spot for auxiliaries of the city's two congregations, the local hotspot for bar-mitzvahs and weddings, and later transformed into an important locus for Jews conferring about the ensuing war. The Millers' purchase provided the Jewish community with much more than sun and fun. The Hotel Rellim united Hebrews of different denominations and helped combat the exclusive practices of many social clubs.

Across the state, Miami Beach's powdery flaxen sands and translucent aqua waves were competing with the new hotels that seemed to block out the sun. Nathan

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<sup>24</sup> Koren, 164.

<sup>25</sup> Irwin Miller, interview by author, personal, St. Petersburg, FL, June 26, 2005

Stone, grandfather of the Sunshine State's future U.S. Senator Richard Stone, was the first Jew to open a multistory boarding house on the beach, the Blackstone.<sup>26</sup> The grandiose resort was the largest hotel on the coast at the time. The Blackstone offered both Jews and Gentiles resplendent palm trees with coconuts as large as bowling balls, spacious cabanas as bright as the surrounding hotels that scattered the poolside, and a beach-front bar that served exotic drinks that chilled even the most blistering summer sun. Stone's hotel was joined by the Nash Wm. Penn Hotel. The Nash offered amazing weekly rates, and was the first Jewish owned hotel to house northern guests escaping vicious winters. Numerous smaller inns appeared as more insolvent proprietors sold off their holdings.

Florida, along with the rest of the South, was a Democratic stronghold when the stock-market crashed in 1929. Still resenting a Republican-imposed Reconstruction, the former Confederacy united by almost unanimously repudiating the Grand Old Party. As the 1932 presidential election commenced, candidates unhesitatingly insisted that the country had to focus on surmounting the unprecedented trials of the Great Depression. The Sunshine State's burgeoning Jewish community had nothing coaxing them to even contemplate voting for a Republican candidate. It had been sixteen arduous years since a Democrat was in the White House. Florida's Hebrews and much of the nation perceived the recession as a Herbert Hoover and Republican-induced depression. Though American Jews had previously favored the Democratic Party, early fidelities were not as solidified as they have been over the past eighty years.

Acquiring the Democratic nomination, Franklin Delano Roosevelt swiftly assembled a national base through the assistance of friends like William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Kennedy. Roosevelt rallied the masses of the proletariat while beguiling labor

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<sup>26</sup> Shell-Weiss, 127.

unions, minorities, and Southerners. An overwhelming majority of Florida's Jewish population was of European descent. These families moved to the United States with previous ties to the socialist and anarchist factions, as well as the Labor Bund. A rich history of mercantilism unified the Jews with the Democratic party and enticed them to join the New Deal coalition. Roosevelt condemned Hoover's inability to ameliorate the economy, as well as his failure to abate the swelling unemployment rate. "Immediate and drastic reductions of all public expenditures, abolishing useless commissions and offices, consolidating bureaus, eliminating extravagances, reductions in bureaucracy, and for sound currency to maintained at all costs,"<sup>27</sup> are just a sampling of what Roosevelt and Florida's Jews craved.

A prominent shift occurred in 1932, making it an influential year in Florida's Jewish political history. In the midst of the country's deepest recession, Florida was still home to less than ten-thousand Jews. Headlining the Democratic ballot for Governor of Florida was David Sholtz, a man who was almost unknown to the vast majority of the state's voters. Sholtz, a lawyer from Daytona, was previously elected to the state legislature in 1916, but he left almost immediately when he received a commission in the Navy during the First World War. When the war ended, Sholtz returned to practicing law in Daytona, and he later became the president of the Florida State Chamber of Commerce. As the 1932 Democratic gubernatorial primaries rolled around, Sholtz paid to enter his name into the running with seven other candidates, two of whom were past

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<sup>27</sup> Richard Polenberg, *The Era of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1933-1945: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford, 2000), 196.

governors of the state.<sup>28</sup> Promising to bring Florida into prosperity and to see many of the state's cities saved from bankruptcy, Sholtz's campaign marched in step with a fellow New Yorker running for office, Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Still devastated by what American Jews perceived as a Republican-induced Depression, Florida's Jews overwhelmingly voted Democratic; a trend which is still alive today. Roosevelt received over eighty percent of the Jewish vote, while David Sholtz became the state's first and only Jewish-born governor. For the first time since Woodrow Wilson was in office, Florida's Electoral College votes were successful in helping a Democrat seize victory, a feat that did not reoccur until Lyndon Johnson's election. Merlin Cox's numbers show what a triumphant feat Sholtz had:

This had been the first try for state office by Sholtz, and he had received the largest majority ever recorded for a candidate in the history of the state. In the general election Sholtz defeated the Republican candidate, by a vote of 186,270 to 93,323. It was a practice of Florida Republicans to vote in the Democratic primary and then switch back to the Republican ticket in the general election in November. Republican voters in 1932 represented 33.4 percent of the total vote cast in the governor's race.<sup>29</sup>

Sholtz and Roosevelt became good friends and worked together on numerous agenda items. Governor Sholtz heralded the President's New Deal, and in return, Roosevelt made sure the flow of Federal funds to Florida was maintained during the rough economic times. While in office, Sholtz established the Florida Parks Service and the Citrus Commission. An avid proponent of governmental restructuring, Sholtz mandated free school books, lowered fees on many government-offered services, and passed a worker's compensation law. *Business Week*, *Nation*, and other periodicals noted

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<sup>28</sup> Merlin G. Cox, "David Sholtz: New Deal Governor of Florida," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 43 (March 1964): 145.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

Florida's comeback, and described how the end of the Depression could be seen in growing cities such as Miami. After serving the maximum one term, Sholtz attempted to run for the U.S. Senate. Eventually losing to another New Dealer, Claude Pepper, Sholtz returned to private life as a lawyer. Sholtz noted his many achievements during his final radio transmission in office:

With reference to the financial affairs of the state, I want to call your attention to the fact that at the beginning of my administration, July 1, 1933, there was a deficit of \$2,124,000 in state revenue. At the end of the fiscal year, the state budget was balanced and the deficit had been changed into a surplus of \$591,000, a net gain in the financial position of the state of \$2,715,000. Not only that, but we paid off more than \$400,000 of past due obligations which were inherited by this administration. Teachers now receive their checks promptly, and we have established a fine relationship with the National Administration.<sup>30</sup>

Prior to Florida and the nation enlisting in war, Jews in the state enjoyed most of the advantages the Land of Sunshine had to offer. "Automobiles deposited fashionably dressed women on Lincoln Road to shop at Saks Fifth Avenue and other fashion houses," recounts Ruth Elsasser. "We drank frappé daiquiris and piña coladas. Tiny colored paper parrots planted in the shaved ice provided a touch of fantasy."<sup>31</sup> The Sunshine State's enchanting cities were not the only places Jews dwelled. Jay Dobkins remembers, "I was a student at the University of Florida and would visit my grandparents at Neptune Beach. My grandfather and I would sit on the seawall together and watch the tide."<sup>32</sup> La Florida's Jewish community enjoyed many of the state's amenities, including the beaches, the ritzy urban shops, and the state's numerous colleges.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>31</sup> Ruth Elsasser, *My Early Childhood in Cocoa Beach*, personal interview by Gary Mormino, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Jay Dobkins, *Early Jews at the University of Florida*, personal interview by Gary Mormino, 2.

The University of Miami, hardly a decade old in the years leading up to Pearl Harbor, embraced many of South Florida's Jewish students. Unlike the Florida State College for Women and the University of Florida, the Coral Gables institution welcomed both young men and women. Nicknamed "Suntan U" and the "Cardboard College," the school consisted of a large rectangular building that encompassed a bustling courtyard. Colossal palm trees and a luxurious lawn were home to students as well as palmetto bugs. Picnic blankets, benches, and recruitment tables scattered the yard. Religious-based affiliations united students while at the same time driving a wedge between them. Stella Suberman remembers that there were "two Jewish sororities and two Jewish fraternities among the twenty or so Greek letter organizations," and that they "were formed strictly along non-Jewish/Jewish lines. As a member of Alpha Epsilon Phi, I no longer dated non-Jewish boys."<sup>33</sup>

Further north, the campuses of the University of Florida and the Florida State College for Women portrayed quite different sentiments than the bronzed, jovial students relaxing in the Miami sun. The all-male Gainesville and all-female Tallahassee institutions were covered in monumental ancient trees suffocating in Spanish moss that draped from branches like crystals on a chandelier and boasted strong crimson brick buildings. The recession forced students from both schools to leave or postpone their classes, as their income was needed at home. Fraternity and sorority chapters went bust, enrollment dropped, and many of the students who stayed didn't have enough income for social organizations. Accessibility to the venerated schools' most esteemed programs were subject to strict quotas. Bernice Katz remembered in disgust how these allotments

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<sup>33</sup> Stella Suberman, *When It Was Our War: A Soldier's Wife on the Home Front* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2003), 38.

were inaugurated, "to keep Jews entering certain fields, such as medicine and law, in proportion to their representation in the population."<sup>34</sup>

The state's newest school was the University of Tampa, which opened its doors in 1931. Frederick Spaulding, the institution's founder, quickly procured Henry Plant's defunct Tampa Bay Hotel for the college's campus. The distinguished Moorish-influenced architecture featured glorious minarets and was surrounded by radiant azaleas whose colors danced across the waves of the nearby Hillsborough River. Arriving a year earlier to serve as the religious leader at Congregation Schaar Zedek, Rabbi David Zielonka became one of the original faculty members. Rabbi Zielonka taught religion, sociology, and philosophy to students who had never seen a rabbi before. As central Florida's only rabbi, Carol Zielonka remembers, "It was a busy life! There were rabbis in Pensacola, Miami, and Jacksonville. David was the only rabbi in this area and he was called on for occasions of joy and sorrow, as well as interfaith and community gatherings for the entire west coast of Florida."<sup>35</sup>

Just as Florida's Jewish population continued to blossom, during the 1930s the state saw a significant rise in the number of synagogues and rabbis. David Zielonka was relieved as the state welcomed new leaders to aid him in meeting the demands of the growing Jewish community. Adolph Burger took over the pulpit at Congregation Rodeph Shalom as cities throughout the Sunshine State welcomed clergy of their own. The *Miami News* reported, "Jewish Leaders From Fourteen Cities to Hold a Conference," and elaborated that Daytona Beach, Miami Beach, West Palm Beach, Orlando, and Saint

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<sup>34</sup> Bernice Katz, interview.

<sup>35</sup> Koren, 83.

Petersburg were among the cities now hosting religious leaders. As the extensive Jewish network continued to expand, the state's rabbis worked closely on, "greater unity among Florida Jews and better understanding between Gentiles and Jews."<sup>36</sup> Across multiple denominations of Judaism, these men worked to not only serve their congregations, but also to function as ambassadors of the expanding populace.

Rabbis played a decisive role in safeguarding Florida's Jewish community during the tumultuous thirties. Desperate men and women craved somewhere to turn as stocks plummeted, the job market dried up, and houses were foreclosed on. Catholics, Protestants, and Jews across the nation turned to religion as circumstances became unbearable. Sermons from churches, temples, and synagogues uniformly testified that members of the congregations should turn to the Lord for help. As the decade progressed Jewish spiritual leaders also sought to unite the community in speaking out against the atrocities enveloping Europe. "There has never been a time when the hearts of a whole people were more hungry for a message of courage, of hope, of assurance that the dangers which beset us on every side will be overcome," proclaimed Rabbi David Max Eichhorn. "We shall, here and now, prove ourselves spiritual giants or spiritual weaklings, craven cowards or lion-hearted sons and daughters of Judah."<sup>37</sup>

The Jewish community transported more than just tailors, restaurateurs, and dry goods vendors to the southernmost state in the 1930s. Carpet and juke joints provided music, dancing, drinking, prostitution, and gambling. These entertainment outlets beckoned rich and poor, visitors and locals, and Jews and Gentiles to come forget about

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<sup>36</sup> "Fourteen Attend State Rabbinical Conference Here," in *Miami Daily News*, 15 Mar. 1938, sec. A, p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> David Max Eichhorn, Greg palmer, and Mark S. Zaid, *The GI's Rabbi: World War II Letters of David Max Eichhorn* (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 38.

the immense tribulations facing the nation. South Florida's eclectic ambiance had previously attracted Al Capone in 1928, and now other Mafioso trekked south to claim a piece of the action. Crooked sheriffs in towns like Hallandale incubated a new breeding ground for the extensive networks of the American mob. Famous men like Charles "Lucky" Luciano, Antonino "Joe Batters" Accardo, Ignatius "Jack" Dragna, and Abner "Longy" Zwillman all marveled at the piles of cash arriving from multiple clubs, all run by one man, "The Brain."<sup>38</sup>

Meyer Lansky migrated to the United States as a child from Belarus. Growing up best friends with Bugsy Siegel, the two formed one of the most brutal Prohibition gangs - the Bug and Meyer Mob.<sup>39</sup> Infinite prospects in the roaring 1920s united the duo with Lucky Luciano, forming a potent trifecta. They worked alternately as liquor hijackers and minders of booze shipments for bootleggers willing to meet their demands, which were so excessive that it amounted to extortion. Seizing hegemony of the old-line Mafia after they orchestrated the assassination of Salvatore Maranzano, Lansky and Luciano became the first and last word in the organized crime world. Lansky gained unrivaled respect throughout the underworld for his keen intellect and persuasive abilities. In a syndicate that excluded all but Italians, Lansky voted and the other bosses followed him. When probed about his partner's background Luciano responded, "I learned a long time before that Meyer Lansky understood the Italian brain almost better than I did. I used to tell

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<sup>38</sup> Mark A. Stuart, *Gangster: The True Story of The Man Who Invented Crime* (Washington DC: W.H. Allen & Co., 1985), 136.

<sup>39</sup> Robert Lacey, *Little Man: Meyer Lansky and the Gangster Life* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991), 558.

Lansky that he may've had a Jewish mother, but someplace he must've been wet-nursed by a Sicilian."<sup>40</sup>

The incarceration of Al Capone, Lucky Luciano, and many other Mafioso in the 1930s gave Lansky unprecedented clout. By 1936 Lansky had opened operations in New Orleans, Florida, and had opened the Caribbean to the syndicate. A flourishing camaraderie with Fulgencio Batista, accompanied by payoffs, helped crush *Trafficantes* from Tampa attempting to open casinos in Havana.<sup>41</sup> This business move endowed bosses throughout the United States with a huge new source of income. Lansky also made the decision to place Bugsy Siegel in charge of Las Vegas and building the Flamingo Casino, in addition to declaring Miami a "free city," meaning the Southern playground was no longer subject to the rules of territorial monopoly that banded the families together. "The Brain" was the money man trusted to hide or invest millions for the mob. As law enforcement and the federal government continued to move in on the Mafia, Lansky moved much of their money to untraceable Swiss bank accounts. It was his brilliance that impressed his associates. "He would have been chairman of the board of General Motors if he'd gone into legitimate business," boasted Jake "Greasy Thumb" Guzik.<sup>42</sup>

Meyer "The Brain" Lansky was not the only Jewish Floridian that was wanted by the local police and FBI. Prostitution, the world's oldest vocation, was alive and thriving during the Depression years. Based out of a Moorish castle along the Biscayne Corridor in Miami, Madam Sherry's bordello welcomed men from around the world for more than

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Hank Messick, *Lansky* (New York: Putnam, 197), 27.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

25 years. Born Rebecca Levitch, she used the name Madam Sherry to cover her identity, as well as her sisters' names - Anne, Rose, and Ruth. She opened the house of ill repute with earnings she made as a successful bootlegger. Inspired by the Arabian Nights architecture of Opa-locka, Madam Sherry purchased land that had been ravaged by the 1926 hurricane for \$10.00.<sup>43</sup> The grand design featured a tower encrusted with coral, a burnished dome, and countless luxurious rooms. The location positioned the whorehouse perfectly. It was within reach of the beach and the Hialeah race track, and was just a couple miles north of the re-built section of the city. In her tell-all biography, Madam Sherry recounted the exhilarating lifestyle. The infamous book - *Pleasure Was My Business: Complete, Unexpurgated, Uninhibited, and Uncensored. The utterly frank story of the women that made sex pay and pay and pay - and enjoyed every minute of it!* - was immediately banned from cities across the state. Madam Sherry had an extensive list of clientele that ranged from the King of Egypt to jockeys from the nearby track, and included both men and women. In the midst of an overbearing recession she built an empire around, "the second best whorehouse in Miami that officials never wanted you to read about."<sup>44</sup>

Evoking images of alluring beaches and recreation, La Florida was far from the utopia that resonated in the minds of many Americans. Northern elites ventured to the Sunshine State for the pristine shores, the heavenly weather, and the exhilarating race tracks. These men and women, like the rest of the country, were not concerned with the war that had already enveloped much of Europe. Florida's lower class returned to work in growing numbers to deliver entertainment and service to the state's affluent visitors.

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<sup>43</sup> "FBI Swoops Down on Madam Sherry," in *Miami Daily News*, 25 Jan. 1951, sec. B, p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

Slowly climbing out of the Depression, they focused their energies on the flourishing tourism industry rather than the atrocities across the Atlantic. Unvarying from the wealthy and the poor, the middle class did not concentrate on Hitler's success; they embraced the entrepreneurial opportunities arising in the recovering economy.

As did their Gentile brethren, Florida's Jews had the opportunity to prioritize other aspects of the American culture over the ensuing European genocide. Afforded with the same securities that the Nazis were ripping away from European masses, Florida's Jews reacted to politics in a variety of ways. Age, circumstance, and family history all dictated how and what they did in between work and school. The younger generation, accompanied by those whose families had resided in the country for several years, felt much more removed from the war than those who either recently migrated to the United States or were the first Americans born in their families. These men and women enjoyed sports, music, movies, and various other forms of entertainment. "Hammering" Hank Greenberg, Clark Gable, Amelia Earhart, and Bing Crosby commandeered their attention away from the slaughters transpiring in the Old World.

In contrast to the younger generation, which turned their interests to other arenas, older Jewish Floridians hastily distanced themselves from the American mainstream. Many empathized with how volatile the atmosphere in Europe had become and related it to occurrences either they or their parents had endured prior to immigrating. Those who still had family in the Old World received correspondence recounting how lives were being transformed and destroyed daily. Stella Suberman, a young woman when the war first erupted, recounts how her father reacted each time he received a letter from friends and family he left behind. Understanding how appalling the war was becoming, he sought

an explanation for not hearing about it in the newspapers. "Where is the *Herald* on this!"<sup>45</sup> Articles relaying the horrific carnage in Europe struggled to make the front page in many periodicals. Those that chose to illustrate the immorality were challenged by another impediment. Despite the images and tales of death and despondency, a single factor barred them from inflaming the nation.

Americans were not looking to enter a war that was so distant from their borders. Though Florida and the rest of the nation were far from void of anti-Semitism, bigotry was not the unifying factor among the pacifists. Continued battles with a lingering Depression, a vibrant isolationist sentiment, and execrable memories of World War I influenced a preponderance of the electorate to remonstrate entering the war. Florida's Jewish community coalesced with Hebrews around the country and appealed to the government to take action. Despite their pleas for engagement, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was repeatedly faced with overwhelming opposition. Americans did not desire to enter into combat to liberate Europe's Jews, an outlook that was consistent among the populations around the world. The United States, as well as every nation that waged war against the Axis Powers, did so because they or their allies were attacked.

Although its roots can be traced back to World War I, America's isolationist temperament began swiftly expanding at the beginning of the 1920s. Citizens loathed the rapidly increasing influx of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. Congress first passed the Quota Act of 1921, which was promptly amended by the even more insular Johnson-Reed Act in 1924. Initially the law established a quota of 165,000 on immigration. It kept immigration abysmally low by granting admittance to a diminutive

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<sup>45</sup> Suberman, 58.

percentage of each nation's representation in the 1890 census.<sup>46</sup> It was masterfully crafted, as the delegates realized that mass migration from these parts of Europe did not occur until after the First World War. Senator Ellison Durant Smith's "Shut the Door" speech is a prime example of the dogmatism that had become prevalent throughout the country:

I think that we have sufficient stock in America now for us to shut the door, Americanize what we have, and save the resources of America for the natural increase of our population. I think we now have sufficient population in our country for us to shut the door and to breed up a pure unadulterated American citizenship. I recognize that there is a dangerous lack of distinction between people of a certain nationality and the breed of a dog. Who is an American? Is he an immigrant from Italy? Is he an immigrant from Germany? Without offense, but with regard to the salvation of our own, let us shut the door and assimilate what we have, and let us breed pure American citizens and develop our own resources. The time has come when we should shut the door and keep what we have for what we hope our own people to be.<sup>47</sup>

The isolationist movement, combined with the rise of Nazism in Germany, fueled similar anti-Semitic sentiments throughout the United States. Active xenophobic assemblages such as the Ku Klux Klan and the Black Legions experienced prosperity through an expanding following across the state. During the 1930s the Klan devastated businesses and rallied in major cities. Father Charles Coughlin's jeremiads and Henry Ford's prejudicial propaganda condemning Jews, Catholics, and blacks galvanized adherents. Bumper stickers declaring "It's always Jew'n in Miami"<sup>48</sup> were confirmation that hotels were not the only place you could discover signs of callowness. Escalating numbers of Jewish visitors to the state exasperated hate-based groups and enticed Klan

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<sup>46</sup> U. S. Bureau of the Census. *1890 Statistical Abstract of the American People, 15 June 1890*, available from [http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1890a\\_v4p1-01.pdf](http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1890a_v4p1-01.pdf); Internet; accessed 24 March 2010.

<sup>47</sup> Ellison DuRant Smith, April 9, 1924, *Congressional Record*, 68th Congress, 1st Session (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1924), vol. 65, 5961–5962.

<sup>48</sup> Ann Armbuster, *The Life and Times of Miami Beach* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1995), 76.

members to focus their sadistic energies toward Hebrew-owned resorts. While graffiti, broken glass, and fires sent a clear message, it could not abate the rapidly expanding Jewish population.

Not all of Florida's affluent Gentiles held negative views of the state's Jewish citizens. Prior to the Great Depression, John Ringling brought international recognition to a young Sarasota, when he chose it as the winter headquarters of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus. The city's Temple Beth Sholom was beleaguered in the recovering economy, and desperately fundraised to construct a synagogue. Coming to their aid, Ringling made the single largest donation to the temple's building fund. The congregation erected an exquisite limestone building that was elegantly decorated with chromatic stained glass. The extravagant Washington Avenue sanctuary welcomed many families that previously remained unaffiliated. Seeing Temple Beth Sholom's success, the Sarasota County Commission summoned one of the synagogue's founding members. Joseph Idelson was presented with a plot of land from the city, to be used as a Jewish cemetery.<sup>49</sup>

Ignorance and anti-Semitism forced Florida's Jewish community to use innovative methods when trying to carve out a piece of paradise for themselves. Deed restrictions accompanied by dogmatism prohibited Jews from settling in specific areas, joining elite social clubs, and enjoying many of the upscale resorts. New members of the tribe tried to locate homes in close proximity to other Jewish families or synagogues. Opening businesses and building houses in these adjacent quarters created a microcosm of the distinct northern Hebrew neighborhoods. Areas like Saint Petersburg's Central Avenue,

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<sup>49</sup> Temple Beth Sholom. *The History of our Congregation*, 12 August 2006, available from <http://www.templebethsholomfl.org/about/history.php>; Internet; accessed 15 February 2010

northern Miami Beach, downtown Hollywood, and the community around Jacksonville's Congregation Ahavath Chesed are prime examples of how these flourishing districts drew strength from increasing numbers. Restrictions also played a fundamental role in opening up new markets for Florida's Jews, as well as creating distinctively Jewish organizations.

Barred from many of the exclusive social clubs, Florida's Jewish residents created new groups to support their expanding communities. Akin to synagogues throughout the country, most congregations already had auxiliaries for the men and women of the *shul*. The cumbersome obstacles set in place by the Depression played a central role in unifying the state's Jews. Larger organizations that had enjoyed great success in the tight-knit northern neighborhoods gained admittance to the Sunshine State and were welcomed with tremendous support. These groups united children with the "Young At Heart," as well as Conservative, Orthodox, and Reform Jews. From Miami and Fort Lauderdale in the south to Tallahassee and Pensacola in the north, the affiliations rapidly reached districts across the state. Though each organization focused on a different factor of the American-Jewish lifestyle, they all helped in unifying the populace.

B'nai B'rith or "Sons of the Covenant" is the oldest continually operating Jewish service organization in the world. Founded by Henry Jones in October 1843 in New York City, it urged members to amalgamate for "Benevolence, Brotherly Love, and Harmony."<sup>50</sup> Florida's first chapter opened in Pensacola at the beginning of 1874. Though the association saw growth in the state, it did not ignite until the 1930s. Incorporating with other Jewish assemblies, B'nai B'rith brought Young Men and Women Hebrew

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<sup>50</sup> B'nai B'rith International. *The History of the Global Voice of the Jewish Community*, 17 May 2003, available from [http://www.bnaibrith.org/about\\_us/bbi\\_roots.cfm](http://www.bnaibrith.org/about_us/bbi_roots.cfm); Internet; accessed 17 February 2010

Associations, Jewish Student Unions, and Hebrew Athletic Clubs to many of Florida's larger cities. By the middle of the decade the state had so many chapters it began having conventions and elected officials to represent all of the districts. The *Miami News* reported "Miamians Elected By B'nai B'rith," and named "Dave Feldman and Jack Abott" as representatives after a conference in Daytona Beach.<sup>51</sup> Gaining substantial political clout within the society, Florida hosted an "Interstate Parley of B'nai B'rith" in 1933, welcoming men from "Maryland, District of Columbia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia."<sup>52</sup>

Working to improve the lives of the younger generation, B'nai B'rith sought to expand young minds and build strong bodies. In 1938 the *St. Petersburg Times* reported that "a fund of \$2500" was set up for the 250 Jewish students enrolled at the University of Florida. The article even named "Harry Simonhoff of Miami as head of a committee to choose a rabbi for the school."<sup>53</sup> The state board also approved a motion to open Hebrew Athletic Clubs in Saint Petersburg, Palm Beach, Lakeland, and Daytona. Young Jewish boys and girls darted to these guilds after school. Gymnasiums with sleek wooden floors hosted children in the afternoon. Lining up in cerulean and light pink uniforms, they mimicked their instructors and completed infinite jumping-jacks, sit-ups, and push-ups. Dave Feldman declared that it was important to "ensure their physical, cultural, and spiritual guidance while away from home."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> "Miamians Elected By B'nai B'rith," in *Miami Daily News*, 2 Sep. 1941, sec. B, p. 1.

<sup>52</sup> "Jewish Order Gathers Here: Interstate Parley of B'nai B'rith Convenes Today," in *Miami Daily News*, 24 Dec. 1933, sec. A, p. 16.

<sup>53</sup> "Jewish Students Establish Union," in *St. Petersburg Times*, 5 Sep. 1938, sec. C, p. 2.

<sup>54</sup> "B'nai B'rith Absorbs Hebrew Athletic Club," in *Palm Beach Post*, 20 Nov. 1940, sec. C, p. 11.

Another organization rallied women around a desire to work on *Tikkun Okam*, or "Repairing the World." The Judaic Council provided much more than a chance to come together in religious observance on Saturday mornings. The sorority gave Florida's Jews a chance to meet their neighbors, develop a community, and to connect with people who had been little more than strangers previously. City-wide suppers, bridge parties, fashion shows, picnics, and even a "Spring Carnival of Fun" were planned as fundraising events for the group's "welfare work."<sup>55</sup> A highlight every year was the annual Armistice Ball. Patriotic colors were combined with the Council's insignia to decorate a ballroom. A festive dance commemorating the end of World War I gave Jews from all over the state a chance to rejoice as one. The group's programs helped develop Braille books for blind children, serve Thanksgiving Day meals to transients, and build the Nina Harris School in Pinellas County for children suffering from Cerebral Palsy. B'nai B'rith and the Judaic Council constructed stronger communities and built social relations that were few and far between in Catholic and Protestant churches throughout the 1930s.

As Florida's economy continued to recover from the recession, many of the Jewish organizations throughout the state began to fundraise to help those still struggling. The Council for Jewish Women hosted adult conversational Hebrew classes and used the money to support their scholarship program. Auxiliaries that could barely keep their doors open during the first half of the decade, flourished as the forties drew closer. "With the formation of the Jewish Federation, an effort was launched to coordinate fundraising and disbursements. The first drive in 1938 netted \$80,650."<sup>56</sup> Congregations that

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<sup>55</sup> "Judaic Council Plans Activities," in *Evening Independent*, 4 Mar. 1946, sec. A, p. 1.

previously could not afford a rabbi, formed committees to search for new religious leaders. Hebrew schools opened their doors once again as public school teachers began to receive regular paychecks. Synagogues saw surpluses for the first time in years as those who previously could not afford dues began sending in funds. Many of the social programs that had disappeared hastily re-emerged.

While the state as a whole was well on the road to recovery, and synagogues were no longer stressing about covering monthly bills, Florida's Jewish leaders took new measures to familiarize the state's Gentile citizens with their religion. Rabbis in Miami, Tampa, Tallahassee, and other cities began to hold open forums, write for periodicals, and host events to explore religious similarities with priests and other clergy. The bold new initiatives infuriated anti-Semites, but intrigued and educated a majority of the Sunshine State's previously unexposed masses. Rabbis David Zielonka and Jacob Kaplan laid the foundation for Florida's rabbinical association. These men and their contemporaries saw that it was just as important to educate the external community as it was the members of their congregations. Rabbi Kaplan was chosen by his colleagues to represent them in a short course offered at the University of Florida for ministers in 1938.<sup>57</sup> Though some of Florida's Jewish residents believed their rabbis should only focus on their religious families, these leaders foresaw that revealing the true nature of their faith before the Klan could implant lies into the minds of the unformed was of the utmost importance.

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<sup>56</sup> Irving Lehrman, *The Jewish Community of Miami Beach* (New York: Specter Publishing, 1956), 22.

<sup>57</sup> Levenson, 85.

As rabbis and organizations began a unified assault on dogmatism, individuals throughout the state followed suit. Though they still had to be vigilant, Jewish store owners were determined to not live in terror because of others' ignorance. Abe Markowitz opened Markowitz Plumbing in Fort Lauderdale in 1933 and enjoyed very minimal success. Those aware of the fact that many avoided using his services because of the Semitic name explained the situation to Markowitz. Exacerbating the problem, the city council requested that he officially change the name to Mark's Plumbing, a less "Jewish-sounding"<sup>58</sup> name. Even with the mounting bigotry, Markowitz refused to meet their demands. He was admired for his unrelenting resolve, and the local Jewish community stood by his decision and helped the young entrepreneur succeed.

The second half of the decade saw objections towards anti-Semitism take on two unique techniques. Members of the state's B'nai B'rith, Hadassah, Covenant Club, and other auxiliaries sought to enlighten Gentiles and work within the status quo. Others chose to oppose these restrictions by protest. These men and women openly applied to restricted organizations, made reservations at exclusive hotels, and waited to be served at restaurants that imposed limitations. Though they were blatantly denied access, men such as Leonard Cooperman knew that "symbolic resistance was better than no resistance at all."<sup>59</sup> As the 1940s approached, actions needed to be taken to end narrow-mindedness; they could no longer let them fall by the wayside.

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<sup>58</sup> Abe Markowitz, *My Life*, personal interview by Nate Tarler, 7.

<sup>59</sup> Leonard Cooperman, *My Early Childhood in St. Petersburg*, personal interview by Ray Arsenault, 18.

The decade that followed Black Tuesday was rife with trials and tribulations for Americans from the Florida Keys to the San Francisco Bay. On the eve of World War II much of the Sunshine State had recovered from the recession; however, its lasting effects still lingered in smaller cities. The Florida dream, accompanied by exotic beaches, bountiful orange groves, and warm sapphire skies, provided the perfect place for families to rebuild their lives. Among the masses that ventured to the South was a burgeoning Jewish community. The state's Jewish population had remained stagnant for years; however, the Great Depression offered a unique opportunity. Fleeing the megalopolises in the North, as well as previous southern strongholds, Florida welcomed Jews from many regions. Uniting with other Hebrews already in the state, they laid the foundations for the extensive Jewish network that blankets Florida today.

Significant building and business ventures replaced those that were previously claimed by the economic collapse. Florida's Jewish stores such as Maas Brothers and restaurants like Wolfie's Delicatessen welcomed affluent Northern investors that were formerly denied equal access to Eden. Hotels that had been closed to Jewish clientele before the Depression began advertising in periodicals such as the *Jewish Daily Forward*. Deed restricted areas gave way to Jewish proprietors as callow land-owners sought to quickly unload parcels of terrain. Because Jews were excluded from many social clubs, the thirties saw the rise of Hebrew organizations that were once foreign to the state. Political guilds such as the Anti-Defamation League and B'nai B'rith fought for equality on multiple fronts, while social auxiliaries such as the Covenant Club and sisterhoods provided support to struggling congregations and families.

As the 1940s drew closer, Florida's Jewish population reached a new milestone. Claiming 20,000 individuals, the growing community reported a 23 percent gain over ten years, while the country as a whole saw "the smallest ten-year increase since 1877."<sup>60</sup> Rampant isolationism, strict immigration quotas, and vile organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan helped abate the swelling American Jewish populace. Even as crosses bathed in flames and bigots with pallid hoods struck terror into the hearts of many, Florida's Jews enjoyed new religious liberties. As other cities and states watched their tight-knit Jewish neighborhoods slowly dissipate, Florida's Hebrew citizens were generating durable social, religious, and political inroads. Additional synagogues, new rabbis, and supportive associations accompanied the flourishing neighborhoods and presented the Sunshine State's Jews with the power of personal preference.

As the sun set on the 1930s, the outlook for much of the world was ominous. Europe was left war-torn and saturated in the blood of men from every corner of the continent. The oceans and skies were hosting innovative killing machines that surpassed previous armaments as the ultimate eradicators. Americans watched with bated breath as authoritarian regimes devoured remote regions, and political factions quarreled over who was most qualified to lead during the turbulent era. Though Florida's Jews enjoyed triumphs on a number of fronts, they endured the pains that uniformly swept across the nation. Amidst some of the darkest moments of the twentieth-century, the Sunshine State's Jewish community persevered.

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<sup>60</sup> American Jewish Committee. *1938 American Jewish Year Book, 17 August 1929*, available from <http://www.ajcarchives.org/main.php?GroupingId=10063>; Internet; accessed 4 April 2010.

## **EXILED FROM EDEN:**

### **FLORIDA, THE S.S. ST. LOUIS, AND THE FINAL SOLUTION**

Throughout time Florida's coasts have been unrelentingly assaulted by the crashing waves of the acrid salt water and bursts of the mephitic ocean air. The sea's melodious harmonies unite with the resonating murmurs of the wind to create a divine symphony featuring rustling palm fronds and thundering aqueous sprays. The never-tiring tide discharges variegated shells and seaweed in shades of sepia and sage, along with a sundry of creatures that have been transplanted from remote regions. Turquoise crests and sapphire breakers devour the resplendent sands endowing La Florida with borders that are eternally oscillating. The distant horizon mirrors the chromatic hues of the vast ocean, transforming from azure to malachite to ash, and becoming undistinguishable at twilight when the two bleed into each other. Infinite grains of sand comprise the littorals, each recounting a different odyssey to the peninsula. The torrid sun scorches down upon the shores that have hosted explorers, buccaneers, and refugees alike. It is here on the ambit of the Land of Sunshine that men and women from around the world first acquired freedom, encountered the splendor of paradise, and grasped the horrific realizations that not all men were created equal.

The United States of America was founded on unalienable rights that so many other nations, empires, and kingdoms neglected to recognize. It has been a distinct function of this country throughout its history to serve as a sanctuary for refugees. The preeminent convictions of the New World have perceptibly declared the will of the nation

to welcome those who have been banished by brutality from the Old World, and provide with them a society conceived in liberty. This notion of equality echoes through the documents that have united colonists and statesmen, Northerners and Southerners, and Jews and Protestants. Thomas Jefferson comprehended the significance of this principle, and stated during his presidential inaugural address, "And shall we refuse the unhappy fugitives from distress that hospitality which the savages of the wilderness extended to our fathers arriving in this Land? Shall oppressed humanity find no asylum on this globe?"<sup>61</sup> Though these values have existed in American ideology since the Revolutionary War, their implementation has been neglected by various authorities, and at times been protested by segregationist factions.

The Great Depression signaled a salient metamorphosis in the immigration patterns that existed after the First World War. In 1936 when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt rededicated the Statue of Liberty on its fiftieth anniversary, the composition and volume of the foreigners entering the United States was a far cry from the huddled masses the Mother of Exiles was accustomed to. America's sea-washed sunset gates bid farewell to more families than they welcomed during the first half of the 1930s.<sup>62</sup> The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1924, combined with Herbert Hoover's interpretation of a 1917 ban of persons "likely to become a public charge," to include those who were capable of working but unable to procure employment during the recession set a troublesome precedent. Austere economic hardships weighed heavily on Roosevelt, and

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<sup>61</sup> James C. Humes, *My Fellow Americans: Presidential Addresses That Shaped History* (New York: Praeger, 1992), 197

<sup>62</sup> Cato Institute. Steve H. Hanke's *A Great Depression?* available from [http://www.cato.org/pub\\_display.php?pub\\_id=9806](http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=9806); Internet; accessed August 1, 2010

played a predominant role in the decision to uphold the practices of the previous administration. This effectively barred Jewish refugees proficient in a myriad of professions, as well as anyone who did not have an assured employer upon arrival in the United States. Lady Liberty's torch no longer radiantly shined as a beacon of hope for those yearning to breathe free.

Arriving in the Americas onboard vessels of all sizes, Jews and other expatriates turned to the oceans to convey them to a land free of religious persecution. Hebrews prayed that these ships delivered them to a New World with neoteric beliefs of equality, acceptance, and freedom. Selling all of their private holdings, Jews escaping Europe boarded these ships with little more than hope. They placed their lives in the hands of captains, shipping companies, and the vessels themselves to liberate them from a world of ancient prejudices. The ritual of anointing and commissioning a ship dates back to ancient times when the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, and Vikings called upon the gods to protect their ships and crew from the perilous sea. Wine, water, and whiskey have all been used to christen vessels, though go back far enough and animals and even humans were sacrificed in the name of appeasing various deities. A Babylonian parable dating back to the third millennium B.C.E. describes the completion of a ship: "Openings to the water I stopped. I searched for cracks and the wanting parts I fixed. Three sari of bitumen I poured over the outside. To the gods I caused oxen to be sacrificed."<sup>63</sup> Today submarines, pleasure boats, aircraft carriers, cruise liners, and destroyers alike are embrocated with champagne. As the bottle erupts the ship is symbolically injected with a

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<sup>63</sup> United States Department of the Navy. *Ships of the United States Navy: Christening, Launching, and Commissioning*. available from <http://www.history.navy.mil/download/ships.pdf>; Internet; accessed 25 July 2010.

spark of life, and departs the dock to fulfill its destined role of transportation, leisure, or defense.

The tale of the *St. Louis* is that of a powerful odyssey that changed the world forever. The magnificent ship bore the dreams, hopes, and fate of more than 900 Jewish lives across an ocean which seemed as vast as the freedoms the New World had to offer. It transported a dispatch to the leaders across the Atlantic that Germany was determined to expel every Hebrew from its borders. Arthur Morse described it as "a voyage which would hold up a mirror to mankind."<sup>64</sup> The journey of this ill-fated ship forever connected the Sunshine State with the infamous Final Solution that claimed the lives of more than six million Jews. Though the ark came within mere miles of one of America's most vibrantly burgeoning Jewish communities, the doomed souls onboard were condemned with a sentence returning them to a continent that was about to be devoured. The *St. Louis* transported much more than 900 individuals back to Europe. It carried a message to Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime that the rest of the world saw Jews as expendable. It was the moment the Holocaust arrived on America's shores, and Americans resolved to ignore the pleas for mercy.

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Enclosed in an unadorned wooden frame, an old portrait remained above the coffee table in Abe and Bernice (Bunnie) Katz's living room for decades. Though it was still clear and unmistakable, years of dust and rays from the penetrating Florida sun had faded it substantially. As I entered the room for the first time in 2002 to interview Mrs. Katz, she kindly greeted me with a glass of water, lit a cigarette as we got comfortable,

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<sup>64</sup> Arthur D. Morse, *While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy* (New York: Ace Pub. Corp., 1968) 221

and turned on an antique lamp. The light revealed a cozy home that throughout the couple's lives had housed numerous festive occasions. It also illuminated the unambiguous portrait that had caught my eye. Noticing my fascination, Bunnie began to tell me about how much she admired President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Radiating with pride as if she was talking about one of her own and displaying a smile that was brighter than the old lamp, she recounted Roosevelt's many achievements. "As a little girl growing up in a troublesome era, FDR did more than we like to remember. He is a personal hero of mine. No president since has commanded the same respect from the Jewish community, or has come even remotely close to standing up for us like he did."<sup>65</sup>

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century there has been a noticeable turn in the attitude of American Jews toward Roosevelt. For decades he was seen as a hero. No president had appointed so many Jews to public office. No commander-in-chief had surrounded himself with so many Jewish advisors. No chief executive had castigated anti-Semitism with such eloquence and fervor. Rallying America's Hebrew citizens with the surging masses of the proletariat behind the Democratic Party, a vast majority voted four times for Roosevelt.

In recent years, however, many have formed new opinions of the once distinguished leader. Today children are being taught that FDR alone made the decision to remain idle while genocide consumed much of Europe, and it was his resolutions that allowed six million Jews to fall victim to the Nazi regime. Why did he resist allowing Jewish refugees to enter the United States prior to the war, and why didn't he bomb the

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<sup>65</sup> Katz, Bernice. Founding Member of Congregation B'nai Israel. Interview by author, 17 October 2002, St. Petersburg, FL. Tape Recording. University of South Florida, Special Collections, St. Petersburg, FL.

Nazi death camps are just a sampling of the critical questions being asked. Biographies, textbooks, and movies have all begun to reexamine the president that Bunnie Katz and so many other Democrats adored.

Those denouncing Roosevelt's lack of action and resolve to maintain neutrality have all pointed to one event. Before bodies were burned at Auschwitz or tortured at Buchenwald, one verdict has come to embody FDR's laissez-faire attitude. Scholars point to the thirty-second President of the United States' refusal to allow the *S.S. St. Louis* and its 936 passengers to land and disembark on American soil. The simple act of remaining silent, and ignoring the pleas for asylum seems great enough to some to warrant grouping Roosevelt with radical anti-Semites of the era such as Father Charles Coughlin and Henry Ford. Presiding over a nation that was adamant about remaining out of war, facing an ever-increasing isolationist following, and trying to prevent a relapse in a slowly recovering economy, Roosevelt sent a signal to the world when he refused entry to the refugees that arrived on the shores of the Land of the Free. With millions out of work, Congress and trade unions were not apt to look sympathetically on the entry of new contenders in the job market. The anti-Semitism that ran rampant throughout the nation infected lower echelons in the State Department and impeded the issuance of visas. FDR had to deal with the nation he was elected to lead, while one vessel sailed across the Atlantic and forever scarred his presidency.

On May 6, 1928 the Hamburg-America Line hailed its newest addition to the fleet. Built by the Bremer Vulkan Shipyards in Bremen, the *St. Louis* was a state-of-the-art diesel-powered craft that measured 574 feet. Synthesizing opulence and technology, the vessel was spacious enough to house close to a thousand passengers, and was capable

of speeds of up to sixteen knots. Translucent smoke rose from the dual chimneys, while vibrant chromatic flags waved from the crow's nest. Inside she was adorned with intricately carved dark wood, art from every corner of Europe, and luxurious fabrics that brightened up the guestrooms, ballroom, and hallways. Following an ostentatious gala celebrating the liner's completion, the *St. Louis* was anointed, and took her maiden voyage on June 15, 1929.<sup>66</sup> She regularly sailed the trans-Atlantic route from Hamburg to Halifax, Nova Scotia, and New York and made cruises to the West Indies. Speed and capacity allowed the Hamburg-America Line to alternate its responsibilities between leisure cruising and trans-Atlantic liner service.

She was a ship built by visionaries seeking to push the envelope on how many amenities a grand liner could hold. Cruising to exotic locations, the *St. Louis* offered passengers a swimming pool, gymnasium, motion pictures, dancing lessons, horse races, delicious food, and much more. Advertisements from the Hamburg-American Line ingeniously boasted that the entire ship was "only one class," promised their clientele "a world of vacation fun," and reminded travelers that "the whole ship is YOURS!"<sup>67</sup> Six day trips to Bermuda for \$55.00 and four day trips to Halifax for \$35.00 brought in many families who sought to escape for the first time since the stock market crashed. On what was labeled a "Good Time Cruise," one could easily forget about everyday worries while surrounded by costume balls, bizarre contests, and extravagant parties. All of this and more was accessible aboard a cruise liner that could travel faster than ships half her size.

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<sup>66</sup> George Reinfelder, *MS St. Louis: die Irrfahrt nach Kuba : Frühjahr 1939 : Kapitän Gustav Schröder rettet 906 deutsche Juden vor dem Zugriff der Nazis* (Hamburg: Greintrich, 1998) 172

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

Devastated economies, soaring unemployment rates, and countless destitute families had little effect on the *St. Louis*. Constructed primarily for society's elite, the ship rarely had an extended stay in port during the Depression years. As one of Europe's fastest vessels, she transported vacationers and immigrants between the Old and New World. Setting sail prior to Adolf Hitler's rise to power, the Hamburg-American craft welcomed any guest with resources. As the 1930s unfolded, and various new programs placed anti-Semitic restrictions on Germany's Jewish community, the *St. Louis* and other ocean liners carried an increasing number of Hebrews fleeing persecution. While previously instituted immigration regulations prevented these families from freely entering the United States, there were a number of nations willing to receive the refugees. Moving to various parts of the Caribbean, Europe, and the Far East, an overwhelming majority of these exiles desired to develop roots in one country, America.

Walter Loebenberg, Herbert Karliner, Philip Freund, Sol Messinger, and Thomas Jackson were all small children when Adolf Hitler rose to power and the *St. Louis* was still in her infancy. Living in various parts of Germany, each of these boys had unique stories that made them distinct. While some were born into affluent families, others watched their parents struggle to survive in a volatile economy. Adolescent innocence and compassionate progenitors shielded them from seeing the tumultuous revolution that was occurring very hastily. For many, the country that their fathers, uncles, and grandfathers had risked their lives for during the First World War was transforming into a new foreign kingdom. The motherland that had comforted their ancestors for generations, that their families embraced and defended, was rapidly becoming more and more distant. An emerging wave of political and philosophical intolerance was quickly uniting

desperate souls searching for a way to endure the torment of insolvency. Though each of these young boys came from different walks of life, they all had one thing in common: They were Jews.

A census completed in January of 1933 reported that there were 523,000 Jews living in Germany, constituting less than one percent of the country's population. Though they were a minority, tight-knit communities strengthened their voice in cities such as Berlin, where one-third of German Jews resided.<sup>68</sup> Although they constituted a minor percent of the overall population, Stephen Roberts explained that when the Nazis came to power, "50.2% of the lawyers in Berlin were Jews, as well as 48% of doctors. The Jews owned the largest and most important newspapers, and made great inroads on the educational system."<sup>69</sup> The initial response to the Nazi takeover was a substantial wave of emigration, primarily to neighboring European countries. Politically active Hebrews were particularly likely to emigrate, and without the same financial restraints as their brethren, they could afford accommodations that transported them off the continent. Members of the working class that packed up for places like France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Czechoslovakia eventually were again confronted by the Nazis as the Reich assaulted neighboring nations in 1939. Large portions of the continent, the Caribbean, and various other regions throughout the globe were transformed into holding rooms for Jews awaiting their chance at freedom through the American quota.

Prior to 1940, the Fuhrer and other Nazi officials were content with simply purging Germany's Jewish community. As early as 1933 persecution of the "Hebrew

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<sup>68</sup> United States Holocaust Museum. *Franklin Delano Roosevelt available from* <http://www.ushmm.org/holocaust/>; *Internet; accessed 19 June 2010.*

<sup>69</sup> Stephen Roberts, *The House That Hitler Built*. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938), 247

Race" became an active Nazi policy, but at first laws were not as rigorously enforced or as devastating as in later years. Private organizations whose charters included Aryan paragraphs were soon accompanied by the Reich when the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service banned Jews from holding prestigious occupations. The death of President Paul von Hindenburg allowed Adolf Hitler to assume totalitarian control of law making. By 1935 Jews were no longer eligible to join the Wehrmacht (Armed Forces), and anti-Semitic propaganda began to appear throughout the country. The passing of the Reich Citizenship Law, the Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor, and the Nuremberg Racial Purity Laws prohibited Hebrews from entering into interfaith marriages, proclaimed that even quarter- and half-Jews were no longer citizens, and revoked basic civil rights such as voting.<sup>70</sup>

During the Night of Long Knives, or "Operation Hummingbird" Hitler was granted even greater influence to push through his agenda. The *Schutzstaffel* (SS) became the dominant policing power in Germany. Since the SS had been the Fuhrer's personal bodyguard, its members were far more loyal and skilled than those of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA). By 1937 and 1938, new laws were implemented, and the segregation of the Jews from the true "Aryan" German population began. Hebrews were penalized financially for their perceived racial inferiority. Government contracts could no longer be granted to Jewish businesses, "Aryan" physicians were only allowed to treat "Aryan" patients, and Jews could no longer practice medicine. Hebrew males were forced to add the moniker Israel and females Sarah to their names, and a large "J" was imprinted on their passports. Jewish children were banned from public schools. These measures further reduced their

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<sup>70</sup> Katrin. Schoelkopf. Rabbiner Ehrenberg: Orthodoxes jüdisches Leben ist wieder lebendig in Berlin" (Rabbi Ehrenberg: Orthodox Jewish life is alive again in Berlin). (Berlin: Die Welt, 1974), 189

rights as human beings, and in many ways officially separated them from the German populace.

Rising to power along with Adolf Hitler, Dr. Paul Joseph Goebbels was appointed as the Reich Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. Holding the position from 1933 to 1945, he was one of the Fuhrer's closest associates and most devoted followers. Goebbels became well known for his zealous oratory and oppressive anti-Semitism. He exerted tyrannical control over the media, arts, and information in Germany and was able to censor every newspaper, book, novel, play, film, and radio broadcast. As one of his first acts, he ordered the burning of more than 20,000 books that were rejected by the Nazis, primarily those authored by Jews. As Germany continued to plunge into a xenophobic darkness, he was bracketed with Julius Streicher as two of the regime's most virulent anti-Semites. By 1938 Goebbels presented Hitler with the idea of confining Jews to a ghetto and requiring them to wear an identifying mark. His intense hatred for Hebrews is evident throughout his diary: "Aim - drive the Jews out of Berlin without any sentimentality."<sup>71</sup>

Eager for the world to receive a "better understanding of German anti-Jewish policy,"<sup>72</sup> Joseph Goebbels fashioned a plan that forever altered the way refugees entered Cuba and much of the free world. A group of Nazi loyalists were sent to Havana with the task of infuriating the public over the rapidly increasing community of Jewish immigrants. They began by portraying the Hebrew refugees as parasites that drained

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<sup>71</sup> Richard J. Evans. *The Third Reich in Power, 1933-1939*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 567.

<sup>72</sup> Robert Levine. *Tropical Diaspora: The Jewish Experience in Cuba*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), 103.

whatever society they were leached onto. As Robert Levine explains, "The plan was simple: permit a large group of Jews to leave Germany, trumpet their undesirability, and then pressure countries not to take them in."<sup>73</sup> Chosen to carry the fleeing masses were the British *Orduna*, the French *Flandre*, and one of Europe's grandest and swiftest ships, the German *St. Louis*. Though each vessel's route was unique, all were due to arrive in Cuba during the first week of June. Together they had the capacity of transporting close to 1200 Jewish refugees to the small island nation. The rapid saturation of travelers was almost the same number that emigrated through Havana harbor the entire previous year.<sup>74</sup> Goebbels' ultimate plan was to unite a rising xenophobic sentiment with a hastening expatriate population to terminate countless Hebrew bastions of asylum in the New World.

President Roosevelt appealed to leaders from around the globe to find a suitable area where "refugees could be admitted in unlimited numbers."<sup>75</sup> The United States was prepared to accept 26,000 immigrants from Germany each year, in normal times a relatively substantial number, but in the critical situation of German Jews, all too few. Hitler suggested Madagascar, FDR sought the use of Ethiopia from Benito Mussolini, while others pointed to vacant regions of the Soviet Union, Africa, and Central America. Britain had its hands tied with a mounting Arab revolt in the Middle East, and France had reached a saturation point after accepting countless refugees fleeing the Spanish Civil War. Shanghai was one of the last bastions of hope, until the Japanese took control of the

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>74</sup> United States Holocaust Museum. *Franklin Delano Roosevelt available from* <http://www.ushmm.org/holocaust/>; *Internet; accessed 19 June 2010.*

<sup>75</sup> Richard Polenberg. *The Era of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1933-1945: A Brief History with Documents*. The Bedford series in history and culture. (Boston: Bedford/St.Martin's, 2000), 69.

port. Understandably, most of the expatriates wanted to go to the legendary land of opportunity across the Atlantic, America. They knew they could not survive the delay; they had to find somewhere they could remain safe until their numbers came up in the quota. Cuba was the only country close enough to the United States that accepted large numbers of refugees.

The pre-arranged trip to Cuba provided countless families with the unique opportunity to escape the Nazis' quickly tightening grasp. German Jews who had already been confined in concentration camps were released if they vowed to leave the country and could show documents detailing their efforts. Attempting to ensure passage for his children, Philip Freund's father smuggled money and risked his life. "The Gestapo discovered what he was doing and arrested my mother. For his crimes they imposed the death penalty," remembers Freund.<sup>76</sup> Walter Loebenberg's family sold their belongings when he escaped from a Nazi train depot. "They had us waiting for hours to be transported. We waited for the perfect moment, and then ran. I never stopped running until I walked on the deck of the ship that promised to transport me to a new life."<sup>77</sup> Those aboard the *St. Louis* knew that merely crossing the border was not enough to guarantee their survival. The Wehrmacht's clout was expeditiously mounting. Only one

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<sup>76</sup> Freund, Phillip. Survivor of the Holocaust and Passenger on the *St. Louis*. Interview by Eric Douglass, 26 May 2004, Miami, FL. Tape Recording. Historical Museum of Southern Florida, Digital Collections, Miami, FL.

<sup>77</sup> Loebenberg, Walter. 1939 German Refugee and Witness to the *St. Louis*' Arrival in Cuba. Interview by author, June 17, 2010, St. Petersburg, FL. Tape Recording. University of South Florida, Special Collections, St. Petersburg, FL.

country could provide the security they desired: the United States. "America was a magic word. It was the be-all and end-all. We knew America would not let us down."<sup>78</sup>

Each refugee wishing to make the trip gathered what little cash they could, sold off items they could not bring to Cuba, and said their good-byes. Even though each traveler had an official landing certificate endorsed by Colonel Manuel Benites, Cuba's Director General of Immigration, they also had to pay a guarantee to the Hamburg-American Line in case they were denied entry. For a preponderance of those seeking refuge, the tropical island was merely a stepping stone to their future home, the United States. Arthur Morse explained that "the effect of raising these sums had been prodigious," because Jews "had long since been removed from the economic life of Germany, and all their possessions were gone, fined, or sequestered."<sup>79</sup> Few were left with more than change in their pocket as they sailed off to start a new life in a foreign world. Though they had little to show, their ticket assured them safety and got them as close to America as possible. When their numbers came up in the quota, they could quickly make the journey to south Florida or await a trip to Ellis Island.

Years before the *St. Louis* departed Germany, Florida had already assumed a prodigious position in the United States' immigration demographic reports. While an overwhelming majority of refugees flocked to Ellis Island and New York City, the Sunshine State was also welcoming increasing numbers of ships transporting men and women seeking their chance at the American dream. Island nations throughout the Caribbean, including Cuba, were merely pit stops on a longer journey to religious

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<sup>78</sup> Sarah Ogilvie. *Refuge Denied: The St. Louis Passengers and the Holocaust*. (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 23.

<sup>79</sup> Morse, 271.

freedom. Gathering what little means they had left, those refusing to wait for their lot to be drawn in the quota purchased chartered rides from fishermen, tradesmen, and shipping liners. Normally with little more than the clothes on their back, they were dropped off the southern coast of La Florida and left to battle the aggressive waves before they could plant their feet upon the soil they had longed to feel between their toes. It was anything but an easy decision to leave a country which was previously so intertwined with the global Jewish community. Peter Khonstam explained that "the only thing the Nazis left a Jew was hope and faith."<sup>80</sup> It was these two remaining strengths that drew them to America.

Cuba was placed in a precarious position as an escalating number of Jewish refugees sailed to the tropical island. While each traveler had to purchase a landing certificate, the income from the amassing immigrant population was not enough for the government to offset its costs. It was also not uncommon for the funds to end up in the wallets of the officials who signed off on the documents. A reporter explained, "Cuba is not all rum and rumba," and noted, "all the worries of the world can be found here in miniature."<sup>81</sup> Unemployment and a struggling economy plagued the island nation, much like other countries on multiple continents during the global recession. A rapid influx in the number of Jews migrating also led to increased competition for those searching for work. In 1938 more than 1500 Hebrews chose the humid Havana port as their first stop

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<sup>80</sup> Don Moore. *War Tales: Inspiring Tales by Those on the Front Line in World War II, Korea*. (Englewood, FL: Charlotte Sun & Venice Gondolier, 2003), 7.

<sup>81</sup> Robert N. Rosen. *Saving the Jews: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Holocaust*. (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006), 201.

on the way to freedom and equality.<sup>82</sup> While most waited patiently for their chance to journey to the United States as citizens, there was also a portion that stowed away on boats and small planes, and headed for Florida illegally.

Illegally smuggling exiles into Florida quickly became a lucrative venture for men seeking to make a quick dollar. The Coast Guard was mobilized to cope with the emerging problem, but the peninsula proved to be too large to patrol. Dropped off in the dark of night, refugees rested on barrier islands before swimming towards the vivacious lights of cities like Miami, Key West, and Fort Lauderdale. Newspapers such as the *Palm Beach Post* and the *Evening Independent* routinely reported newly captured smugglers or unlawful aliens. La Florida's shore was transformed from a luxurious vacation hideout into a dangerous arena. Human cargo rapidly became more profitable than drugs, cigars, and alcohol: "Captured exiles explained to officials that they promised to pay \$350 for the trip."<sup>83</sup> However, not all business arrangements ended amicably. The captain of the *Panchito*, a small Cuban schooner, told reporters that he "promised to bring the aliens for whatever they could pay, and learned when he rowed them ashore that they had no money at all."<sup>84</sup>

Once onboard the *St. Louis*, life was exceedingly different from what these German Jews were accustomed to. Depicted as less than human by propaganda distributed through the Reich, the refugees had forgotten what extravagances were. The

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<sup>82</sup> American Jewish Committee. *1939 American Jewish Year Book*, available from <http://www.ajcarchives.org/main.php?GroupingId=10063>; Internet; accessed 4 April 2010.

<sup>83</sup> Martin Gross. "Captured Exile Enlightens Officials," in *The Evening Independent*, 2 July 1939, sec. D, p. 5.

<sup>84</sup> Nancy Thompson. "Cuban Smugglers Captured Off Coast," in *Palm Beach Post*, 7 July 1939, sec. C, p.2.

vessel transported those in exile to a world filled with luxury, and was described by passengers as a "vacation cruise to freedom."<sup>85</sup> Sophisticatedly dressed attendants delivered foods that were already being rationed in parts of Europe. Guests were serenaded by string quartets, and entertained by exceptional performers. Men who were formerly detainees in camps like Dachau, were now being attended to by Gentile crewmembers. Those who were detained weren't the only guests being catered to. Sarah Ogilvie and Scott Miller describe how the transition was uniformly felt by women and children as well: "Women who had been banned from shopping in town markets and department stores enjoyed the ship's beauty salon. Children not previously allowed to enjoy parks, playgrounds, and schools of the Reich romped festively together, spending long, happy hours exploring the *St. Louis'* many nooks and crannies, even indulging in the swimming pool."<sup>86</sup>

Max Korman noted in his diary how wondrous it was to be leaving Germany:

We boarded the *St. Louis* in a spirit of gaiety, delighted with the sense of relief from the tensions brought on by the preparations for the voyage. Most of us explored the ships at once, running up and down staircases, gazing down gangways, and inspecting admiringly the interiors of the halls and dining rooms. Exactly at eight in the evening, as the ship began to move slowly from its moorings, a grand vision possessed each of us; sixteen days in a luxurious floating hotel; sixteen days of freedom from burdens and sorrows; sixteen days to be climaxed in Havana by the embrace of loved ones, by the chance to send for wives, children, and parents who remained behind. A new chapter was to begin for all of us. The ladies really came into their own with all these diversions, for they could show off their entire wardrobes, from formal wear to playsuits and swimsuits. The truly beautiful and sublime was nature, yes, only nature. Looking into the ocean we saw the ship splitting the water to create in its wake foam-laden waves that rhythmically chased one another. We saw the dolphins trying to overtake the faster moving ship by jumping out of the water again and again. We

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<sup>85</sup> Levine, 111.

<sup>86</sup> Ogilvy, 117.

saw the sun rise and set. It was a wonder to see all this, and at the same time to feel one's aloneness in the world's enormous spaciousness.<sup>87</sup>

Captain Gustav Schroeder, a veteran sailor of more than thirty-seven years was in charge of the *St. Louis* and her crew. Growing up aboard ships and learning very early how deep his affinity for the ocean was, Schroeder had no reservations when he left school prematurely. Joining the vessel's regular crewmembers were undercover agents tasked to help keep the Fuhrer and Dr. Goebbels updated regularly. Schroeder warned these men, and all of those who were employees of the Hamburg-American Line, that he refused to tolerate bigotry towards their paying guests. The Jews traveling on the *St. Louis* were no longer second rate citizens; they were customers and therefore should be treated with respect and courtesy. By seeing to it that the refugees were taken care of, he felt as if he was making amends during the voyage on behalf of all of Germany. Remembering the voyage, Rudolph Jacobson recounts how "painful impressions on land disappeared quickly at sea and soon seemed merely like dreams."<sup>88</sup> Though Captain Schroeder was aware of the covert SS agents that had been placed on the roster, he was not apprehensive of properly attending to the patrons. He celebrated with the Guttman's, who married in Berlin and were honeymooning while fleeing. Schroeder also "took the unprecedented (and politically dangerous) step of removing the ballroom's large formal portrait of Adolf Hitler, thus better enabling the grand salon to be used as a place for Jewish worship."<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Mark M. Anderson. *Hitler's Exiles: Personal Stories of the Flight from Nazi Germany to America*. (New York: New Press, 1998), 186.

<sup>88</sup> Katz, Abraham. Founding Member of Congregation B'nai Israel. Interview by author, 17 October 2004, St. Petersburg, FL. Tape Recording. University of South Florida, Special Collections, St. Petersburg, FL.

<sup>89</sup> Ogilvy, 18.

The lucky men, women, and children allowed to leave Germany sailed from Hamburg on May 13, 1939 toward a New World and a new life. Leaving behind friends and family they embarked on a journey to a land that promised so many renewed chances with acceptance and equality. However, even prior to their leaving the dock in Germany, Cuban President Federico Laredo Bru endorsed Decree 93, which nullified their certificates. The new resolution required refugees to carry visas approved by the Cuban State, Treasury, and Labor departments. An overwhelming majority were unaware that "the thousands upon thousands of blank landing certificates sold to the Hamburg-American Line for resale to desperate refugees were worthless."<sup>90</sup> Neither the passengers nor Captain Schroeder were notified prior to departing, even though Cuban officials contacted the *St. Louis'* home office in Hamburg. Telegrams from Havana were received as the ship was crossing the Atlantic, indicating that Cuban officials doubted the validity of the documents being carried by the travelers. Panic uniformly swept the vessel and raised countless questions about the future of the forlorn souls onboard.

Men and women abandoned their reclining deck chairs, finished their last cocktails, and changed out of their bathing suits. The *St. Louis* no longer hosted jovial dance lessons, lavish tea receptions, and ritzy art auctions. The festive mood was transformed almost overnight as word quickly traveled from cabin to cabin about the impending obstacle. Captain Schroeder did his best to calm his frantic passengers, and promised to do everything in his power to ensure their safety. Years later a survivor explained that "even the ship's comedian, Max Schlesinger of Vienna, had difficulty in

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<sup>90</sup> Morse, 272

forcing smiles out of the audiences."<sup>91</sup> Hundreds of questions and scenarios raced through their heads. How could the signature of Manuel Benites be open to questions? Would they have to return to Germany? Surely America could accept them even though their quota numbers had not been picked, right? As the *St. Louis* steamed forward, only one thing remained clear: No one could get the answers they wanted until they reached Havana.

The *St. Louis* arrived in Cuba at 4 A.M. on May 27, and was denied the privilege of docking. The government hastily sent officials from an expansive spectrum of departments and Coast Guard vessels to monitor the ship and ensure none of the passengers escaped. Newspapers reported that the cruiser was "surrounded at all hours by boats and small launches carrying relatives and friends who leaned over the railings to catch a glimpse of their loved ones and to shout encouragements at one another."<sup>92</sup> Articles in Cuban and American periodicals revealed heartbreaking images of loved ones trying desperately to aid their family members stuck onboard. President Bru permitted brief visits to the ship; however, the lines wrapped around the harbor. After enduring such a psychologically taxing journey, uttering another good-bye was devastating. Almost instantaneously scores of Jewish organizations and social guilds dispatched representatives to Havana. Even Meyer Lanksy, the United States' most influential Jewish gangster, attempted to arrange a bribe for the battered, stranded souls.

Pulling into the Havana harbor, sirens signaled the ship's arrival. The New York Times reported that "the saddest ship afloat today, carrying refugees clamoring to get

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>92</sup> Levine, 117.

ashore was halted at heavily guarded gangways."<sup>93</sup> Jewish social organizations mobilized almost as hastily as the State Department, and sent their most diligent and diplomatic negotiators south on the first available flight to Cuba. Private lines for expedited communication were established between Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr. and Secretary of State Cordell Hull. Roosevelt's advisors frantically searched for a way to entice president Bru to alter his decision without having to use monetary incentives. Hull and Morgenthau knew that FDR's opponents could exploit his allegiance to the Jewish community if they proved he purchased permanent Cuban visas for the exiles. The refugees on the *St. Louis* suffered through endless hours without updates on the developing situation, and patiently awaited news from Captain Schroeder with optimism. "The first word I ever learned in Spanish was mañana. But that day never arrived," recalls Herbert Karliner.<sup>94</sup>

As the *St. Louis* cruised into headlines around the globe, media outlets and officials swiftly chose sides in the rapidly intensifying debacle. Those opposing Jewish emigration argued, "Not every Jew is a communist nor every communist a Jew. However, every Jew is a potential communist."<sup>95</sup> Those who sought to help procure refuge for the weary travelers pleaded with the public to "witness the care-worn faces of old and young, their once-bright eyes grown dull with suffering, and your heart will go out to them. Witness the stark terror in their expression, and you will realize they cannot be sent back

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<sup>93</sup> Robert H. Abzug. *America Views the Holocaust, 1933-1945: A Brief Documentary History*. The Bedford series in history and culture. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999), 62.

<sup>94</sup> Edward Roth. "Looking Back to a Horrific Moment," in *Miami Herald*, 17 August 2006, sec B. p. 4.

<sup>95</sup> Ogilvy, 114.

to Germany."<sup>96</sup> Families, neighborhoods, and entire nations had mixed emotions in regard to the destinies of so many lives. Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr. pleaded with influential advisors close to president Bru to persuade their leader to grant asylum to the refugees. Morgenthau and other supporters knew that acquiring American visas for those aboard the *St. Louis* was almost impossible, so they quickly strategized to pressure the Cuban government into accepting the refugees. The world watched with baited breath, and it quickly became evident that external forces could not force Bru to do anything he deemed negative for his career or country.

While the *St. Louis* meandered and circled between Cuba and Florida, the *Orinoco* was already well on its return to Germany. The enraged Jewish guilds' main concern now was whether the passengers were going to be sent to the concentration camps upon return. This horrifying prospect also upset America's ambassador in London, Joseph Kennedy. Abhorred by the English for his anti-British tendencies and defeatist attitude, Kennedy had already publicly expressed his belief that the once glorious global power was to be "badly thrashed" in the forthcoming war with Germany. However, even Kennedy's most ardent detractors confessed that he had one redeeming attribute: the skill to circumvent bureaucracy, and by dealing with those in authority, the ability to produce results. Kennedy sent out an urgent dispatch to Hitler on June 3, and convinced him to allow "the 200 refugees on the *Orinoco* to return to their homes unmolested."<sup>97</sup> Hours later he learned that if Cuba refused to accept the *St. Louis*, the passengers were still

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>97</sup> Ronald Kessler. *The Sins of the Father: Joseph P. Kennedy and the Dynasty He Founded*. (New York: Warner Books, 1996), 84.

going to be banned from entering the United States, a message that was not publicly announced for another week.

The same day the passengers aboard the *Orinoco* learned of the news regarding the Fuhrer's promise, Captain Gustav Schroeder resolved to pursue a new tactic. For more than half the day the *St. Louis* sailed in ever-widening circles off the Cuban coast, hoping for radio communication recalling her. In the early afternoon Captain Schroeder ordered the ship to steer slowly northward towards Florida. Gordon Thomas explains, "At the back of his mind was still the vague hope of intervention by the United States, and he had reasoned that, should that come, he wanted to be well placed to run for the nearest American port."<sup>98</sup> By early evening the ship was near Miami, still heading north, away from Cuba, as well as the Dominican Republic, which offered to receive the exiles for a substantial sum.<sup>99</sup> Those tracking the vessel questioned whether it planned to continue north, swing back around for Cuba, or head northeast for Europe with the help of the Gulf Stream.

In his autobiography *Heimatles auf haher See*, Captain Schroeder recounted how he had planned to make an illegal landing along the Sunshine State's coast. He claimed, however, that when he attempted to do so Coast Guard vessels and planes arrived to prevent him from landing. In addition to being monitored, the *St. Louis'* passengers faced two major obstacles. First was the massive size and deep draft of the grandiose cruiser. The very ship that offered these men and women deliverance from oppression stood in

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<sup>98</sup> Faye Dunaway. *Voyage of the Damned*. (Van Nuys, Calif: AVID Home Entertainment, 1992), 243

<sup>99</sup> Roger Friedman. "Dominican Republic Offers Refuge to *St. Louis*," in *Miami Daily News*, 15 July 1939, sec. C, p. 7.

the way of their crash course with freedom. Even the maximum depth at high-tide along most of South Florida was not enough to accommodate the craft. This caused any attempt to approach the shore to be perilous at best. Second, without a port capable of handling a vessel of that magnitude, the refugees needed lifeboats to disembark. Jumping overboard and swimming to the beach was not a realistic option for a vast majority of the children, elderly, and injured workers that had escaped from the concentration camps.

Since anchoring and off-loading were the only viable options, the logistics of such an attempt, even in tranquil shielded waters, could have proven to be too sacrificial an undertaking. This effect was further complicated by the fact that the expatriates undoubtedly needed to take their luggage with them. Those that had left everything but a few important possessions could not afford to leave behind what little they had held onto. Entering the New World with little more than pocket change, many were not willing to relinquish the few remaining artifacts of their once peaceful lives in Germany. It is likely that even with the help of the *St. Louis*' staff, these men lacked the skill and experience required to perform such a task in the surf without potential loss of boats, crewmen, and passengers.

"Carrying her cargo of human misery,"<sup>100</sup> the *St. Louis* evacuated Cuba's largest harbor and maneuvered north, to the east coast of Florida. With the ship anchored a mile off Miami Beach, "the green of coconut palms and the gleaming walls of luxurious beachfront hotels were visible to the refugees."<sup>101</sup> Children onboard like Philip Freund,

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<sup>100</sup> Daniel Walters. "Ship Carries Cargo of Human Misery," in *St. Petersburg Times*, 5 June 1939, sec. A, p.1.

<sup>101</sup> Mathew Ross. Ross, Mathew. "Refugee Ship Nears Our Coast," in *The Evening Independent*, 5 June 1939, sec. A, p. 3.

Sol Messinger, and Thomas Jacobson composed letters to first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, while their parents pleaded with the president for asylum. As hours turned into days, and days into what must have seemed like an eternity, the desperate souls stranded at sea anxiously awaited any type of response from the White House. The silence that radiated from Washington, D.C. revealed a horrifying reality to those praying for acceptance. It became unmistakably evident that "Florida's golden shore, so near, might as well be four-thousand miles away for all the good it does us."<sup>102</sup> The extravagant hotels that lined the shore offered relaxation to vacationers across the nation, but for the *St. Louis'* weary refugees they were only the battlements of another forbidden city.

Early on Sunday, June 4, 1939 the passengers on the *St. Louis* were relieved to see that they were still near the American coast, and even closer to Miami than the previous night. The city, which appeared to be more beautiful than Eden could be seen without binoculars. Glancing towards the southern retreat, Rosemarie Bergman said to her husband, "So near, and yet so far."<sup>103</sup> Deep sea fishing yachts from Florida came close to the cruiser, and took photographs of the desperate families. Seeking to show ignorant Americans the faces of the oppressed exiles, newspapers paid well for the captured images. As the grueling sun rose in the sky and the day progressed, a much larger ship joined the fishing vessels. It was the U.S. Coast Guard cutter 244, dispatched from the naval base in Fort Lauderdale. A preponderance of the refugees believed the ship was

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<sup>102</sup> Ogilvy, 8.

<sup>103</sup> Bergman, Rose. Survivor of the Holocaust and Passenger on the *St. Louis*. Interview by Janice Myers, 6 April 2001, Miami, FL. Tape Recording. Florida Jewish History Museum, Digital Collections, Miami, FL.

there "to protect us, and to pick up anyone who jumped overboard."<sup>104</sup> Only a select few believed the cutter's presence was to ensure that the Hamburg-American liner did not enter American waters.

The *St. Louis* stormed into the headlines with unrestrained vigor captivating the national and global community. Jewish media moguls, presidential cabinet members, and American Jews in every region quickly began attempting to help secure asylum for the families onboard. Though many had been following the events transpiring in the Old World, the ship's arrival off Florida's coast brought it to their doorsteps. Religious persecution and desperate masses were no longer something they could ignore. Chronicling the vessel's journey north along the shoreline, newspapers from around the country recounted the intense situation developing in the Sunshine State. Those on the ship longingly peered out across the clear waters while men and women crowded along the beach to see the cruiser the periodicals were depicting. Herbert Karliner joined the other children of the *St. Louis* and watched the automobiles and brightly colored hotels on Miami Beach. Looking through a pair of binoculars he remembered that "America looked like an oasis. I'd never seen coconut trees in my life. I was very impressed."<sup>105</sup>

La Florida's flourishing Jewish community quickly rallied to intervene on the immigration issue that began worrying citizens of the Sunshine State. Hebrew organizations gathered the cash that had recently begun to accumulate from increased membership and used it as bail money for captured exiles. After posting bond, Jewish

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<sup>104</sup> Karliner, Herbert. Survivor of the Holocaust and Passenger on the *St. Louis*. Interview by author, 17 August 2010, Miami, FL. Tape Recording. University of South Florida, Special Collections, St. Petersburg, FL.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

associations helped arrange housing, provided food, and tried to procure employment from one of their members until the refugee's number came up in the quota. One such alien, Joseph Stabinsky remembers how supportive Tampa's Jewish community was. "It was a nightmare. I was arrested after risking my life several times between Poland and Florida. When the officer told me friends had arranged my release. I thought he was mistaken. I didn't know a single soul in America, but I wasn't about to tell him that."<sup>106</sup> Synagogues across the state also banded together and fundraised to aid the expatriates. On November 24, 1938 the *St. Petersburg Times* reported that more than "one thousand persons gathered at the First Baptist Church to hear Rev. Andrew Caraker, Baptist Pastor; Rev. Charles L. Elslander, Catholic Priest; and Rabbi David L. Zielonka. In total more than \$1500 was raised to help Jewish immigrants on our shores."<sup>107</sup>

The Sunshine State's Jewish community was not the only group infuriated by the government's lack of response to the crisis. Larger Hebrew strongholds in America's northern metropolises became boisterous and defiant towards those choosing to ignore the men, women, and children asking for compassion from the *St. Louis'* weathered deck. Anonymous donors began funding passage from Havana to New York. Walter Loebenberg was one such fortunate individual. As the dilemma facing Roosevelt and the nation quickly escalated, Loebenberg and other German Jews resided upon the benches of Ellis Island for months. "My family lived on hard wooden benches for four months before we were cleared to join friends and family in Chicago. The large rooms held

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<sup>106</sup> Stabinsky, Joseph. Survivor of the Holocaust and Passenger on the *St. Louis*. Interview by Sarah Ogilvie, 11 March 1998, Miami, FL. Tape Recording. United States Holocaust Museum, Digital Collections, Washington D.C.

<sup>107</sup>Sandra Englemenn. "Sarasota Jews Raise Funds for Refugees," in *St. Petersburg Times*, 24 November 1939, sec. A, p. 2.

desperate souls from around the world; however, it certainly seemed that an overwhelming majority were European Jews."<sup>108</sup> External congregations also began to speak out regarding the silence that was radiating from the nation's capital. Descriptions of the distressed souls prompted Bishop James Cannon Jr., of Richmond, Virginia, to write a letter to the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*:

... the press reported that the ship came close enough to Miami for the refugees to see the lights of the city. The press also reported that the U.S. Coast Guard, under instructions from Washington, followed the ship... to prevent any people from landing on our shores. And during these days when this horrible tragedy is occurring right at our doors, our government in Washington makes no effort to relieve the desperate situation of these people, but on the contrary gives orders that they be kept out of the country. Why does not the President, Secretary of the State, Secretary of the Treasury, Secretary of Labor, and other officials confer together and arrange for the landing of these refugees who have been caught in this maelstrom of distress and agony through no fault of their own? ... The failure to take any steps whatever to assist these distressed, persecuted Jews in their hour of extremity is one of the most disgraceful things which has happened in American history and leaves a stain and brand of shame upon the record of our nation.<sup>109</sup>

As the food and water surplus rapidly dwindled, Captain Schroeder realized that it was time to make a significant decision. They could either continue to circle between the Sunshine State and Cuba and risk running out of vital supplies, or they could return to Europe, where their chances for survival seemed as dim as the depressing and lack-luster light that once radiated from Lady Liberty's golden torch. Schroeder made a promise to the passengers that he wasn't sure he could keep. Though he knew it was becoming less

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<sup>108</sup> Loebenberg, Walter. 1939 German Refugee and Witness to the *St. Louis*' Arrival in Cuba. Interview by author, June 17, 2010, St. Petersburg, FL. Tape Recording. University of South Florida, Special Collections, St. Petersburg, FL.

<sup>109</sup> Morse, 280.

realistic with each passing hour, he declared “We won’t return to Germany!”<sup>110</sup> If the circumstances facing the refugees weren’t disconcerting enough, the unrelenting Florida summer weather added a new obstacle. Max Korman explained that those “were truly the days when our despair reached its lowest ebb, for even the clouds turned against us. Rain, fog, and storms unleashed themselves against our already overtaxed nervous system.”<sup>111</sup> Learning that a mounting number of his guests were contemplating suicide, Schroeder vowed to beach the *St. Louis* on England’s shores allowing everyone to escape, rather than delivering them back to Hitler’s concentration camps.

Word reached the *St. Louis* on June 6, 1939, that Cuban President Bru had declined every offer from the Joint Distribution Committee. It was this transmission that caused the ship to cease her idle cruising, and set course for Europe. The route chosen was direct; however, the impressive speed of the liner was not utilized on the return trip. One final telegram was sent to Roosevelt, as with the others, there was no reply. As the refugees sailed towards a fate that they were no longer capable of protesting, Jewish organizations and newspapers condemned the horrific response by the government:

It is hard to imagine the bitterness of exile when it takes place over a faraway frontier. Helpless families driven from their homes to a barren island in the Danube, thrust over the Polish frontier, escaping in terror of their lives to Switzerland or France, are hard for us in a free country to visualize. But these exiles floated by our own shores. Some of them are on the American quota list and can later be admitted here. What is to happen to them in the interval has remained uncertain from hour to hour. We can only hope that some hearts will soften somewhere and some refuge be found. The cruise of the *St. Louis* cries to high heaven of man’s inhumanity to man.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> *Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial and Museum. Gustav Schroeder’s Diary, available from [http://www1.yadvashem.org/righteous\\_new/germany/germany\\_schroeder.html](http://www1.yadvashem.org/righteous_new/germany/germany_schroeder.html); Internet; accessed 25 July 2010.*

<sup>111</sup> Anderson, 189.

<sup>112</sup> Charles Grant. “Humanity Reaches All New Low.” in *Tallahassee Democrat*, 12 November 1939, sec. B, p. 4.

As the Hamburg-American vessel left the Sunshine State's warm waters and advanced toward Europe, most Americans returned to work or school and continued to ignore the consequences of their decision. Though periodicals and social networks continued to fight an ill-matched battle, a preponderance of the public disregarded the situation with the refugees no longer floating off the coast. Arthur Morse stated that "none of the American people, all sons, daughters, or descendants of immigrants, came to the aid of these men, women, and children floating across the Atlantic toward certain doom, guilty of no crime, accused of no offense, victims only of the accident of birth."<sup>113</sup> While several smaller Hebrew guilds continued to raise awareness, only one organization, the Joint Distribution Committee, rose to the challenge of calling upon other nations not to make the same mistakes the United States did. A cry for help was sent to countries on multiple continents, and representatives were dispatched to deliver the urgent message that the *St. Louis* could not be allowed to return to Germany.

As the passengers onboard watched the sun rise and set, they counted the days until they had to disembark their floating safe-haven. Optimistic men and women formed a brigade of the most stable personalities to prevent suicides. As they constantly patrolled the decks, there was little time for others to sit along the ship's railing and contemplate taking their own lives. Max Schlesinger pleaded with those feeling woeful to remember "we're on a cruise. Get bronzed in the sun. Let's enjoy it!"<sup>114</sup> Parents and grandparents had to conceal their true emotions in order to prevent the younger refugees from carrying

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<sup>113</sup> Morse, 283.

<sup>114</sup> Aryeh Tartakower. *The Jewish Refugee*. New York: Institute of Jewish Affairs of the American Jewish Congress and World Jewish Congress, 1944. p.47.

the same onerous burden. Those less sanguine about the future prayed that the Captain kept his promise of beaching the ship and granting them time to escape. In these dangerous times, a desperate escape with the chance of freedom was much more enticing than an almost certain death back home.

On Tuesday, June 13, Captain Schroeder received a momentous message. Wired from Paris by Morris Troper, a representative from the Joint Distribution Committee, it was the first news that Schroeder was elated to relay to the guests. “Final Arrangements for disembarkation all passengers completed happy inform you governments of Belgium, Holland, France, and England cooperated magnificently.”<sup>115</sup> Tremendous celebration uniformly engulfed the vessel as the wire was read aloud. Tears filled the eyes of men and women, who openly embraced strangers for the first time. No time was wasted in composing a response. “The 907 passengers of the *St. Louis* dangling for last thirteen days between hope and despair received your liberating message. Our gratitude is as immense as the ocean on which we are now floating. Accept the deepest and eternal thanks of men and women and children united by the same fate.”<sup>116</sup> In the final disposition of the passengers, 214 went to Belgium, 287 to England, 181 to Holland, and 224 to France.<sup>117</sup>

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The captivating odyssey of the *St. Louis* inadvertently revealed what many perceived to be the dark and hidden side of American democracy. The vibrant young

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<sup>115</sup> Anderson, 183.

<sup>116</sup> United States Holocaust Museum. *Franklin Delano Roosevelt available from* <http://www.ushmm.org/holocaust/>; *Internet; accessed 19 June 2010.*

<sup>117</sup> Ogilvy, 174.

nation that once heralded liberty and equality no longer embodied what Thomas Paine and others envisioned as "an asylum for mankind." Historians such as Saul Friedman began to believe that "perhaps it had never been such a sanctuary." Examining the "platitudes of presidential addresses, Sunday sermons, editorials, and political platforms," Friedman remorsefully recounted that "despite all these things, the immigrant to the United States had often encountered hostility from those already here."<sup>118</sup> Adolf Hitler's rise to power on a stridently anticommunist platform equated Bolshevism with the Jewish community, and spread from Germany to xenophobic followers on several continents. A growing fear of "Red Jews," "Jewish radicals," and "alien Jews" fueled the argument that non-Aryans were plotting to destroy the foundations of Anglo civilization. The Reich's wide-reaching propaganda had captured narrow-minded followers around the globe, including Florida.

Dogmatism dwindled in the years leading up to the Great Depression due primarily to America's prosperity. Economic dislocation, a burgeoning communist regime in the Soviet Union, and other factors played a salient role in igniting a renewed surge in fanaticism in the 1930s. Anti-Semitic lexicons rapidly linked "Jew" and "communist" as synonymous. Father Charles Coughlin exacerbated the predicament by creating *Social Justice*, a tabloid that was distributed weekly to more than one million subscribers, while fifteen million Americans listened to his narrow-minded jeremiads on the radio.<sup>119</sup> Racist conservatives attacked Roosevelt's administration for including Jews and courting black voters. Advertisements from clandestine associations were placed in periodicals and

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<sup>118</sup> Saul S. Friedman. *No Haven for the Oppressed; United States Policy Toward Jewish Refugees, 1938-1945*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973), 17.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

horrifically proclaimed, "You kiss the Niggers, I'll Kiss the Jews, and We'll stay in the White House, As long as we choose."<sup>120</sup> Out spoken bigots blamed many of the nation's lingering tribulations on "the Jewish brigade Roosevelt took to Washington," and claimed the fight for Western Civilization could only be won "if we recognize that the enemy is worldwide and that it's Jewish in origin."<sup>121</sup>

Despite increasing reports of the rampant persecution of Germany's Jews in the winter of 1937, eighty-three percent of Americans expressed opposition to admitting additional refugees.<sup>122</sup> As the *St. Louis* sailed north along the Sunshine State, Roosevelt was ensnared between a mounting intolerant following, and his most loyal voters, Hebrews. The nation did not accept its own Jews, and most were certainly not seeking any more that could complicate the already volatile employment calamity. Years later, even following Germany and Japan's defeat, historians noted the enduring distrust many still harbored towards Hebrews. "It is significant that in virtually every poll conducted by Gallop, Roper, ORC, and NORC through February of 1946, the group singled out by most Americans as posing the greatest menace to the country was Jews."<sup>123</sup> Letters arrived at the White House by the thousands protesting the admittance of the desperate souls onboard the *St. Louis*. Citizens pleaded with the president, requesting him to "Please spare us," and questioning "Why open the door for more Jews? Don't we have enough of that scum here already?"<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Reinfelder, 78.

<sup>121</sup> Friedman, 28.

<sup>122</sup> Tartakower, 6.

<sup>123</sup> Friedman, 23.

<sup>124</sup> Tartakower, 27.

Although opposition to admitting additional refugees into the United States was widespread, Roosevelt was also supported by a substantial following seeking to grant asylum to the families. Jewish alliances and federations across the nation combined efforts with other human rights organizations to bolster their numbers. While piercing poems were mysteriously planted in newspapers, democratic loyalists like Ben Hecht unreservedly composed verses to be distributed in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Miami Herald*, and every other periodical that promised to run the Associated Press' pieces supporting an open door policy. As the Hamburg-American Line's most famous ship meandered off the coast of the Land of Sunshine, Hecht's infamous *Ballad of the Doomed Jews in Europe* blanketed the nation:

FOUR MILLION JEWS waiting for death,  
Oh hang and burn but - quiet, Jews!  
Don't be bothersome; save your breath-  
The world is busy with other news.

Four million murders are quite a smear  
Even our State Department views  
The slaughter with misfavor here  
but then - its busy with other news.

You'll hang like a forest of broken trees  
You'll burn in a thousand Nazi stews  
And tell your God to forgive us please  
For we were busy with other news.

Tell him we hadn't quite the time  
To stop the killing of all the Jews;  
Tell him we looked askance at the crime-  
But we were busy with other news.

Oh World be patient - it will take  
Sometime before the murder crews  
Are done. By Christmas you can make  
Your Peace on Earth without the Jews.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Ben Hecht. "Ballad of the Doomed Jews of Europe," in *New York Times*, 10 October 1939, sec. A, p. 1.

For many of the weary souls that sailed on the *St. Louis*, their rescue proved to be the beginning of the end. Researchers for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum have discovered that more than 250 of the expatriates that returned to Europe were slaughtered in Hitler's death chambers. While some were lucky enough to get a second chance to traverse the Atlantic prior to the Wehrmacht's multiple successful campaigns, the only refugees protected from the Nazi terror were those who found sanctuary in Britain. Those delivered to France, Belgium, and Holland praised God that they were not returned to concentration camps; however, life was still exceedingly tumultuous. They were trapped in a foreign country and forced to wait on the seemingly endless quota. They were not allowed to work and were confined to ghettos or escaped and went into hiding. Friends separated and families were torn apart; the conditions they faced continued to tax them mentally and physically. As Germany devoured the continent, asylum outside of her borders was no longer enough to ensure survival.

Those denouncing Franklin Delano Roosevelt's lack of action during the debacle neglected to recognize a few realities. Roosevelt had spoken at great length about issuing visas to the refugees so that they could remain temporarily in the Virgin Islands. Hoping the transitory solution might appease all parties, the president was upset when Samuel Rosenman and Henry Morgenthau advised him that it was illegal. The passengers, supporters, and many others pleaded with Roosevelt to permit the three ships anchored off of Cuba to land in the United States, but he had no authority to violate the popular immigration laws. Furthermore historians such as Ronald Sanders have pointed out that "the Atlantic Ocean was at the moment teeming with boatloads of refugees."<sup>126</sup> One

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<sup>126</sup> Ronald Sanders. *Shores of Refuge: A Hundred Years of Jewish Emigration*. (New York: Holt, 1988), 162.

exception to the law that had been enforced so sternly was sure to cause others to expect the same treatment. Allowing the *St. Louis* to deliver the desperate souls to south Florida would certainly set a dangerous precedent. As the leader of the free world, FDR could not extend a welcome to select groups without assaulting the notion of equality that was a fundamental right protected by the documents composed by the Founding Fathers.

Those seeking to deprecate Roosevelt refuse to consider the fact that if we blame the president, we must also blame each of the citizens that remained idle and allowed the travesty to occur. Those searching to chronicle the Holocaust and the troubling 1930s have allowed a horrifying trend to take root. Wanting to establish that everyone, including Americans, were responsible for the atrocities, unfair views have been attributed to the most powerful man on Earth at that time. “The story needed a villain. Who better than Roosevelt himself?”<sup>127</sup> asked Robert Rosen. Additionally, the president is continually denounced while many forget to remember that none of the refugees were forced to return to Germany. It was FDR’s persistence, with Henry Morgenthau’s contacts and assistance, that granted the Joint Distribution Committee leeway in negotiating with European countries and saved the Jews from disembarking in Germany. As to Roosevelt’s silence after receiving pleas for asylum, there was little he could say. Every passenger that was waiting for their chance to immigrate through the quota already understood the laws set in place. Though they were not in favor of the draconian regulations, neither was the president and much of the State Department.

Throughout the course of the war, and after Germany and Japan surrendered to the Allied forces, those that received the chance to return to the Land of the Free did so

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<sup>127</sup> Rosen, 432.

overwhelmingly. Many held onto mixed emotions until they passed away. With much of Europe transformed and destroyed during battle, there was little left tying them to the homeland that they were once so fond of. For some returning to the United States was a necessary evil. “We were just a little over 900 traveling on the *St. Louis*. More than yearning to breathe free, we were yearning just to breathe, to survive. To send us back to Hitler’s Europe was a criminal act. It was the greatest cruelty.”<sup>128</sup> Others, such as Bob Fedler, never once took their freedom for granted. They unreservedly transformed countless aspects of their lives to embrace their new home. Fedler’s daughter remembers him telling others that they “did not realize how good you have it. You are spoiled and don’t know how wonderful this freedom is.”<sup>129</sup> Many dedicated the remainders of their lives to aiding the causes of the Jewish organizations that valiantly fought on their behalf. Though many eventually integrated fully into the American Jewish community, one sentiment lingered on and distinguished them from their dedicated democratic brethren. While they could forgive an entire nation composed of millions of different beliefs, philosophies, and ideals, many could not stomach forgiving the leader of the free world, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Faye Ben-Saul will never forget when she learned that there were “two faces to America and most Europeans knew only the good face. It was a terrible thing for the president to send us back. It was a great crime, a tragedy. Think of the lives lost because of one man’s decisions.”<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Ogilvy, 118.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>130</sup> Saul, Faye B. Survivor of the Holocaust and Passenger on the *St. Louis*. Interview by Cory Ericson, 4 October 2002, Miami, FL. Tape Recording. University of Miami, Digital Collections, Miami, FL.

Zora Neale Hurston may have summed it up the best in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* when she wrote, “There are years that ask questions and years that answer.”<sup>131</sup> While countless questions were raised in 1939, a single answer changed the course of history. Denied refuge in the New World, and condemned to return to a continent in turmoil, the *St. Louis* answered Hitler’s queries and cleared the way for the eradication of more than 6,000,000 Jews. The vessel’s horrific return signaled to the European Jewish community that all hope of finding a new home, along with religious freedom was lost. The liner’s expulsion from La Florida’s translucent sapphire waters solved Roosevelt’s dilemma and proved Americans did not sympathize with those entrapped by the emerging genocide nor feel the need to bolster allies in the developing conflict. For all of the questions raised regarding the fate of Germany’s Jews, a single decision to deny desperate souls asylum answered them all. Cubans, Floridians, and Americans overwhelmingly responded to the pleas for mercy with hope-shattering silence. Xenophobia caused over 900 souls who fled Europe in joy to return in dread.

Denied admittance in the New World, the *St. Louis* returned to Europe with invaluable ammunition for the Fuhrer. If Jews were welcome nowhere, Hitler reasoned there was no place on earth for them. He wrathfully proclaimed, “It is a truly shaming display when we see today the entire democratic world filled with tears of pity at the plight of the poor, tortured Jewish people, while remaining hardhearted and obstinate in view of what is therefore its obvious duty: to help.”<sup>132</sup> Criticizing the egalitarian states

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<sup>131</sup> Zora Neale Hurston. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. (Greenwich, Conn: Fawcett Publications, 1965), 14.

<sup>132</sup> Jeremy Noakes. *Documents on Nazism, 1919-1945. A complete look at the historical speeches of Adolph Hitler and Joseph Goebbels*. (New York: Viking Press, 1975), 98.

that were so verbose but did so little, Hitler revealed to the world that no one stood ready to take the Jews. With this empirical evidence in hand, new revolutionary measures had to be implemented. Though Germany had successfully expelled countless Hebrews during the previous decade, the Wehrmacht's triumphs brought land the country desired and Jews it didn't. Those such as Dr. Goebbels, with a fundamental hatred for non-Aryans, were exhilarated to see years of planning finally culminating. Liesl Joseph Loeb explained how horrifying the vessel's return was: "The world just didn't care. We had no home. We had no money left. Even worse we had nothing left, not even hope."<sup>133</sup>

From 1933 to 1940, the United States welcomed more than 200,000 Jews seeking asylum. This number is larger than the total of Jewish refugees resettled in any other country.<sup>134</sup> Even with the acceptance of this enormous allotment, there were undoubtedly hundreds of thousands more who perished while waiting for their numbers to come up in the quota. While men like Walter Loebenberg, Herbert Karliner, Philip Freund, and others received a second chance at freedom, many of the *St. Louis*' passengers were only able to glance from the ship's saddened decks at the Promised Land. Banned from Havana, they sailed along the same shores that today see Cubans, Haitians, Dominicans, and evacuees from around the world. Florida has played an influential role in the welcoming of millions of citizens of countless religions, races, and countries into the American melting-pot. However, in 1939, there was no Wet-Foot Dry-Foot policy, and the Mariel boat lifts were still decades away. The Jews that drifted off the Land of

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<sup>133</sup> Loeb, Lisa J. Survivor of the Holocaust and Passenger on the *St. Louis*. Interview by Scott Miller, 19 September 2002, Miami, FL. Tape Recording. United States Holocaust Museum, Digital Collections, Washington D.C.

<sup>134</sup> National Refugee Service. *1940 Annual Report of the National Refugee Service Inc.*, available from <http://findingaids.cjh.org/?pID=365456>; Internet; accessed 12 July, 2010.

Sunshine's coast were victims of a time and place when xenophobia and radical intolerance dictated the course of American immigration policy. Turned away from the warm tropical waters, the torrid blazing sun, and the lush coconut palms that scattered the beach, the *St. Louis* returned one last time to Europe before being remodeled to accommodate Hitler's extensive military campaigns. Though she returned to Germany void of Jews, she delivered to the Fuhrer his first substantial victory of the war. The Hamburg-American vessel returned from Florida with a "green light for the final solution."<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Jacobson, Rudolph. Survivor of the Holocaust and Passenger on the *St. Louis*. Interview by Maryann Dickman, 17 January 2001, Miami, FL. Tape Recording. University of Miami, Digital Collections, Miami, FL.

## **TORAH! TORAH! TORAH!**

### **PEARL HARBOR & THE EMERGENCE OF**

### **FLORIDA'S MODERN JEWISH COMMUNITY**

Dismal veils of smoke rose and blockaded the phenomenally azure sky that was mottled with white clouds, as Japanese munitions cascaded down from plains that proudly displayed the vibrantly red rising sun. Awakened to ear-shattering explosions on December 7, 1941, the men and women stationed at Pearl Harbor emerged from barracks, houses, and the mess hall to an America that was in the midst of being altered forever. Even the most spectacular Eden can be distorted into a wasteland in the blink of an eye. In general, the evolution of history unfolds gradually. Traditions and attitudes flow from day to day, rarely being challenged. However, unique occurrences also possess the ability to alter the course of history. These shifts signify a change from one way of thinking to another. It is a revolution, a transformation, and a metamorphosis. These conversions do not just occur, but rather are driven by agents of change. As battleships were relinquished to the depths of the Pacific Ocean, American lives were returned to their creator, and a nation learned just how vulnerable it was, the world gasped in terror as the conflict reached new shores. The feelings of uncertainty, doubt, and defenselessness were best summed up by Linda Hogan in her novel, *Power*. “The winds leave you changed without knowing how, just knowing something unsayable has changed and it has changed forever

and you cannot go back and you can never be the same person you were only a day before.”<sup>136</sup>

A state that marketed the succulent orange and survived off others’ desires to feel the sun’s golden rays was excited to welcome the beginning of tourist season. As the Great Depression slowly receded and World War II became unavoidable, Florida continued a precarious economic recovery. Tourists returned in record numbers, and vacation towns busily constructed new hotels and lodges for their comfort. Wealthy Northerners traveled by plane, steamship, and trains to resorts along both of the state’s littorals. Shiny Ford Model A roadsters rumbled around the fiercely cold streets of Tallahassee, while sun worshippers roasted on the resplendent sands of South Beach. As radio broadcasters and newspaper hawkers touting special editions delivered the first accounts of the attack to citizens in the Land of Sunshine, they were met with mixed reactions. Few understood this was the trigger they had been waiting for, and more importantly, that the growing conflict now included America. To a preponderance of the men and women in the Sunshine State, news of the assault was met with questions. Numerous Jews and Gentiles had never heard of Pearl Harbor. What was it, where was it, and why did they care if the Japanese bombed it? However, what was unknown to everyone was just how much influence the event would have in shaping much of Florida’s future.

A small but proud community prior to World War II, Florida’s Jewish population had existed since the earliest settlement in St. Augustine. While they had been successful at electing a United States senator, a governor, and numerous other representatives from

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<sup>136</sup> Linda Hogan, *Power* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 67.

their ranks to public office, they were still very disconnected from the rest of the state's citizens. Their diminutive numbers prevented a preponderance from obeying many commandments as kosher food was almost impossible to procure, synagogues existed in only a handful of cities, and a determined Ku Klux Klan targeted individuals who did not adhere to their ideals of what an American should be. Relatively little existed to entice Jews who found tight-knit communities, first-class religious schools, and acceptance in northern metropolises to look to the Sunshine State as a place to develop roots. However, Pearl Harbor brought young men to Florida in order to train and prepare for war. While most only remained in the state for a brief period, they fell in love and vowed to return after achieving victory. When the nation erupted with unanimous celebration, those young servicemen returned with their spouses, children, and extended family. A day of infamy that marred the United States and sent Americans into harm's way is also responsible for generating the lasting affinity between Jews and the Land of Sunshine.

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The lingering pains of the Depression that were blatantly visible in other states were in many cases masked or banished across Florida by increased defense spending, resurgent tourism, and rapid homebuilding. While progress was not uniform for urban and rural areas, similar trends took root from the Panhandle to the Keys as the sunshine battled to emerge from the dark shadows of the 1930s. State-of-the-art new air cadet training facilities in Pensacola and Jacksonville were accompanied by the Banana River Naval Air Station, MacDill Field, the Valparaiso Bombing and Gunnery Base, Hendricks Field, and Riddle Aeronautical Institute through grants from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the Naval Expansion Act of 1939, and other New Deal programs.

Many of the extensive housing developments abandoned during the bust of 1926 began to take on new investors seeking to cash in by selling a piece of paradise. Alluring radio ads, chromatic pamphlets, and cunning salesmen known as “binder boys” found new legs and once again assaulted Northerner’s wallets. Though the recovering economy allowed more and more individuals to vacation in the tropical climate, those who were not foreigners to the Land of Sunshine returned to find an altered Eden. Hotels converted into schools and airports refashioned into training fields stood as proof that even America’s playgrounds couldn’t fully escape the gloomy clouds brought on by the recession.

Even though they had lost the battle to gain asylum for the doomed souls aboard the S.S. *St. Louis*, the fight played a crucial role in unifying the state’s Jewish population. Prior to the dramatic event, synagogues tended to remain in close contact only with other assemblages in their region. Rallies such as the one held at Bayfront Park in Miami drew in more than 1500 Hebrews from all across Florida. New bonds of friendship were developed as rural, agrarian Jews rallied around a common cause with their urban, mercantile brethren. So fundamentally altered was the communal dynamic that Rabbi Jacob H. Kaplan of Temple Israel told his congregation it was a special test and proclaimed, “Blessed Be the Tie that Binds.”<sup>137</sup> The mounting war in Europe created a new sense of urgency in the Sunshine State’s Jewish community. Zionist or Reform, native-born or immigrant no longer mattered to a mobilizing assembly. They swiftly came to cherish and value new principles. They began to realize, as Deborah Dash Moore

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<sup>137</sup> Selma Schloss “Rabbi Kaplan’s Words Echo,” in *The Florida Flambeau*, June 28, 1941, sec. 1A, p.1.

explains, that “they were Jews in all sorts of complicated ways that had relatively little to do with faith and observance and a lot to do with dignity, fellowship, and humanity.”<sup>138</sup>

More than a year after the 907 Jews aboard the “Ship of the Damned” were delivered back to Europe, Hebrew congregations continued to aid displaced men and women, promote immigration and resettlement in Palestine, and fight to reopen the sealed gates to the Land of Liberty. In what was considered the greatest challenge in the history of American Jewry, local drives pushed for donations from businesses, politicians, and families. Abraham Sierkese, a Russian immigrant who settled in St. Petersburg, chaired fundraisers up and down the state’s west coast. Arriving to the Pinellas peninsula in 1915, he always reminded donors that when he moved to the area, “9<sup>th</sup> street was still woodland, the street itself often was ankle deep in mud, and St. Petersburg was nothing more than a small fishing village.”<sup>139</sup> While many were reluctant to donate due to fears of a relapse in the economy, he pleaded with them to imagine the horrific conditions their European relatives were enduring. Appealing to the Times, Sierkese pleaded for “\$8,000 a quarter at minimum. Men are injured, women sickly, and children dying. Even if we can’t send our troops we must send them supplies and our prayers.”<sup>140</sup>

While some individuals, synagogues, and social organizations focused their energies on aiding their extended family across the Atlantic, an overwhelming majority concentrated on tackling the obstacles still imposed on a recovering nation. Hoping that American intervention in the developing conflict was drawing nearer, many resolved to

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<sup>138</sup> Deborah Dash Moore, *GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 11.

<sup>139</sup> Hernan, Koren, *Histories of the Jewish People of Pinellas County, Florida, 1883-2005, Hebrew Dates 5643-5766*. (Clearwater, FL: Temple B’nai Israel, 2007), 117.

<sup>140</sup> Milton Lew “Jews to Launch Fund Drive: Seek Money for Jewish Refugees,” in *St. Petersburg Times*, February 22, 1939, sec. 1A, p.14.

wait for an official declaration. Florida's Jewish community had made significant strides toward acceptance and equality during the New Deal era. Boisterous protests and excessive calls for action could only lead to infuriating those already resenting their growing presence in the state, as well as energizing pacifist factions that represented a preponderance of the electorate. Gentiles no doubt preferred Southern Jews, those whose social manners and attitudes harmonized with their own, those who spoke tenderly and showed discord subtly. Stella Suberman recounts that they also preferred Hebrews who "held the same outlook toward blacks – whom they called *shvartzerem* – much like my own."<sup>141</sup> Though countless traditions and opinions tied them together, the verbose Jewish transplants from northern metropolises, unlike those from the South, were hard pressed to find Southern acceptance of their initiatives and businesses.

Many of the pacifistic masses became more outspoken as entry into the ensuing conflict drew closer. While many of the Jewish organizations across the state called for American intervention, they were careful and attempted not to draw too much attention to themselves. In November 1939 the *Palm Beach Post* brought horrific news to Hebrews in the Sunshine State. The Ku Klux Klan had elected A. Colescott of Atlanta as its new Imperial Wizard, and he resolved to silence the Southern Jewish voice. In a letter sent to the periodical, Colescott announced:

The Klan always will be devoted to the preservation of patriotism. We oppose American Jews exerting any influence on Congress concerning international affairs, as they are biased because they have interests abroad. We don't want to be propagandized into the European war. The Jewish problem was caused by the Jews, and it is up to them to settle it. When our ancestors first came to this country they dropped all attachments to the old countries and entered into the new

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<sup>141</sup> Stella Suberman, *When It Was Our War: A Soldier's Wife on the Home Front*. (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2003), 68.

spirit of Americanism. Jews came here too, but they failed then, and have failed now, to assimilate the true American ideals.<sup>142</sup>

Rallying the Klan's base with a renewed vision of bigotry, burning crosses appeared in Miami, Jacksonville, and Tampa following the letters written by Colescott.

Even with the Klan's calls to remain neutral, Florida's religious leaders united to speak out collectively against Adolf Hitler. Outrage was the almost unanimous opinion of Nazi cruelty among the state's clergy. Rallies across the Land of Sunshine welcomed keynote speakers as well as reverends, priests, and rabbis. "Persecution only comes when rulers disregard the fact that all men are created equal and endowed with certain inalienable rights by their creator,"<sup>143</sup> declared Reverend J.J. O'Riordian to his church in Tallahassee. Reverend John P. Jockinsen pronounced that, "righteousness, truth, and justice should control the affairs of men, not hatred, prejudice, or lies,"<sup>144</sup> to his Naples congregation. To a rally of more than 2,000 in Bayfront Park, Rabbi Pizer W. Jacobs announced, "The recent outbreak of savagery against a defenseless people has aroused the strong protest of the civilized world. I am grateful for the humanitarianism from America's leaders, in keeping with the high-minded vision of the founders of this glorious country."<sup>145</sup> The mere mention of the name Adolf Hitler evoked boos from crowds in sanctuaries as well as parks. While many still did not believe America was ready for war, almost none agreed with the Fuhrer's actions.

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<sup>142</sup> Gerald Evans "Klan Elects New Leader Who is Ready for Change," in *Palm Beach Post*, January 19, 1939, sec. 1B, p.5.

<sup>143</sup> Fred Bass "Rage Over Fuhrer's Actions," in *The Evening Independent*, November 21, 1939, sec. 1C, p.2.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Rhonda Andrews "Local Rabbi Raises Awareness at Convention," in *St. Petersburg Times*, September 17, 1940, sec. 1A, p7.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's unprecedented bid for a third presidential term in 1940 elated Democrats and enraged Republicans. After all, who did he think he was to ignore the accepted limit of eight years that had existed since George Washington relinquished leadership? Distraught over bloody German victories in Europe, Florida's Jews could not even contemplate backing anyone other than the New York New Dealer who sympathized with the community's inability to take action. They hoped that a nation dedicated to a world void of inequality might also support the dream of Jews for a country of their own. The devotion of the United States to the four freedoms – freedom of speech and worship, freedom from want and fear – promised them a future of dignity, as individuals and as a people, at home and abroad. The grandiose notions of democratic socialism enticed Florida's Hebrews to once again shower Roosevelt with support because of its guarantees of a satisfactory standard of living. More than any other factor, they prayed their protector might use the full force of his office to stop Adolf Hitler before it was too late.

Male students at universities across the state received a staggering alert on September 14, 1940, when Congress passed the first peacetime conscription in United States history. The Selective Service Act required that men between the ages of 21 and 35 register with local draft boards. To ensure fairness men were selected through a lottery system. To appease the pacifistic masses, provisions were included that demanded drafted soldiers were to remain in the Western Hemisphere or in American territories located in other parts of the world, and stipulated that no more than 900,000 men were to be in training at any one time.<sup>146</sup> Jews and Gentiles held the same lot: very few were

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<sup>146</sup> United States Government. *Selective Service Act of 1940*, September 28, 1940, available from <http://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/147.html>; Internet; accessed 17 October 2010.

exempt from the new conscript. Bernice Katz remembers “how exciting it was to see our men called to service with everyone else. Though they were considered grown, we still considered them our boys.”<sup>147</sup> Men such as Harvey Morris, a fish merchant on Miami Beach, and Wilfred Wolfson, a pharmacist in Lakeland, were among the first selected for training. Outfitted with a new wardrobe, fashioned with a buzz-cut, and shipped out to one of the neoteric training facilities, these men ventured out as proud Americans and ambassadors of Florida’s Hebrew congregations.

The increasing number of young Hebrew recruits across the state confronted many of the old stereotypes held by men from rural areas with small or non-existent Jewish populations. Even at large universities with Hebrew fraternities such as Phi Beta Delta, Jewish boys were seldom respected as campus clowns, only occasionally as student-body politicians, never as athletes, but always as scholars. Joining Catholics and Protestants, they composed the “three fighting faiths of democracy.” While a prodigious “H” for Hebrew was engraved on their dog tags, it had a far different effect than the armbands with swastikas and the tattoos forced upon their European kin. At places like Starke, Punta Gorda, and Sebring, Gentile recruits soon learned that even though they had been taught to distrust Jews, members of all three religions believed in God and in the brotherhood of all men. Although bigotry was far from banished or eradicated, many Jewish leaders believed the conscript improved relations. “I was relieved to hear from friends already at the camp that they had encountered relatively little distrust. In fact they

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<sup>147</sup> Bernice Katz, interview by author, personal, St. Petersburg, FL, October 17, 2004

got a chance to clarify some misconceptions around a campfire one night,”<sup>148</sup> wrote Robert Levine.

The prospect of American entry into the war weighed heavily on the Jewish community. While the draft had already asked many Hebrews to train with Uncle Sam, alignment with and full support of the Allies could only mean the 900,000 limit would be increased to a number that guaranteed success. Though the conflict was a constant topic on the campus of the University of Florida between 1940 and 1941, most of the students went about their usual routines in the same nearly carefree manner as always. Debating the pros and cons of entering the fight, Jewish and Gentile students kept updated about current events but didn't relinquish their rights as students to party and cheer on the mighty Gators. “We wondered if our college careers would be interrupted by the far-away conflict being waged in Europe, but it was still only in the back of our minds. The football season was in full swing and a big name band was playing for Fall Frolics, as always,”<sup>149</sup> wrote Jay Dobkin. As the world swirled in turmoil and citizens from New York to Seattle protested intervention, many Jewish students throughout the state's universities continued their studies and revelry.

Less than two weeks after Congress and President Roosevelt endorsed the draft, Florida's Jews welcomed the High Holidays. Women with lovely flowing dresses and exquisite hats and men with dapper suits and shiny wing-tipped shoes filled the seats of every congregation. Smaller communities that normally met in members' houses for weekly Shabbat services rented churches and social halls and filled the pews and chairs. Protestant sanctuaries held Torahs instead of King James Bibles, and Catholic churches

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<sup>148</sup> Robert Levine, interview by author, personal, Gainesville, March 1, 2008

<sup>149</sup> Jay Dobkin, *Early Jews at the University of Florida*, personal interview by Gary Mormino, 2.

served up sweet Manoshevitz wine instead of communion wafers. Unprecedented numbers attended not merely to ask God to grant them another year and to inscribe them in the Book of Life; they prayed that England's defenses might hold, the Soviets could keep the Fuhrer's forces busy, and above all else that they might see American involvement before it was too late. Speaking to a sizeable mass at Temple Israel in Tallahassee on Rosh Hashanah Rabbi David Max Eichhorn began his sermon by declaring:

There has never been an hour in Jewish history more fateful and solemn than this. There has never been a Rosh Hashanah when the advent of the New Year found a more affrightened or a more unified Israel. There has never been a time when the hearts of a whole people were more hungry for a message of courage, of hope, of assurance that the dangers which beset us on every side will be overcome.<sup>150</sup>

Afraid of the repercussions for being overly verbose about Germany's military success or lack of popular interest in entering the war, congregations and statewide organizations employed other methods of protest. Florida's Jewish War Veterans unanimously passed a boycott of German goods "until the present ruthless Nazi government is ended." Members also condemned the Nazi regime for "causing world unrest and threatening it with widespread war."<sup>151</sup> The ex-servicemen urged school authorities to examine textbooks for subsidized and foreign-inspired propaganda. Members also pledged their support to President Roosevelt for his continued efforts at the preservation of peace that embodied the honor and dignity of the American nation. While they still hoped and prayed for action, they were careful not to develop enemies that might cause them grief later. Men who were proud to represent the red, white, and blue

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<sup>150</sup> David Max Eichhorn, Greg Palmer, and Mark S. Zaid, *The GI's Rabbi: World War II Letters of David Max Eichhorn* (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 33.

<sup>151</sup> Duncan Slade, "Jewish Veterans Rap Nazi Rule," in *St. Petersburg Times*, August 31, 1939, sec. 1D, p23.

decades earlier, like Thomas McManus, Rabbi Saul White, and Irving Price squeezed into their old uniforms and cheered on a new generation of Jewish GIs from the Sunshine State. Brave souls who served on the front lines and on the high seas now tackled politics and public opinion while their sons and nephews trained to defend the United States.

Military camps and airfields were not the only places where Jews found success in the fight for acceptance. On the basketball court and in the boxing ring, Hebrew teams and pugilists were amassing impressive fan bases and making a splash in local periodicals. Though role models from the North had existed for many years, for the first time in Florida history Jewish boys and girls at recess from Hebrew school looked to Joey Spiegel, the welterweight from Miami, or Hyman Roth, the all-star point guard from Tampa. Papers began to take notice of the impressive athletes and reported their victories along with everyone else's. "The Y.M.H.A quintet will most certainly dismantle the Coral Gables All-Stars Thursday night. With only a single loss to the Miami U. the quintet is on fire,"<sup>152</sup> proclaimed the *Miami Herald*. Raising funds to support families of enlisted men, the Beth David synagogue held a benefit. Selling out the Miami Beach Arena for the 10-round main event between Frankie Hughes of Philadelphia and Joey Spiegel, they collected close to \$25,000.<sup>153</sup> The Jewish southpaw quickly demolished his opponent in less than three rounds. Wearing navy blue trunks with a white satin Star of David on the right leg, he quickly proved the Sunshine State was home to some hard-hitting Hebrews.

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<sup>152</sup> Lyman Bradford, "Hebrews Play All-Star Five," in *The Miami News*, March 16, 1941, sec. 2A, p28.

<sup>153</sup> Jean Setlin, "Beth David Attraction Draws Huge Crowds," in *Miami Herald*, July 20, 1941, sec. 3 B, p17.

After the Fuhrer's invasion of Poland in 1939, war clouds gathered quickly, and the effects became apparent in the United States long before December 1941. Sisterhoods in Orlando and around Florida formed Red Cross Committees and sent leaders such as Ellen Boyell, Janice Freehling, and Cynthia Applebaum to nationwide preparation seminars. As they returned to their congregations, Jewish women gathered to learn what else they could do to support their communities and prepare for the dark days that awaited them. Already sewing and knitting for hospitals, the ladies were taught how to properly roll bandages. Members were urged to enroll in nutrition and gardening courses so neighborhoods could be self-sufficient in case of an emergency. Wendy Spaet, who later worked for the Civilian Defense Program, also mailed close to 100 letters to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt from fellow congregants. Spaet thanked Roosevelt for her "constant devotion to America's Jewry" and reiterated "what a terrific role model you are to women of all ages across our blessed country."<sup>154</sup>

As bloody months in 1939 and uncertain days in 1940 unfolded, most Americans believed entrance into the war was certain. The question that no one could answer was when? What did Germany have to do in order to enrage a nation that still believed it was isolated from the growing battle by the two titanic oceans which flanked it? As France fell with unfathomable speed to the Fuhrer's forces, Jews in the Sunshine State resolved to bolster Britain in any way possible. While Roosevelt fought to push through a widely distrusted Lend-Lease Act, Hebrews in Tallahassee, Sarasota, and Palm Beach mustered synagogues and Jewish guilds. Canned food, water, clothes, and other vital supplies were gathered at B'nai B'riths and transported to the Allies as "Bundles for Britain." Items already being rationed in Europe, and others that were about to be limited across the

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<sup>154</sup> Wendy Spaet, interview by author, personal, Orlando, FL, November 12, 2010

United States, were donated at unprecedented rates. Ruth Elsasser recalled “passing out pamphlets with women posing with brooms positioned like rifles. Jewish groups called upon mothers and daughters to also sew blankets to keep our brethren warm.”<sup>155</sup> As Florida’s Jewish men were being chosen for training, the women were charged with stalling the Wehrmacht.

Florida’s female Jewish residents didn’t sit around idle prior to the war. While they assisted in creating care packages for the English and serving cookies to conscripts, they also instituted new methods to raise morale and spread the unified spirit sweeping the nation. St. Petersburg’s Judaic Council held their first fashion show on February 18, 1941, at the Woman’s Clubhouse on Shell Isle, and featured all-American styles in American colors. “Red, white, and blue were heavy favorites in everything from swimsuits to dinner dresses. Sailor caps, military braids, and brass buttons were favored accents,”<sup>156</sup> reported the *Evening Independent*. Various pieces were collected from Jewish merchants across the region, including Maas Brothers and Rutland Brothers, and the merchandise was donated to less fortunate girls in the area. Many of the formal dresses were seen in the coming years at countless USO dances at the city’s Million Dollar Pier.

Sisterhoods and other women’s organizations throughout the state also resolved to take care of their drafted sons, brothers, and husbands. Though Jews had played an active role in every American conflict since the Revolutionary War, especially in Florida, the magnitude of families that were going to be affected was unprecedented. The ladies of

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<sup>155</sup> Ruth Elsasser, *My Early Childhood in Cocoa Beach*, personal interview by Gary Mormino, 1.

<sup>156</sup> Richard Miller, “Judaic Council Fashion Show Emphasizes All-American Styles in American Colors,” in *The St. Petersburg Times*, February 18, 1941, sec. 2A, p7.

Temple Beth - El in Pensacola took turns serving punch and freshly baked cookies on the sidewalk to recruits at the local military installation. Other congregations sponsored bingo nights, raffles, luncheons, card parties, and dances to raise funds for families whose bread-winners were picked during the early rounds of the lottery. Erma Rosenblatt and other younger girls no longer spent enchanting autumn afternoons at the beach or shopping for striking dresses in ritzy stores with friends. Instead, they joined their mothers and aunts in writing holiday cards for enlisted men, delivering thank-you baskets to volunteers at the draft boards, and babysitting so their guardians were free to spend more time fundraising. "I traded in my towel for wool to sew blankets. Instead of sand between my toes, my Sundays were spent with a needle between my fingers,"<sup>157</sup> recounts Rosenblatt.

While the state's Jewish community actively gathered supplies and spoke out for American aid to Great Britain, they also protested the English's new proposals for the Holy Land. Upset with Britain's repudiation of the Balfour Declaration, their violation of the mandates handed down from the League of Nations, and the issuance of the "White Papers" from Neville Chamberlain, Florida's Jews took to the streets. The White Papers sought to reduce the number of Jews in Palestine and grant those remaining a minority status, as well as restrict Jewish emigration to the area, including refugees from countries captured by Axis troops. Zionist organizations in Miami, Tampa, Jacksonville, and Pensacola held massive demonstrations. Hadassah, Misrachi, B'nai B'rith, the Rabbinical Association of America, and other larger guilds sent representatives from every region of the country to symbolize their support for the protests. Congregations pleaded with

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<sup>157</sup> Erma Rosenblatt, *Growing Up Jewish in Miami*, personal interview by Gary Mormino, 4.

Florida's citizens to join up and "protest English injustice against world Jewry."<sup>158</sup>

Traveling as a distinguished guest speaker to rallies around the country, Rabbi Max Shapiro was elated to return home and headline campaigns in the Sunshine State.

Gathered around radios in Tampa, Jacksonville, and Key West, Jews in the Land of Sunshine enjoyed listening to Jack Benny and other famous personalities, as well as receiving updates on the war. By 1940, WSUN, one of the state's first radio stations, was broadcasting "The Clerical Trio," a program that examined developing world events and sought to improve interfaith relations. Moderated by Dr. Franklin Williams, the popular trio included Father Florence Sullivan, Rabbi Colman A. Zwitman, and Reverend Roger Squire. Zwitman, the religious leader of Temple Israel of Greater Miami, dedicated much of his time to promoting the transmission that was rapidly spreading to other cities throughout the country. Donning a vibrantly flamboyant yarmulke that was commissioned for him as a gift by Father Sullivan, he outwardly spoke for American intervention in the European genocide. The skullcap was handcrafted and contained his Hebrew name as well as the WSUN logo. Northern transplants in his congregation who had abandoned the frigid metropolises of New York, New Jersey, and Chicago claimed he had the emblem added after it was completed, for he jested that it taunted the synagogue's snowbirds. When asked what it stood for he proclaimed, "Why Stay Up North!"<sup>159</sup>

Across the entire country, Americans had fallen in love with flight. It was already becoming evident from newspaper articles and radio transmissions that the European

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<sup>158</sup> Franklin Webster, "Jewry will Protest English Stand," in *Tampa Morning Tribune*, May 21, 1939, sec. 1B, p2.

<sup>159</sup> Tebeau, Charlton W. *Synagogue in the Central City: Temple Israel of Greater Miami, 1922-1972*. (Coral Gables, Fla: University of Miami Press, 1972), 93.

conflict was not only a technological revolution for weapons. New, exotic planes were pictured in periodicals, while gigantic bombers were depicted to listeners during news broadcasts. Jews in the Land of Sunshine fell in love with the expanding frontier and resolved to bring as many air ports, landing strips, and air fields to the state as possible. Remembered as the second private plane owner in Florida, Jerome Waterman was always proud to show off his pilot's license, which was signed by none other than Orville Wright. As President of Gulf Airways, he negotiated many of the Pan American and National Airlines contracts that increased those companies' presence in the state. As a member of the Tampa Citizens Committee, he was successful in securing both MacDill and Drew Fields for use by the Air Corps, bringing much-needed financial aid to the region. At the University of Florida, Peter Rippa published his Master's thesis in 1940, before being accepted as a navy cadet. Applying Einstein's Theory of Relativity to the problem of returning aircraft preparing for landing, he developed a system that is still used today by both the military and public.<sup>160</sup>

As destruction devoured Europe, trade between the Americas gained new importance. Florida, especially Miami, had already established a name for itself as the "Gateway to the Americas" in terms of trade and tourism. Once exchanges with Asia and Europe were cut off, these economic ties took on greater responsibilities. By 1940, the United States supplied more goods to Latin America than any other country, providing 33.9 percent of the region's imports.<sup>161</sup> Jewish merchants quickly recognized the immeasurable wealth that could be made by tapping into these flourishing markets. Losing their homes during the Depression, families such as the Rubins of Daytona and

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<sup>160</sup> Koren, 125.

<sup>161</sup> Helen Muir, *Miami, U.S.A.* (Miami, FL: Pickering Press, 1990), 126.

the Friedmans of Apalachicola headed toward booming ports to start their lives anew. Hebrew retailers in larger cities enjoyed renewed success with extensive networks of local black clientele and even grander numbers of customers seeking to purchase goods throughout the Caribbean and South America. “In the years leading up to the war my father’s shoe store saw tremendous growth. We rejoiced that the recession was over as he hired more help with each contract, purchased us toys and gifts that in prior years we never could have even imagined receiving, and came home earlier as each month passed,”<sup>162</sup> remembered Abe Katz.

While young Hebrew men were being trained at installations across the state, one of Florida’s most prodigious Jewish officers was making waves in the developing battleground of the Pacific. The youngest of five boys and two girls, Ellis Zacharias was born in Jacksonville on New Year’s Day 1890. His father Aaron, a distinguished Confederate veteran packed up and moved to the Sunshine State to start life anew after the South fell to Union forces. He was a petite man, standing only five foot four. Dark chocolate curls and ebony eyes crowned his lean 105 pound body. As a young boy he always dreamed of being a Naval officer and trading in his yarmulke for a khaki cover. Ellis was appointed to the Naval Academy in 1908, and in 1912 he shipped out as the only Jewish graduate of Annapolis in more than a decade.<sup>163</sup> During his early years he served on a variety of vessels, including the USS *Arkansas* in October 1912, when it transported President William Howard Taft to inspect the Panama Canal. As he was always considered extremely scholarly, the Navy resolved to task the Lieutenant

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<sup>162</sup> Abe Katz, interview by author, personal, St. Petersburg, FL, October 17, 2004

<sup>163</sup> United States Government. *Sage Prophet or Loose Cannon*, July 3, 2008, available from [www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2008/summer/zacharias](http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2008/summer/zacharias); Internet; accessed 17 October 2010.

Commander with overseeing intelligence operations and training in Tokyo. There he learned to speak Japanese fluently and became acquainted with many of the government officials who controlled the country's fortune in future years.

Rising through the ranks and being awarded countless medals as the Land of the Rising Sun flexed its embryonic muscles, Zacharias took on countless responsibilities as the Pacific continued to transform. Specializing in cryptography, he headed the first comprehensive radio communication intercept unit, successfully monitoring, seizing, and translating Japanese naval transmissions. Reporting on the triumph directly to President Roosevelt, Zacharias stated that it "represented a long step forward in our positive intelligence against the emerging island nation."<sup>164</sup> While stationed in San Diego, California, he received alarming news on October 17, 1940. Zacharias learned from a confidential informant of a Japanese scheme that culminated in a suicide air raid on an American base. Admiral Kimmel, Commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet and stationed at his headquarters in Hawaii, received the following warning: "Japanese planning an air attack on our fleet on a weekend, most likely a Sunday morning. The attack will be for the purpose of disabling battleships. Probable method of attack is by aircraft from carriers north of the Hawaiian Islands."<sup>165</sup> For lack of patrolling crafts and planes, Admiral Kimmel and General Walter Short, Army Commander in Hawaii concluded it was unlikely they were in danger. Zacharias' numerous warnings fell upon deaf ears.

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<sup>164</sup> Time Magazine, *National Affairs: Navy's Oracle*. January 14, 1946, available from <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,886812,00.html>; Internet; accessed 17 October 2010.

<sup>165</sup> Ellis M. Zacharias, *Secret Missions: The Story of an Intelligence Officer*. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1946), 116.

Sunday mornings were for sleeping in while relaxing to nature's natural symphony, religious school to prepare for a Bar Mitzvah, or divine brunches with a myriad of choices except for bacon and sausage. The early hours of a Florida December are especially delightful, with clear skies and enchanting breezes. The harshness of the cruel summer months is replaced by magnificent mild winters that are always a welcomed change in the Land of Sunshine. While many parts of the state had already outlawed the enduring blue laws that forbade working and other activities on the Christian Sabbath, Jews still viewed Sundays as the "lonely day." Stores that were closed Friday evenings and Saturdays had very few customers on Sunday, while a majority of the population attended masses, enjoyed large meals with family, and escaped the pressures of the week by closing their eyes and listening to the radio. Though in most towns it was still illegal to purchase alcohol, especially before noon, more urban areas slowly allowed cinemas to open their doors. The South's stringent views on the Day of Rest placed many burdensome limitations on those who didn't accept Jesus as the Messiah as well as those who rejected faith altogether.

The first Sunday in December 1941 brought optimism and hope along with gentle squalls. Tourism was at pre-Depression highs for the first time in more than a decade. The ever-expanding military presence across the state continued to reverse the horrid unemployment rate as well as maintaining the steady flow of federal funds into Florida. Jews and Gentiles alike were thrilled to receive positive news from war-ravaged Europe. While the Wehrmacht had achieved triumphant *blitzkrieg* victories in Poland, Finland, and France, and was pushing hard for England, Soviet forces were successful in launching counterattacks. Theaters from Homestead to Pensacola enjoyed overflowing

rows and long lines. A recovering economy and America's continued infatuation with film padded the wallets of Hollywood tycoons. Escaping bright boulevards for dark rooms with large screens, Floridians enjoyed classic masterpieces such as *How Green Was My Valley*. "The venerable Tampa Theater featured Walter Brennan as an Okeefenokee backwoodsman in *Swamp Water*. At the Seminole Theater, a double feature advertised Charles Boyer in *Hold Back the Dawn* and Tommy Harmon in *Harmon of Michigan*, with the all-American halfback starring as himself,"<sup>166</sup> wrote Gary Mormino.

Emerging from theaters on December 7, 1941, in the early afternoon, Jack and Stella Suberman were surrounded by swelling crowds converging on newsboys touting papers. The young couple had seen films with boisterous hawkers before, but the setting was always one of the larger Northern megalopolises, never Florida. Falling in love among the palm trees at the University of Miami as freshmen, the couple moved north together to finish their degrees during the turbulent era. Jack always hitched a ride from the University of Florida so he could join Stella at the Florida State College for Women for Shabbat and a relaxing weekend with his gal. The mass was a spectacle for a Sunday in that state's capital unless you attended church. It was also highly unusual for the paper, the *Tallahassee Democrat*, to release special editions. They attempted to battle their way through the swarms to reach one of the boys. As impoverished college students, neither really desired to purchase a paper; they just wanted a quick glimpse at the headline to understand all of the commotion. Finally slithering their way to the front of

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<sup>166</sup> Gary Ross Mormino, *Hillsborough County Goes to War: The Home Front, 1940-1950*. (Tampa, Fla: Tampa Bay History Center, 2001), 20.

the mob they saw the words that forever altered their lives. “There it was, it’s big black letters shouting JAPS ATTACK PEARL HARBOR,”<sup>167</sup> remembered Stella.

In a growing age of information, Florida’s Jews learned of the ghastly attack from more than just bold-face headlines. Quiet Sunday afternoons were perfect for kicking back and reading the newspapers; however, the ever-expanding group of Americans huddling around radios also received news of the tragedy. Certainly not even Orson Welles’ shocking *War of the Worlds* had come close to leaving as many listeners fighting to lift dropped jaws. Even prior to President Roosevelt delivering his address to the nation or declaring war, broadcasters tried to explain how gruesome the strike was. Jay Dobkin, a student in Gainesville, recounted standing around a small radio in the middle of a store that he walked to in order to purchase a magazine. “We all stood silently, absorbed and shaken by the words that came from that box. I believe that each of us standing there in stunned silence was thinking about some friend or relative who was now so obviously in harm’s way.”<sup>168</sup> Though they did not see photos of the burning destroyers, clouds of black smoke, or the multitude of injured and dead servicemen till the following days, the words emanating from radios around the Southernmost State guaranteed that finally the country had no choice but to respond with full force. Reports and broadcasts from December 7, 1941 forever echoed in the minds of those tuned into the transmissions.

Learning of the assault did not cause uniform reactions. While everyone was dismayed, there were still many questions to be answered. Where is Pearl Harbor? Who would attack us? What does this mean? Will we now enter the war? These were just a

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<sup>167</sup> Suberman, 72.

<sup>168</sup> Jay Dobkin, interview.

few of the things Americans were left pondering. A popular radio personality for WDAE, broadcasting from the 12<sup>th</sup> floor of the Tampa Terrace Hotel, Sol Fleischman was still embarrassed years later to admit, “It didn’t impress me as a big thing. I thought it was a practice.”<sup>169</sup> As the CBS station returned to the melodious songs of Kate Smith, Fleischman went downstairs to the Hotel’s café to pick up a sandwich. Having a few minutes, he decided to mingle with the many GIs on leave enjoying the infamous “Surefire Room.” The lounge had received the nickname for the delightfully enticing volume of women looking to help inebriated servicemen spend their paychecks. Decades later he narrated how he was awakened to the immenseness of the situation:

I went to the hotel café and saw General Clarence Tinker, the commander of MacDill Field. He was an ardent fisherman and always asked where to catch trout. General Tinker turned to me and lifted his swagger stick. He asked, “Anything new in the news?” Coleman ‘Sugar’ Hinton, his assistant, was sitting in the general’s staff car. “Well, general,” I said, “un-identified planes have attacked Pearl Harbor and Ford Island.” He almost choked on his coffee. “Son this means WAR!” I saw Hinton open the door and the car speed away. I rushed back to the booth. All hell had broken loose.<sup>170</sup>

Hours before Americans learned of the ghastly attack from radio broadcasters or special edition headlines, Arnold Swartz and Abe Stein witnessed the massacre firsthand. Swartz, a native of Coconut Creek, was seven months into medical school when he was called to active duty. “I wanted to finish my education and then serve four years in the medical corps, but they told me absolutely no chance,”<sup>171</sup> remembers Swartz. He trained as an anti-aircraft artillery officer and was transferred to Hawaii early in 1941 after marrying his wife Rose. Born and raised in Aventura, Stein enlisted at the nearest

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<sup>169</sup> Sol Fleishman, *Radio and the War*, personal interview by Gary Mormino, 2.

<sup>170</sup> Mormino, 20.

<sup>171</sup> Arnold Swart, interview by author, personal, Miami Beach, FL, December 7, 2010

recruitment office in West Palm Beach. When given the option he chose the island state because he was shown “pictures of hula girls and palm trees that looked marvelous,”<sup>172</sup> explained Stein. He arrived in Hawaii in January 1941 and was assigned to the Schofield Barracks Station Hospital. Eleven months later he was awakened from his bed at 7:55 AM as the Japanese began their assault. As a Second Lieutenant, Swartz had just inspected the sentries and was in line at the mess hall waiting for breakfast when he heard the first explosions. He quickly organized his men and manned the gun batteries to mount defensive fire. Both of these men survived; however, the nightmares from the bloody ordeal remains with them today. Stein went on to participate in the Allied invasion of Normandy, while Swartz later served at the battles of Midway and Guadalcanal.

News of the attack spread rapidly and reached places void of radios and newsboys. While well-oiled sun worshippers were frying on the sand and Saturday night revelers were still sleeping, word flashed through cabanas that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. “I was swimming in the pool and socializing with a group of friends from religious school at the Raleigh Hotel on Miami Beach. When we received word everyone ran home as quick as possible,”<sup>173</sup> recounted Ruth Elsasser. Also enjoying the resplendent weather on Miami’s picturesque beaches was Erma Rosenblatt, handing out towels and swim trunks to Jewish servicemen on leave at the YMHA. Rosenblatt and the young GIs were reprimanded for still being on the shore in the late afternoon. Being clueless as to what transpired earlier, she was shocked when her father arrived. More than 50 years later she still remembered him scornfully scolding her and the conscripts enjoying the

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<sup>172</sup> Abe Stein, interview by author, personal, Miami Beach, FL, December 7, 2010

<sup>173</sup> Ruth Elsasser, interview.

saltwater. “This is no time for fun. Pray for our boys! Today is a dreaded day for sure. One none of us will soon forget.”<sup>174</sup>

Nicknamed Hawaii Operation, or Operation Z, by the Japanese, the assault consisted of 353 fighters, bombers, and torpedo planes, in two waves, launched from six aircraft carriers. The empire’s aerial attack was successful in sinking four battleships (two of which were raised and returned to service during the war) while also damaging the four others present. They also sank or razed three cruisers, three destroyers, an anti-aircraft training ship, and one minelayer. One hundred eighty-eight U.S. aircraft were demolished; 2,402 men were slaughtered, and 1,282 were wounded.<sup>175</sup> President Roosevelt waited until Monday, December 8, to address the American people regarding the cowardly attack. Delivering his “Day of Infamy” speech at 12:30 p.m. to a joint session of Congress and an entire nation, Roosevelt kept his discourse to a brief six and a half minutes. While advisors such as Secretary of State Cordell Hull suggested FDR devote more time to a fuller exposition of Japanese-American relations and the lengthy but unsuccessful effort to find a peaceful solution, he opted to keep the speech short in the belief that it would have a more dramatic effect. Drawing to a close, the president’s words echoed through every Zenith, Silvertone, Delco, Emerson, and Crosley radio across the state:

As commander in chief of the Army and Navy, I have directed that all measures be taken for our defense. But always will our whole nation remember the character of the onslaught against us. No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory. I believe that I interpret the will of the Congress and of the people when I assert that we will not only defend ourselves to

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<sup>174</sup> Erma Rosenblatt, interview.

<sup>175</sup> United States Government. *Damage Report for December 7, 1941*, January 28, 1942, available from <http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq66-2.htm>; Internet; accessed 17 October 2010.

the uttermost, but will make it very certain that this form of treachery shall never again endanger us. Hostilities exist. There is no blinking at the fact that our people, our territory, and our interests are in grave danger. With confidence in our armed forces, with the unbounding determination of our people, we will gain the inevitable triumph -- so help us God. I ask that the Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, December 7th, 1941, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese empire.<sup>176</sup>

Roosevelt's speech had an immediate and long-lasting impact on American politics.

Thirty-three minutes after he finished speaking, Congress declared war on Japan, with only one Representative, Jeannette Rankin, voting against the declaration. The speech attracted the largest audience in US radio history, with over 81 percent of American homes tuning in to hear the President.<sup>177</sup>

Florida chapters of nationwide Jewish guilds banded together and anxiously awaited instructions from headquarters in New York City, Boston, and Chicago. The Jewish War Veterans of the United States were among the first to announce their participation in a widespread "Victory Program." The organization's commander for the Land of Sunshine, M.F. Tobias, revealed plans to members throughout the state. Newspapers reported that the national executive committee called for "an enlistment of 250,000 American Jews across all branches of the military, sale of \$25,000,000 in defense bonds, and the purchase of six pursuit planes for the government in memory of slain victims of Pearl Harbor."<sup>178</sup> Tobias, a recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor proclaimed that all members should restrict activities to one duty, that of serving the country for victory. In addition to selling bonds, the state's veterans were tasked with

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<sup>176</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, *The Words That Reshaped America: F.D.R.* (New York: Quill, 2000), 239.

<sup>177</sup> David Jansen, "President Roosevelt Speaks to Attack," in *New York Times*, December 9, 1941, sec. 2A, p4.

<sup>178</sup> William Felner, "Jewish Veterans Mobilize," in *St. Petersburg Times*, December 17, 1941, sec. 2C, p1.

collecting \$30,000 towards the Bell Air Cobra planes. Speaking at a rally, Tobias stated that “for the duration of the war, every member of the JWV must serve in the cause of American victory. Any member who does not has no place in our organization.”<sup>179</sup> After years of calling for intervention across the Atlantic, their wishes were granted. As the United States mobilized, Florida’s Hebrews now had to keep up with the country’s rapid response.

Following the lead of the state’s Jewish veterans, women’s committees and sisterhoods from every district pledged “absolute loyalty, boundless faith and unceasing work”<sup>180</sup> to President Roosevelt during the emergency. Florida’s female Jewry promised full co-operation and unflinching sacrifice during the nation’s hour of need. In Miami the ladies supported the USO canteen on Biscayne Boulevard and invited servicemen and women to their homes. The Sisterhood and women of Pensacola offered full use of the synagogue’s kitchen and to cook for military personnel. Congregation B’nai Israel in Pinellas County rotated members to man the USO on Christmas so Gentiles could relax and celebrate the holiday, while their friends and neighbors at Temple Beth-El provided cakes and cookies to ill recruits. In Daytona letters to family members of the Pearl Harbor massacre victims were composed to offer compassion and sympathy. Female societies in Orlando began to fundraise and find a Torah for the men stationed in the area. Everywhere across Florida, from Boca Raton to Panama City, and from Apalachicola down to Fort Lauderdale, the state’s Jewish women went to work supporting the war effort.

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<sup>179</sup> Max Hermer, “Tobias Calls for Support Among State’s Vets,” in *The Evening Independent*, December 15, 1941, sec 1D, p4.

<sup>180</sup> Todd Gifford, “State’s Jewish Women Resolve to Aid President,” In *Tallahassee Democrat*, December 20, 1941, sec. 1A, p23.

Congregations announced special memorial services to honor the American lives taken by the Empire of Japan on the island of Oahu. After the nation dialed into the Commander in Chief's "Day of Infamy" speech, many headed to their synagogue, church, or temple and joined their community in prayer. Pleas of "God Bless America" and "Keep our troops safe" echoed from assemblies, while parishioners lit candles, collected funds, and began planning rotations for U-boat patrols along both of the coasts. December 8, 1941 was transformed from another manic Monday into arguably the greatest day of coast-to-coast invocation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Abe Katz remembered, "It was the first time I ever saw my father and uncle stay home other than on a holiday. Still worrying about a relapse in the economy, they even got out of bed when they were sick."<sup>181</sup> Congregants knew America was going to war with confirmation from the President; however, much of the future still remained a mystery. How long will troops be away? Where will our boys be sent? Will we have to endure the blackouts and rations that have spread across Europe? These and other questions were just a sampling of what Jews and Gentiles meditated on. Religious leaders across the state used sermons to rally followers. Less than 24 hours after the airstrike Rabbi Mark Kohn gave a rousing homily, titled "Seeds of Victory" in Gainesville "to promote an America that will be brighter than ever."<sup>182</sup>

The emergence of American involvement in the war meant that many changes were going to be implemented. Even prior to rationing, married white women joining the work force, and bond rallies, nothing signified change and altered the nation like the

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<sup>181</sup> Abe Katz, interview.

<sup>182</sup> Carl Nordis, "Rabbi Mark Kohn Gets Standing Ovation," in *Gainesville Register*, December 8, 1941, sec. 2C, p2.

massive number of weddings being conducted. Men who were drafted, as well as those who rapidly enlisted, exchanged vows and wedding bands with their beloveds before they were transplanted to remote islands in the Pacific or treacherous bunkers in Europe. Luxurious celebrations and lavish receptions were out of the question during the hours of despair following December 7, 1941. Servicemen threw on their uniforms and brides flocked downtown department stores for simple dresses to wear to their informal ceremonies. Mildred Berkowitz told the story of “heading down to Maas brothers to find a plain dress and hat. They were flying off the shelves because all the women were there for the same reason.”<sup>183</sup> Priests, pastors, and justices of the peace joined rabbis across the state and nation to accommodate the huge numbers of couples seeking unification. Rabbi David Zielonka of Tampa admitted that he “performed more weddings in the weeks and months following Pearl Harbor than I did in the rest of my career.”<sup>184</sup> However, for most, there was no time for honeymoons. Florida’s Jewish servicemen quickly joined the troops as *chupahs* (wedding canopies) were replaced with clouds of war, and sounds of shattering crystal goblets were drowned out by dangerous explosives.

An ostentatious final fling swiftly followed the shock of the attacks on December 7, 1941. While countless Floridians raced to volunteer, others resolved to salvage the rest of the tourist season. Determined not to lose capital from what many had promoted as an exceptional year, tourism advertisers announced a “blitzkrieg of joy” to lift civilian morale. Tracy Jean Revels explained that “war appeared more a theme than a threat as festivals, boat races, and fish broils continued. Bathing beauties painted their nails in red,

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<sup>183</sup> Mildred Berkowitz, interview by author, personal, St. Petersburg, FL, October 17, 2004

<sup>184</sup> Hans Juergensen and Adrienne Sundheim. *75 Years Congregation Schaarai Zedek; Tampa, Florida, 1894-1969*. (Tampa, Fla: Congregation Schaarai Zedek, 1969), 204.

white, and blue, but headed to the beach instead of work.”<sup>185</sup> Clearly upset, and not dependent on revenue from tourism, *Time Magazine* condemned many of the frivolous activities as deplorable. Though many believed they were far enough from Pearl Harbor not to be affected, the realities of war imposed themselves as German U-Boats attacked ships off the state’s coast.

Many feared for the state’s economic future as the tourist season came to an abrupt end. All of the white sand, warm sunshine, and alluring palm trees in the world could not call and entice a resolute nation to furlough. To the countless Floridians who owned hotels, eateries, and resorts, memories of the lean Depression years were all too familiar. However, the Land of Sunshine had one thing working in its favor, an abundance of cheap land. While many began appearing prior to December 1941, the attack on Pearl Harbor brought close to 200 military installations to Florida. The iconic image of glorious beaches covered with tourists in chromatic swimsuits was replaced by “a huge new stream of visitors wearing khaki, olive drab, and navy blue,”<sup>186</sup> explained Gary Mormino. All at once the rich tourists in bathing attire and tuxedos had metamorphosed into servicemen swarming all over the beach. Jewish proprietors joined Gentile restaurateurs, hotel owners, and landlords on both littorals in welcoming the troops. Though Floridians and the American public were previously deadlocked on intervention in the war and isolationism, Japan’s assault established a unity as nothing else could have done.

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<sup>185</sup> Mark I. Greenberg and Samuel Proctor. *Florida’s Heritage of Diversity: Essays in Honor of Samuel Proctor*. (Tallahassee, Fla: Sentry Press, 1997), 139.

<sup>186</sup> Michael Gannon. *The New History of Florida*. (Gainesville, Fla: University Press of Florida, 1996), 323.

Florida's Jewish community did not have to leave the Sunshine State to be exposed to the harsh realities of the war that they were now part of; instead, the conflict knocked on their back door. In January 1942, the Fuhrer approved Operation Drumbeat, an initiative to gain control of the precious Gulf Stream with submarines by utilizing numerous intelligence gaffes that the American military had made. More than 20 ships were sunk off both of the state's coasts by the powerful German U-boats. Citizens of the Land of Sunshine, as well as vacationers, watched in horror as tankers burned and glutinous oil plastered the bleached sands of places like Miami Beach, Jacksonville Beach, and Cocoa Beach. Torpedoed merchant vessels could be seen burning from house porches, as well as the balconies of the hotels that rapidly filled with 90 day wonders. Shipping companies lost millions of dollars in cargo, while hundreds of lives were taken until an effective convoy system was put in place by the Allies. Jews and Gentiles all around the state signed up for patrol rotations. Men such as Harvey Keller spent "a couple nights a week walking up and down the coast looking for lights in the distance. We were all petrified that the ships were just the first step. It could only be a matter of time before they tried to land."<sup>187</sup>

Seeking to capitalize on the growing interest in the state for training facilities, affluent titleholders offered up their rooms to the increasing numbers of battalions assigned to the Southernmost State. Stella Suberman remembers, "When we recovered from the shock, it began to seem logical. We had an abundance of hotels, and hotels meant housing."<sup>188</sup> The notion to utilize waterfront hotels and resorts to house recruits was initially refuted by countless critics. Grand establishments such as Miami Beach's

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<sup>187</sup> Harvey Keller, interview by author, personal, Jacksonville, June 8, 2010.

<sup>188</sup> Suberman, 90.

Blackstone and the Don Ce-Sar of St. Petersburg while magnificent, were viewed as too ritzy for sweating military personnel. Distraught over the public's response to wealthy landowners granting use of their facilities to the government, Undersecretary of War Robert Patterson answered adeptly, "The best hotel room is none too good for the American soldier."<sup>189</sup> While some were quick to offer up their rooms and dining tables, generosity was far from unanimous. Those that still clung to hopes of a record-breaking tourist season slowly changed their minds as U-Boats continued to sink ships off the state's Atlantic and Gulf coasts, travel restrictions were implemented, and the mounting surge of patriotism seemed to grow exponentially. As early as February 1942, troops began being housed in rooms that once catered to wealthy Northern visitors. Whole towns were transformed into drill fields. There was not a moment in the day when one could not hear men marching through the streets shouting "sound off" repetitions.

Florida's Jews wasted little time after the attack in enlisting in numbers that were previously inconceivable. The war made Jews visible, not as objects of disdain and odium, but as subjects participating in American culture, politics, and survival. As days and weeks passed, the Nazis were gassing Jews in death camps at an increased rate. Close to 2,000,000 lives had already been taken. The Jews of Europe could not fight the Fuhrer, but as GIs in the U.S. military, Irwin Miller, Jay Dobkin, and Jack Suberman could. They joined the rapidly expanding ranks both as loyal Americans devoted to defending their country and as a people suffering persecution. Representative of the population as a whole, scarcely a Jewish family in the state existed without a son or brother, father or uncle in the service. Many had sisters or daughters in uniform as well. Hebrews from Pensacola, Sarasota, and West Palm Beach served their country, as did Gentiles from

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<sup>189</sup> Greg Mathews, "Patterson Distraught," in *The Miami Herald*, January 3, 1942, sec. 2D, p1.

every Florida city. The armed forces lifted Jews out of familiar neighborhoods in St. Petersburg, Miami, and Jacksonville, and transported them to sections of the United States they barely knew existed.

Women played a dynamic role on the home front as America mobilized for war. While they had been rolling bandages, creating survival packs for the English, and feeding conscripts prior to December 7, they took on new responsibilities after the assault. For the first time, married white females joined the workforce. Though many had been teachers prior to falling in love, it was still unacceptable for a wedded woman to be out of the home. They traded in dresses with floral prints for overalls as they tackled previously male-only jobs. Ruth Rubin Elsasser of Miami passed her aptitude test and became the city's first WAVE (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) officer early in 1942. Farther north in Tampa, Nellye Friedman became one of the first women to enlist in the WACs, the Women's Army Corps. Working as plane spotters, flying aircraft, transporting, and various other duties, Florida's Jewish females joined an elite class of women accepted to represent the red, white, and blue in uniform. With a number of doubters, they were constantly asked, "What's a nice Jewish girl like you from the South joining the Army for?" Friedman explained to the newspaper, "I am going for my country, and for my people. America needs us all right now, male or female, Christian or Jewish."<sup>190</sup> Showing up on streets all around the state, the headlines read, "Sailors on Shore Leave! Mothers – Lock Up Your Sons!"<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Mormino, 74.

<sup>191</sup> Ruth Elsasser, interview.

Arriving for OCS training, no one attracted more attention than Clark Gable. However, Florida's Jews *kvelled* over the arrival of Hank Greenberg for boot camp. Postal workers delivered bundles of mail to the baseball all-star, most inviting him to dinner at every Jewish home from Key West to Fort Lauderdale. Though he clearly received more invitations than the average Hebrew recruit, families and congregations resolved to make their visiting brethren feel comfortable and at home. Synagogues, B'nai B'riths, Sisterhoods, and other religious guilds asked their members to make a conscious effort on behalf of the Jewish servicemen, believing they might enjoy having Jewish food or speaking Yiddish. Mothers relished fattening up their visitors, fathers took the chance to discuss the war and beach patrol rotations, and young girls fancied the handsome trainees. Homes that emptied immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor rapidly repopulated. Noting the unique family dynamic, the *Daytona Evening News* asked why Jews were spending so much to feed complete strangers. Arthur Goldberg replied to the paper, "If we don't win this war, what good is my money, anyway?"<sup>192</sup>

While the impressive number of Jews enlisting from the Sunshine State continued to expand, it was the colossal amount of Hebrew recruits from across the country coming to Florida for training that had the greatest impact on the state. Florida cities operated as vibrant bastions of activity as millions of Americans encountered the state for the first time. The American Jewish Yearbook reported in 1940 that the Land of Sunshine was home to less than 14,000 Jews, collectively representing not even one percent of the

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<sup>192</sup> Tyler Clarence, "Jewish Homes Welcome in Recruits," in *Daytona Evening News*, March 14, 1942, sec. 1C, p23.

state's total population.<sup>193</sup> However, crystal clear waters, exotic coconut palms, and an infinite supply of tropical golden rays flirted with and seduced the trainees. Whether they piloted a B-17 and enjoyed the rich azure skies, or were rocked by the Gulf of Mexico or Atlantic Ocean's calming breakers in amphibious assault vehicles, almost all were grateful to be in paradise. To many of the recruits who came of age during the Depression, the notion of receiving the chance to visit such an Eden was something that previously belonged only in fairy tales. Resorts and hotels that were accustomed to only accommodating society's elite now welcomed Midwestern farm boys, Northern inner-city gangsters, and Jews from every corner of the United States. After Pearl Harbor, Florida's population was forever altered.

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Some lessons must be learned the hard way. In *The Yearling* by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Jody Baxter is awakened to the fact that things are not always as simple as they seem. "This, then, was hunger. This was what his mother had meant when she had said, 'We'll all go hongry.' He had laughed, for he had thought he had known hunger, and it was faintly pleasant. He knew now that it had been only appetite. This was another thing."<sup>194</sup> While Jews had called for American intervention in the war for years, many believed the highest priority was to maintain neutrality and preserve isolationism. After Pearl Harbor there was no doubt, the men and women of the United States had just as much to defend as those being persecuted across the Atlantic Ocean. Though no one could understand how much participating in the war was going to cost or the social,

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<sup>193</sup> American Jewish Committee. *1940 American Jewish Yearbook*, available from [http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC\\_DATA/Files/1940\\_1941\\_8\\_Statistics.pdf](http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/1940_1941_8_Statistics.pdf); Internet; accessed 4 October 2010.

<sup>194</sup> Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, *The Yearling*. (New York: Scribner's, 1939), 167.

political, and economic changes the nation was going to have to endure, one thing became evident. Jews, Protestants, and Catholics could no longer afford to focus on the things that made them unique; instead, they had to become a new people united under the banner of democracy and equality. As Uncle Sam rallied a growing mass of young men and women to protect Old Glory, every American drew forth a new found determination to once again restore honor and respect to the red, white, and blue. Admiral Halsey summed up the spirits of the entire country when he proclaimed, “Before we’re done with them, the Japanese language will only be spoken in Hell!”<sup>195</sup>

Servicemen and women from New York City, Chicago, and St. Louis pledged with their comrades from Charleston, Columbus, and Phoenix to return to the orange groves, beaches, and sunshine they fell in love with. “Mother, this is the most beautiful place that I have ever seen.... I really think when the war is over, I’ll move down here,”<sup>196</sup> wrote Dan Moody from the Hotel Blackstone. On June 1, 1945 Governor Millard Caldwell signed a bill to help entice the many Hebrew transplants to stay, or to return with their families. Florida became the first Southern state to adopt legislation outlawing the publication and distribution of unsigned material attacking religious groups, races, or individuals. As the decade drew to a close, Florida’s Jewish community had multiplied more than six times. Surpassing the 80,000 mark, they now represented more than two percent of the state’s populace. As the war terminated and every American city erupted with jubilation, colleges and universities across the Sunshine State greeted returning students, as well as a sizeable freshman class. The mounting number of Gators,

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<sup>195</sup> William Frederick Halsey, *Admiral Halsey’s Story*. (New York: Whittlesey House, 1947), 147.

<sup>196</sup> Gannon, 324.

Hurricanes, and Seminoles also included 26,000 Jews.<sup>197</sup> Pilots, seamen, and grunts of all different ranks hastily purchased land, opened businesses, and joined religious organizations and communities to enjoy their own piece of the Florida dream.

Finally ending the incessant bickering between those who sought to aid the Allies and those seeking to preserve isolationism, Pearl Harbor united a nation resolute on defending democracy and liberty. While Jews had been ready to stand up to the Wehrmacht for quite some time, almost no American questioned the validity of intervention after the USS *Arizona* was consumed entirely by the Pacific Ocean. Whether they had to stomach eating ham for Uncle Sam, trade in their tailoring shears for khaki covers, or convince a plethora of close-minded skeptics that they were fit for duty, America's Jews played a vital role in preserving the four freedoms President Roosevelt and the entire nation valued. The Japanese attack drew them out of distinctive neighborhoods in Northern metropolises and delivered them to Camp Blanding, MacDill Field, and other military installations across the state. Escaping cruel winters for enchanting tropical weather, an unprecedented number of young Hebrews were transplanted to the Land of Sunshine. Though many only remained in the state for 90 days, three months was long enough to leave a lasting impression.

As impressive as the number of young Hebrews who encountered paradise for the first time was the dedication and involvement of the state's 14,000 Jews. While only 30 synagogues existed in Florida at the start of the war, extensive networks of Jewish guilds, traveling rabbis, and a growing sense of statewide solidarity laid the foundation to

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<sup>197</sup> American Jewish Committee. *1948 American Jewish Yearbook*, available from [http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC\\_DATA/Files/1948\\_1949\\_18\\_Statistics.pdf](http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/1948_1949_18_Statistics.pdf); Internet; accessed 4 October 2010.

properly welcome the incoming mass of service personnel.<sup>198</sup> While Florida had already begun to separate itself from the rest of the South, a lasting legacy of bigotry and xenophobia was far from extinct. Even with an outspoken new Klan leader, pacifists blaming Jews for trying to instigate America into war, and other burdensome obstacles, the state's Jewish community made a valiant stand to defend their rights as well as to convey to others that it was the United States' responsibility to protect and preserve the foundations that the people of this nation valued so dearly. Women left their homes to work with the Red Cross, nurtured adopted Hebrew service men by welcoming them for dinner, and aided the Allies in their fight by rolling bandages, sewing clothes, and creating survival kits. Jewish men from across the state enlisted in all branches of the military and prepared to take on the Fuhrer and the Japanese Empire. The state's entire Hebrew community mobilized to ensure American victory. If the Allies were unsuccessful in liberating Europe and ending the Axis powers, it was not going to be because Florida's Jews remained idle.

Today Florida is home to the most densely populated Jewish community outside of Israel, and the state claims more Hebrews than the rest of the former Confederacy combined. Between 750,000 and 1,000,000 Jews live in the Land of Sunshine, depending on how one calculates the snowbirds.<sup>199</sup> Representing close to four percent of the state's population, Jews have been elected to every political position across all three branches of government. As United States senators, a governor, and chief justices of the state's

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<sup>198</sup> American Jewish Committee. *1940 American Jewish Yearbook*, available from [http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC\\_DATA/Files/1940\\_1941\\_8\\_Statistics.pdf](http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/1940_1941_8_Statistics.pdf); Internet; accessed 4 October 2010.

<sup>199</sup> American Jewish Committee. *2008 American Jewish Yearbook*, available from Internet; accessed 4 October 2010.

Supreme Court, they have played a fundamental role in helping shape modern Florida. Though it is believed that Hebrews have resided in Florida since the sixteenth century as *conversos*, nothing attracted more Jews to the Sunshine State than Pearl Harbor. As planes, ships, and trains delivered more and more trainees for arduous calisthenics, combat instruction, and flight education, they also transported men from around the nation to Eden. Falling in love with the rejuvenating ocean breezes, decadently sweet orange juice, and the warm sun, Jews promised to return after achieving victory. They kept their vows, and returned with spouses, children, and parents. Though the Hebrew community was not the only one to explode after the war, almost no other culture or group was able to set up the successful tight-knit neighborhoods that remained almost unchallenged until the state's rapid Latin expansion.

It is because of Pearl Harbor and World War II that cities such as Miami Beach, West Palm Beach, and Boca Raton have welcomed unprecedented numbers of Jewish residents. From matzo-ball soup in Gainesville to potato pancakes in Tampa, modern Florida's unique Jewish restaurants, stores, and neighborhoods are lasting testaments to the profound impact of December 7, 1941. The social revolutions that were brewing in Europe played a vital role in dictating the course of history for millions of lives. However, the Fuhrer, the Nazis, and the Empire of Japan could never have fathomed that their actions might create a robust new bastion of hope in the Sunshine State, and that it would be stronger than ever 70 years later. Jack Rubin may have summed it up the best, "We found in Florida sun that was brighter than anything you could even imagine up

North. Friends that were warmer than the most oppressive West Coast summer. Surely with such beauty we had finally found the land of milk and honey!”<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Jack Rubin, interview by author, personal, Daytona Beach, November 8, 2008

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Jason A. Memmer was born in Aurora, Colorado, but has lived in Florida for a majority of his life. He earned a B.A. Degree in History from the University of South Florida from the College of Arts and Sciences. His writing has earned him numerous awards during his graduate studies including the Leland Hawes Award from the Tampa History Center, as well as back to back Governor LeRoy Collins Awards from the Florida Historical Society. He is also very involved with the state's Florida Memory Project, and has conducted countless interviews that are retained by museums and libraries in Miami, St. Petersburg, Tampa, Orlando, Gainesville, and Tallahassee. His current projects include finishing a book on Florida's Jewish community, as well as a museum exhibition and lecture series which brings to life the content found in this thesis. He hopes to continue his education and earn a Ph.D. before becoming a college professor.