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The Impact of World War One on Ethnic Identity:
Examining the Effects of the War on the American Jewish Community
Nationally and in Pittsburgh

Mary McCune

“Whether we will or no, the consciousness of our Jewishness is forced upon us. We may glory in it, we may try to evade it, but it is inescapable. We are forced to consider ourselves as one tribe...even when [some Jews] have renounced Judaism and have become Christianized or turned atheists, they are still recognized as Jews. They remain members of the tribe.”

Rebekah Kohut, prominent Jewish-American activist, wrote these words in a memoir that appeared in 1929. She had been a highly visible presence in the wartime activities to aid Jews around the world affected by World War I as well as the reconstruction efforts of the post-war period. Prior to that the organization with which she was affiliated, the National Council of Jewish Women, was deeply involved in working with Jewish immigrants arriving on U.S. shores. While the earliest waves of immigrants tended to forswear identifications that did not rest on a religious foundation, many of the immigrants arriving in the late 19th century, largely from Eastern Europe, expressed their Jewishness in ways more closely resembling an ethnicity rather than a religious confession. Some of them, like members of the socialist Workman’s Circle, denounced religion outright all the while claiming adherence to Jewish ethnic and linguistic identity through the promotion of Yiddish.

The diversity of the American Jewish population also included stark differences of opinion on the subject of Zionism. Some, like the Workmen’s Circle, opposed Zionism opting to promote Jewish cultural autonomy in the lands in which they resided. Others, such as Hadassah, the Women’s Zionist Organization of America, obviously was deeply attached to the building of a Jewish state in Palestine. The NCJW, while not in outright opposition to Zionsim, embraced a non-Zionism: neither in vocal support nor in vocal opposition. The war forced many American Jews to consider their relationship to the Jewish people and to the movement to create a Jewish state. Despite the pre-war diversity of identity, the outbreak of World War I in Europe led to a

new-found unity within the diverse American community. The war deepened profoundly the connection American Jews felt for those overseas, bringing them together to aid refugees fleeing war and pogroms. During the war various relief groups exhorted American Jews to care for their “family” abroad, to look out for their unfortunate “brothers and sisters.” While divisions intensified in the post-war period over what the nature of that “family” was, especially regarding Zionism, the powerful notion that Jews globally were connected remained strong.

In my past work, which I return to in the first part of this paper, I examined these issues by looking at the pre-, wartime and immediate post-war work of the NCJW, the Workmen’s Circle and Hadassah. In addition to looking at how the leaders of these groups conceptualized Jewish identity, I also concerned myself with exploring the role gender played in these constructions as well as in the reform and activist communities at large. In this paper, I will focus on gender as it was used in wartime propaganda and then discuss some of the work that the three Jewish organizations I focused on in my book engaged in. I’d then like to turn my attention from this global and national perspective to examine the effects of the war on one community: the Hill District in Pittsburgh. A largely Jewish area in the late 19th century, by the end of the war the neighborhood was beginning its transformation to an African-American neighborhood, a process completed by the 1950s, an effect of another transformative war.

What unites both these works is an interest in how communities are built and how identities, particularly ethnic identities, are understood. In order to get at these questions and to what was happening among community members in the Hill District, I will focus my attention on one major Jewish institution: the Irene Kaufmann Settlement House. Founded in 1895 to aid the influx of Jewish immigrants coming to Pittsburgh, the institution was forced to re-examine its

mission and its own identity as more Jews began to leave the neighborhood and more African Americans arrived. The IKS (“Ikes”) was ostensibly open to all, but records indicate that African Americans participated in the settlement in only limited ways and were not allowed to become members until the 1940s. In the meantime, the Jews of Pittsburgh began to create an identity that was not bound by neighborhood. While many Jews did move to a new neighborhood, the Squirrel Hill section of the city, the institution that they founded in the wake of the Great Migration of World War II was the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh – unbounded by geographical lines. The IKS building in the Hill was ultimately turned over to the African-American community and, after merging with other groups, became the community organization Hill House in 1964. The impact of social changes first arising during World War I could be felt decades after that war’s conclusion.

When the war broke out a number of Jewish relief agencies were created, ultimately coming together to form the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). The publications of the JDC and one its constituent members, the American Jewish Relief Committee, relied heavily on a rhetoric of “family” in order to personalize the crisis and better raise funds. The imagery of the publications often portrayed a European Jewry that was frail, fearful, and feminine. Representations of European Jews in these publications frequently portray them as bedraggled women with starving children at their sides. In one depiction American benevolence appears as a statuesque, healthy woman extending her arms across the sea to help her starving European sister in a drawing curiously titled “All Israel are Brethren.” Such illustrations served to feminize European and American Jewry, symbolizing difference in material wealth through the physical bodies of women. Typically, however, only European Jews

underwent such a feminization, and this, in turn, underscored their helplessness. The textual exhortations appealed directly to potential donors, reminding them of how close they were to those living abroad: “Had this World-War occurred twenty years ago we might be pleading FOR you instead of TO you.” American Jews were encouraged to think of the victims as their very own relatives (which, in some cases, of course, they might be): “Have American Jews become callous to the sufferings of their brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers in the war zones?” Yet in creating this international Jewish “family” the relief organizations most frequently employed female images to show the despair of European Jews, especially as the war progressed. One solicitation, centered around the image of a tired old woman without food or support, declared boldly, “Tired of Giving? You Don’t Know What Feeling Tired Means!” Another focused on the suffering of “Jewish babes, Jewish mothers, Jewish boys and girls and the Jewish aged,” raising the specter of families struggling to survive without fathers and young men. Another appeal directly referred to the greater potential for female suffering. “The first to bear the brunt of the conditions for which they are in no wise responsible will be our brethren,” it reminded readers, “and to an even greater extent than the men, the women and children – the most helpless and defenceless among the entire populations.” In formulating their pleas in this manner, both the AJRC and the JDC posited the existence of “family” bonds between all the Jews of the world. The images entreated American Jews to do their part to aid the helpless victims of the war – the Jewish aged, children, and especially women bereft of male protection.¹

The means by which Jews raised money for their “brethren” overseas resembled the activities of other groups. Groups, like the East European members of the Workmen’s Circle, engaged in raising money for their hometowns, behaving in essence like *landsmanshaftn*.

Hadassah, and the Zionist movement in general, focused its attention on the Jews in Palestine and those Russian Jews who had been deported by Turkish authorities and languished in refugee camps in Egypt. The intensity of commitment to the global Jewish family only increased after the war, even as disagreements about how best to assist that family deepened. With Europe ravaged, the U.S.S.R. and surrounding lands in turmoil, and the doors to the United States effectively closed to immigration, American Jews realized that their duty to those overseas would end neither with the armistice nor with the final peace treaty. Attention, then, remained focused on overseas aid with socialist and communists arguing for funding to go toward reconstruction in the East, Zionists lobbying for a Jewish state in Palestine, and the mainstream non-Zionists focused on refugee relief and reconstruction. Initially funneling money through the American Relief Administration, eventually the JDC was allowed to send workers overseas itself on missions to the Jews.² Jewish contributions from 1919 to 1921 reached \$33.4 million. Much of this money went toward founding soup kitchens, maintaining hospitals and orphanages, and bringing food to the starving in the countryside. Such activities continued throughout the decade.³ While divided over what they envisioned as the future of Jews worldwide, American Jews were united in a common sense of ethnic identity and a connection that transcended national boundaries.

This is the quickly drawn outline of what happened at the national level. Now I'd like to turn my attention to exploring what the impact of the war was on Jewish-ethnic identity on a micro-level by looking at the changing nature of the Irene Kaufmann Settlement House. The IKS was founded in 1895 by the Pittsburgh chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women.⁴ It grew steadily and was known by a number of different names until department store magnet

Henry Kaufmann and his wife sponsored the development of a building to house the institution. The newly-named Irene Kaufmann Settlement was created to honor the memory of the Kaufmann's deceased daughter. Although founded by Jews, with a Jewish Board of Directors Jewish Executive Directors, the IKS leadership explicitly defined the institution's goals as being non-sectarian in nature. An early statement of purpose delineated the following goals for the institution: "The advancement of the civic, intellectual, and social welfare of the surrounding community. It aims to do this: first, by guiding native and foreign-born to American ideals; second, by encouraging self-improvement; third, by stimulating healthy pleasures; fourth, by broadening civic interests; fifth, by creating ideals of conduct."⁵ Numerous references to the non-sectarian nature of the settlement's goals, membership and programming appeared throughout institutional publications up through the 1940s. Sidney Teller, Executive Director from 1916 to 1942, frequently made statements akin to what he asserted in a 1924 Director's report, namely, that "The IKS is not a sectarian institution, but we believe that its work is deeply and fundamentally religious, carrying out through deed and action, service and activities, the teachings of all the of the great religions of the world."⁶

Yet in the initial years of the settlement the neighborhood was largely Jewish and there was little conflict in who constituted a "member" and who was a "neighbor."⁷ The Settlement's newsletter in the 1920s, entitled *Neighbors*, frequently ran pieces on Americanization programs and English classes, some of which were printed in Yiddish.⁸ In 1919 Louis J. Affelder, President of the Settlement's Board of Directors, noted that in the past year there had been a great deal of talk of Americanization. He pointed out that the IKS had always engaged in such work, asserting that "All Settlement work, whether conducted within, in classes or clubs, or without,

through visits to sick and well, has tended to Americanize." This would indicate that, at that point, a great majority of clients and members were immigrants, if not Jewish.⁹

Sidney Teller was a powerful advocate for both the Hill District and for the IKS, and he served during the period when African Americans first began to move into the Hill in large numbers. Teller worked tirelessly to combat the persistence of crime and corruption in the Hill and he aimed to involve his members and neighbors in the battle against these pernicious forces. The IKS was deeply involved in efforts to clean up the neighborhood, in battles against saloons, political and police corruption, crime and filth. In a 1924 Teller outlined in detail the forces against which he and his staff combated:

"the Personal Service Department handles the many matters of vice, gambling, illegal sale of liquor, etc. The task seems endless, if not hopeless, but constant vigilance is the price of a clean neighborhood. We have stood unafraid against the threats of the various 'gangs' and evil powers in the third and fifth wards, and the record for the year shows results in spite of 'double crossing,' police inefficiency, corrupt politics, and lack of a city-wide aggressive and fearless citizens' organization."¹⁰

Settlement documentation noted the great influx of African Americans into the Hill beginning in World War I yet traced the origins of the neighborhood's problems to the years prior to the war itself and often blamed the rise in crime on the arrival of African Americans. For example, Louis Affelder, in his 1919 report, stated that before 1908 there were not many applications to open saloons in the Hill District but that after that date greater problems with vice arose as more immigrants and "negroes" moved into the area.¹¹ An NCJW report produced in 1906 bluntly stated fears about the rising number of African Americans, the prevalence of prostitution, and interracial sex in general:

"Is it a wonder that such should be the case, if one considers that the whole Hill district is infested with colored people, 90% of whom openly lead an immoral life? Is it a wonder, I say, that such dreadful conditions should exist, if Jewish

people sublet rooms to colored prostitutes and their cadets? I have heard of two cases, where Jewish women have given birth to colored children. I have tried to get the facts in these cases, but failed. I will, therefore, assume that this is a manufactured story, but it is highly suggestive of conditions in that neighborhood."¹²

However terrible the conditions were prior to World War I, the war only served to exacerbate them. In a 1916-1917 study staff noted that "a great influx of Negroes from the South came into the general neighborhood. This has made the neighborhood more congested, and there was a great exodus of Russian Jews to the district east of the Settlement."¹³

As congestion in the neighborhood grew worse, the need for recreational facilities for youth rose to the forefront. A review of articles in the African-American newspaper *The Pittsburgh Courier* reveals that while African-American basketball teams affiliated with a black settlement house played the IKS teams and African-American mothers took advantage of the baby and mother clinics housed at the settlement, the presence of African Americans at the IKS was slight. And tension was evident between the Sidney Teller and some in the African-American community. In 1926 *Courier* columnist John L. Clark forthrightly stated that Teller "has been preaching 'I.K.S. for the whites and Crawford Center for the blacks' - or words to that effect."¹⁴ In the same year he accused Teller of leading an anti-vice campaign that focused on African-American perpetrators while ignoring white crime in the neighborhood. In 1930, he bluntly expressed his outrage: "Sidney Teller, director of the Irene Kaufmann Settlement, is at it again. We understand that he has reported some dives and kindred resorts on the back streets. He could start almost directly in front of the Settlement, work up or down Center Avenue, and locate his own race violating the law."¹⁵

Upon his retirement in 1941, Teller expressed great disappointment that certain members

of the public associated his institutional leadership with racism and discrimination. He told the *Pittsburgh Courier* “If the Colored people do not think my work has been a worthwhile contribution to this community, then I am deeply disappointed.” He attempted to shift the blame for segregation at the IKS to a Reverend Moore who opened an institution in 1921, asserting that he had merely complied with the Rev. Moore’s request that the IKS send black children there. And yet, tellingly, according to the paper, he “refused to offer any hope for the Negro's full participation in the Irene Kaufmann Settlement recreation program....[arguing that it is overcrowded and underfunded as is, he stated that] ‘When a pitcher is full of water, there is no use running it over by pouring more water into it.’” Teller also had a poor answer as to why IKS membership was limited to the immediate neighborhood, stating that the IKS couldn’t serve everyone (though neighborhood and serving all had been a driving ethos), adding ““When colored people come here we feel that Hill City and the Kay Club will take care of them, not because they are colored, but because those institutions have been established for that purpose.””¹⁶ Moreover, by 1960 this is precisely what the Jewish community had done: created an institution that served a citywide membership, not one limited to a particular geographically-bounded community.

Despite Teller’s, and others, insistence that the IKS was open to all even as an adequate number of other institutions existed to serve the African-American population, a report written for the National Urban League and produced in 1930 found that, in fact, there were very few recreational offerings for black youth in the neighborhood. After surveying the available paltry options, the author of the report, Ira De A. Reid, underscored the need for a center that would be open year-round. He also recommended that IKS “consider the possibility of broadening its

activities so that it would have physical recreational provisions for Negro children in its immediate environment,” insisting that “the practices of segregation and discrimination which are carried on in some of the private, commercial and public institutions of the city should be discontinued.”¹⁷ Later in the report he focused on the the IKS specifically, bluntly stating that its programming was:

“primarily for the Jewish population. Since its existence, however, there have been a few colored children in some of its classes. Invaluable service has been rendered to Negroes through the personal service work of the Settlement. Negroes are constantly in attendance at the various clinics held there; are clients of the social agencies quartered there; secure milk from the city's milk station and attend the open air school. The regular curricular activities of the institution are for other racial groups. In its community ventures such as neighborhood clean-up campaigns and elimination of vice and crime situations, the cooperation of the whole community, regardless of racial lines, is secured. The settlement has made interesting social studies of the Hill District. In its main functions, however, it is distinctly not for Negroes though neither is its program entirely Jewish in character nor its entire membership constituency Jewish.”¹⁸

Despite the fact that Sidney Teller served on the Steering Committee, he made no public comment on this statement. De A. Reid succinctly elucidated what appears so murky in the official records of the IKS: that African Americans were not full members of the institution, even though non-Jewish whites were, and that while black assistance was welcomed in community-wide endeavors, they were rarely welcomed in the institutional community other than as clientele of social service providers.

This situation, spurred by the movement of blacks to the North, only intensified in the Great Migration of the World War II years. This time, however, the settlement's leadership could not explain away its policies. The Double V campaign, spearhead by the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the riot of 1943, as well as similar waves of activism and unrest throughout the nation, prompted city leaders, including IKS leaders, to take a closer look at race relations in

their city and communal institutions. A self-study prepared by the IKS in 1942 noted that the neighborhood was 70% black and suggested moving in incremental steps toward full membership for African Americans.¹⁹ In 1943 the IKS began steps toward becoming inter-racial in membership and, in that same year, opened an IKS in Squirrel Hill, a neighborhood to which large numbers of Jews had migrated over the past several decades. In October 1945 equal membership was opened to children aged 13 and younger. By 1948 the IKS implemented a fully equal membership policy and, yet, a mere nine years later, the institution divested itself of its Hill District property, renting it to the now African-American community leadership for \$1.00/year. By 1962 there were no longer any financial ties between the two groups. In 1960 the new IKS in Squirrel Hill merged with several other Jewish organizations in order to become the Y-IKS and, eventually, the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh.

In my previous work I was interested in exploring how the First World War shaped, and re-shaped, Jewish identity in the United States. The war created among Jews a clear and abiding sense that they were connected to other Jews throughout the world and, given their privileged position in the United States, it was incumbent upon them to come to the aid of those “brethren” overseas. Of course, there were divisions among American Jews regarding what were the best means by which to help their fellow Jews, nevertheless there was growing cooperation and greater identification of a community that transcended religious and political differences. We see, I think, similar dynamics playing out in Pittsburgh through the movement toward creating a “Jewish Community Center” out of what was once several different communal organizations. We also see, and this is what I’m particularly interested in exploring in this project, a shift away from an identity rooted in neighborhood, in a physical place, to a sense of community as being

one that transcends physical space. And, once again, the World Wars had much to do with accelerating this transformation. In the case of Pittsburgh, that shift in identity was precipitated by the Great Migration and is intimately connected to the often-forgotten history of racial discrimination and segregation in the North, particularly as regards recreational facilities. The leaders of the IKS clung tenaciously to the idea that the settlement was open to all, that the neighborhood itself, though crime-ridden and poverty-stricken, was an amalgamation of peoples from the world over. And yet, as greater numbers of African Americans settled in the Hill, policies were effected to bar them from full participation in the IKS “family.” As on the national level, the war years facilitated a heightened sense of ethnic/religious identity, this time and in this place, with a clear component of racial identity as well. As Jews prospered and moved away from the Hill District new definitions of Jewishness emerged. In concert with concerns over assimilation and continued anti-Semitism in mid-century U.S., many people involved in recreational and settlement work were prompted to turn toward Jewish programming for youth, changing the context and structure of the earlier settlement model. Even as policies changed to include African Americans, community members grew increasingly distant from their former neighbors, not only physically but programmatically.²⁰

Memories of those earlier decades frequently downplayed the levels of segregation that existed, positing instead visions of a hard-scrabble existence and cooperation. In 1994 a reporter for the Pittsburgh *Jewish Criterion* turned his attention to the Hill District, seeking to recover some of that history and to reveal the ways in which Jews and Blacks, while all too often portrayed as at odds with one another, had had cordial relationships in the past. Interviewing several former denizens of the Hill, the reporter highlighted the warm feelings they had for their

former neighborhood. Hy Richman, who lived in the Hill until 1941, noted that "the white power structure did not welcome [Jews]. Negroes were also unwelcome and the fact that both groups were discriminated against allowed them to become friends." One place where blacks and Jews congregated, according to Richman, was the Irene Kaufmann Settlement house where, he noted, they "participated in programs...together."²¹

While the former residents recalled a general lack of conflict and some interaction, their responses also betray ambivalence, and many noted a certain distance that was maintained between the two groups. Dr. Raymond Goldblum recalled that "it was always a rather cordial relationship while we were growing up. It was nothing like 'let's go and play together at my house.' The two groups were friendly and we'd walk home from school together but a lot of contact and playing with them after school wasn't really encouraged....You kept your distance - from Blacks or from any other group - and they did the same. Everybody was poor and putting all their energies into scraping a living. Maybe that's why relations were so good back then." Hy Richman, too, recalled that while there was interaction between the two groups, "it was mainly superficial. It was that way primarily because the social and cultural disparity was great," adding that "It wasn't a matter of white/black but a separation along a working versus middle class experience...so you had a pretty limited context for conversation - but we got along fine. There were never any incidents between the two groups."²²

What is often seen as natural or organic circumstances - "You kept your distance - from Blacks or from any other group - and they did the same" - involved conscious decision-making and resulted from structural and institutional racism that led to the development of the neighborhood as largely black and largely poor as whites from the Hill moved to neighborhoods

elsewhere in the city. The Great Migrations of African Americans from the South dramatically changed the racial composition of the city. Following World War II city leaders embarked on an effort to study and, ideally, improve race relations in the city. And yet, a report done at the conclusion of the war found that "over 80 per cent of the people feel the best American policy is to accord the same rights and privileges to all people, some 43 per cent favor racial segregation in Pittsburgh." This same study found that the greater the intimate nature of the interaction, the greater the desire on the part of whites to segregate from blacks: 65% of white respondents opposed joining the same social club as blacks or living in the same apartment complex. The report concluded that "Generally, the greater hostility is to be found in those contact situations where personal and social relationships are assumed to exist."²³

While these respondents were, presumably, more likely to be non-Jewish, the ways in which equal membership policy in IKS was implemented (younger children first) suggests that Jews involved in the settlement house harbored similar fears regarding racial interaction. World War I was critical in setting these dynamics in motion. The population shift that began in those years, intensifying in World War II, led to a re-examination of what it meant to be a Jew. Nationally, Jews embraced a global identity that sought to encompass all regardless of religious and political identification. On the streets of Pittsburgh, the war raised questions of racial identity and began a similar process of identity formation that was ethno-religious based and citywide in nature. While ostensibly all-inclusive, the effects of this re-imagining of institutional purpose and communal identity, had, ultimately, quite exclusionary effects.

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 2. Yehuda Bauer, *My Brother’s Keeper: A History of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1929-1939* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1974), 9.
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 5. The History, 1940 Statistics, Purpose and Ideals of the I-K-S- of Pittsburgh, P-NFS Box 239, Folder 505, Minn. 007/172-014/172 p. 1. Printed on the cover of this 1941 report and indicates that came from early report.
 6. "Extracts from the Resident's Director's Report 1895 - for the twenty-ninth year - 1924," p. 114, Box 4, Folder 2, JCC of Greater Pittsburgh, Mss #389, HSWP [check citation in finding guide - wording]
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 9. IKS 1919 Yearbook A year of service in times of demobilization and reconstruction Louis J. Affelder, President, "The IKS and Community Progress," p. 11, Box 8, Folder 12, JCC.
 10. "Extracts from the Resident's Director's Report 1895 - for the twenty-ninth year - 1924," p. 113, Box 4, Folder 2, JCC of Greater Pittsburgh, Mss #389, HSWP [check citation in finding guide - wording]

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 12. Report to Immigrant Aid Committee, September 22, 1906, Box 18, Folder 2, p. 8, National Council of Jewish Women, Pittsburgh Section Papers, 1894-2011, AIS.1964.40, Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh.
 13. "Synopsis of Social Studies of the Neighborhood of the IKS" Made under the supervision of Sydney A. Teller, Resident Director [n.d., but file notes 1916-1917], Box 8, Folder 13, JCC, p. 3
 14. John L. Clark, "Pittsburgh," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 23, 1926, p. 6.
 15. "Wylie Avenue....Pittsburgh..." John L. Clark, January 20, 1934, p. 4; "City-Wide Campaign Against Vice Has Centered In Hill District, Says Investigator, Whose Expose Of Conditions Now Prevalent Proves Big Surprise," John L. Clark, August 28, 1926 [see photocopied stats from De Reid on racial composition in 1920 census];
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 22. Srulevich, "A Positive Look Back," *Jewish Criterion* Vol. 33 no. 26 (August 25, 1994): 8.
 23. "Pittsburgh Study," circa 1945, p. 21. Box 1, Folder 15, Papers of Nathan M. Katz, 1922-1951 (bulk 1934-1937), MSS #280, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania (hereafter HSWP). Katz was an active member of the Jewish and Pittsburgh community serving on the

