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Civil Rights

Birmingham’s Jewish Women and the Civil Rights Movement
“We could have done more.”

Kaye Cochran Nail

Jewish women in Birmingham became well known for their local philanthropic endeavors. During the Progressive era they followed a national trend by forming study groups and charitable organizations. Early twentieth century newspaper articles and Jewish publications noted that the local chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) advocated senior citizens assistance, free eye exams and glasses for indigent children, and financial scholarships for foreign students. More importantly, they sought to educate themselves on local political issues, international peace concerns, and the community’s racial problems. Their effort to generate a positive influence on the community proved important during the Depression era, particularly among the disadvantaged. However, despite popular reputation to the contrary, the impact of a few Jewish women in the civil rights movement proved to be still more significant. Recent scholarship documents the important role of Jewish women in the southern Civil Rights Movement, in places like New Orleans and Miami. This also happened in the “cradle” of that movement, Birmingham.

Jewish women frequently worked alongside their husbands in managing their business or professional success. More significantly, during the postwar era, these women mirrored a national pattern of participation in local social movements. According to a Birmingham News article published in 1952, “the Birmingham Council of Jewish Women plays a forceful and active part in community affairs.” Several dynamic women, deeply troubled by racial prejudice and discrimination, took a brave stand for black voter registration, school desegregation, and the elimination of police brutality. Birmingham Jewish women, though
Civil Rights

concerned with protecting the religious, social, and economic framework of their community, nonetheless fought against social injustice during the southern Civil Rights Movement. They proved to be fearless advocates of social reform, desegregation, and direct action against racial inequality.

Jews migrated to Birmingham by 1871. These first Jewish men and women set about establishing the fledgling city with businesses, temples, and growing families. By 1917 some 3,500 Jews lived in the city, representing 1.8 percent of the total populace. Yet even while achieving personal growth and success in Birmingham, Jews never forgot their “deeply engrained philosophy” of social justice.1 The ancient cultural values of the Jewish faith drew numerous Birmingham women toward social activism.

The Hebrew Ladies Benevolent Association (HLBA) established the earliest documented charitable group in the city of Birmingham in 1883.2 Initially established to provide relief for Jewish migrants coming into the city, they soon began offering housing, food, and money to anyone in need. The Hebrew Ladies benevolent Association served as inspiration for “new charitable and social welfare oriented organizations” in the Birmingham hinterland.3

Like the HLBA, the Ladies Aid Society formed under the capable leadership of Birmingham Jewish women, namely Emma Ullman. In addition, elite Birmingham Jewish women, incorporated as the Daughters of Israel, ministered to the poor in the community. Then in 1898 the local chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) organized under the direction of Miss Jeanette Goldberg. The NCJW held weekly study groups, advanced philanthropic efforts, and sponsored local civic programs.4 Not surprisingly, the NCJW provided

3 Elovitz, 45.
an important springboard for Birmingham Jewish women’s activism. During a 1914 national and local economic depression, the HLBA joined forces with the Jewish men’s Birmingham Relief Society and the Daughters of Israel. They collected $675 and offered “interest-free loans as well as temporary shelter and meals to the needy.” Many Birmingham charitable organizations at that time period received government funding. However, Jewish charities operated solely on private donations. Moreover, accepting a handout from the Jewish groups did not obligate one to suffer through judgment and admonition regarding their moral status. Jewish women honored tradition by aiding their Jewish brethren and Birmingham’s poor alike. Thus, Jewish women strode into the twentieth century as experienced philanthropists and in so doing emerged as a force against social injustice.

**Dorah Sterne**

Dorah Sterne’s influential impact on Birmingham has proven to be immeasurable. With a history of activism that spans the better part of the twentieth century, countless Birmingham social reform movements occurred under the watchful eye of Dorah Sterne. Her husband, Mervyn, was a prominent local stockbroker with a civic conscience. Like Dorah, Mervyn paid “civic rent” to their community. The Sterne’s were single minded on many issues facing Birmingham, yet differed on the resolution of others. To be sure, Progressive era reforms and ideas affected the lives both.

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5 LaMonte, 46.
6 Ibid., 59.
8 Corley, *Paying “Civic Rent”*, 27.
9 Dorah Sterne, interview by Bette Jo Hanson, date unknown, interview AR 929, Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Birmingham, AL.
Another avenue of Birmingham Jewish women's philanthropy can be found in the Temple Kindergarten, formed in 1900. The school met a communal need for free child care. Children were admitted regardless of religious affiliation. Significantly, the school remains in existence today under the name of the Birmingham Jewish Community Center. The continued activism of Birmingham Jewish women touched many in the community.

A recent graduate of Smith College and a young bride, Dorah Sterne "plunged" into "civic work as a member of the (Birmingham chapter) Council of Jewish Women."\(^{10}\) According to Sterne, as soon as she first met with the NCJW in 1922, she agreed to hold the office of secretary. When the council hastily changed the position to presidency, initially, Sterne declined the position. But with the right amount of persuasion she accepted the post. She served three years as president and later served another term in the position. From this vantage point, Sterne's confidence as an organizer grew. She participated in many local civic groups such as the Girl Scouts and the League of Women Voters (LWV). More importantly, she joined the American Association of University Women (AAUW) in 1923. By 1938 Sterne held the office of President of the local AAUW. She soon advanced her civic influence in the community as well as the state.

A newspaper article relating the brutal beatings of female prisoners at Tutwiler Prison, most of whom were black, came to the attention of the AAUW. Dorah and several other members learned everything they could about the Alabama prison structure, particularly for women.\(^{11}\) During the 1930s and 1940s they took direct action by personally visiting Tutwiler, Kilby, Ketona, and other prisons in Alabama. The horrific conditions at the penal complexes moved Sterne to put a "stop to the evil effects" of "extreme punishments" experienced

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\(^{11}\) Corley, Paying "Civic Rent", 40.
by the prisoners. Subsequently, the AAUW recommended that the state parole board adopt apolitical policies as well as establish a citizen board to watch over guideline enforcement and hiring practices. Sterne successfully brought local and state politicians, leaders, and officials linked to the Alabama Department of Corrections together for the first time in March 1939. An important connection regarding the needs and concerns of the local and state prison system resulted. Sterne effectively navigated bureaucratic Alabamian governorships, from Sparks to Wallace, eventually leading the citizen prison board for Governor “Big” Jim Folsom from 1947 to 1951. Alabama hired its first female warden, banned prison flogging, and vastly improved sanitation and health conditions as a result of Dorah Sterne, Birmingham Jewish women, and the work of the AAUW. When asked why she volunteered her time and energy to this cause, Dorah explained that some might answer “paternalism,” but she considers “maternalism” to be her motivation for social work. Unfortunately, as prison reform slowly took place, racial tensions were mounting in the city.

Jim Crow and racial zoning laws in Birmingham and other southern cities, gave blacks little choice but to push back. Decades of white governance and racial segregation at work and in black neighborhoods barely budged until the post-World War II (WWII) era. Some gains were made as blacks sought better housing and workplace benefits. Yet in Birmingham, like many other southern cities, black progress set off a wave of hate crimes, led by a resurgence of the white supremacists groups, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). In one year alone, fifty-nine black homes and businesses across the south were bombed. Many of these targets were in Birmingham.

Dorah Sterne felt deep shame about the local “race issue” as did many other Jewish women in Birmingham. Then, in 1948 the

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12 Dorah Sterne, interview by Bette Jo Hanson,
13 Corley, Paying “Civic Rent,” 41.
14 Boyd,
16 Dorah Sterne, interview by Bette Jo Hanson,
KKK attacked Sterne’s beloved Girl Scouts. Two white Girl Scout leaders teaching a group of black counselors were confronted by hooded terrorists. The KKK ran the white women out of town. The Klan’s acts of widespread domestic terror multiplied all over the south.\textsuperscript{17} Jewish women in Birmingham felt frustrated at the lack of local law enforcement ability to stop the violence and protect all citizens equally. Their frustration reached a zenith in 1950 when three black homes were bombed. On April 21, 1950, the \textit{Birmingham Post-Herald} published the following article, “Jewish Women Adopt Resolution, Condemn Negro Home Bombing.” The Birmingham NJCW wrote the following resolution soon after the bombing of the newly constructed home of black dentist, Dr. Joel Boykins of Smithfield. The resolution read this way,

“We, the members of the Council of Jewish Women are shocked and ashamed at the dastardly bombing of a Negro citizen’s home and office on Thursday of last week. Resolved that the police Department of the city of Birmingham and other law enforcement authorities be urged to do everything in their power to pursue the perpetrators for this crime until justice is done. Resolved further that law and order and the protection of civil and property rights be guaranteed to all citizens of this community.”\textsuperscript{18}

Sterne and the NCJW gave notice where they stood on the racial problem in Birmingham. There were other signs of opposition to racial discord as well.

Dorah and Mervyn Sterne attempted to solve racial problems through interracial communication. The 1950 Interracial Committee


\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Birmingham Post-Herald}, “Jewish Women Adopt Resolution, Condemn Negro Home Bombing,” April 1950

176
Civil Rights

evolved out of a 1940s drive by the Southern Field Division to form a Birmingham unit of the National Urban League. After troublesome leadership issues and initiatives, the league chapter idea died. Nonetheless, in its place emerged the Interracial Committee, a division of the Jefferson County Coordinating Council of Social Forces. To be sure, many of the Interracial Committee’s moderate members attempted to advance the black civil rights cause while at the same time maintaining segregation. The Committee avoided contentious issues and had mixed success regarding black concerns. Yet, they did accomplish the desegregation of most city elevators and initiated discussions to hire black police officers. More importantly, the Committee’s dialogue among blacks and whites established communication between both races, men, and women. The interracial membership of the board consisted of fifty influential citizens of the city. Mervyn Sterne provided his leadership and business acumen to the Interracial Committee for many years. Sterne seemed to uphold a gradual approach to end racial discrimination. As one Jewish counterpart put it, “Sterne, was a good man in many respects but he was in the white leadership that wanted things to remain as they were, white.” Yet, his important contribution to race relations during the 1950s should not be discounted. Dorah Sterne did not see a resolution to Birmingham’s racial problem in the same way as Mervyn. According to one of Dorah Sterne’s compatriots, “She was different.” So were other Jewish women who attended the

20 Ibid., 77.
22 Buddy Cooper, interview by Horace Huntley, date unknown, transcript, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute Archives, Oral History Project, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, Birmingham, AL.
23 Getrude Goldstein, interview by author, Birmingham, AL, October 18, 2009.
Civil Rights

Interracial Committee meetings. One such woman, Betty Loeb, raised the standard for the next wave of Jewish women activists during the Birmingham Civil Rights Movement.

Betty Loeb

Betty and Robert Loeb regularly met with the Interracial Committee at the Advent Church. The recent US Supreme Court decision that separate was not equal effectively put an end to the Interracial Committee by 1956. White segregationist moved swiftly, forming citizens groups committed to preserving the southern way of life, indicating school segregation. Segregationists pressured local and state politicians to stand against desegregation. The groundswell of white supremacy cost the Interracial Committee funding and support from the community.24 However, Betty and Robert Loeb did not let segregationist attacks stop their efforts to end racial and social injustice in Birmingham after the Interracial Committee folded.

Pittsburg native Betty Wolfe met Robert Loeb while visiting relatives in Birmingham and married him in 1947. Her civic minded father, a former cotton broker, supervised a Pittsburg Boy Scout troop. Her mother, a Reform Jew, raised money for Youth Aliyah to get children out of Germany during WWII. Betty stated, “It was unheard of for a Reform Jew to fundraise and mother did it anyway.”25 Betty’s father, warned her about the racial situation in Birmingham. As Loeb started her married life in Birmingham, she “was appalled at the conditions” and “thought it was terrible” the way blacks were treated. Loeb soon learned from Dorah Sterne the dreadful situation in local prisons. She also made a trip to Bryce Mental Hospital, in Tuscaloosa, never to forget the horrible treatment of the patients. Loeb considered the attitude toward blacks, prisoners, and patients, “completely foreign to me.”26 In Loeb’s opinion, part of the race problem belonged to southerners who “grew up here and take it all for granted.” The situation no longer pricked local social conscience. Loeb soon proved to be conscience enough for her

24 Corley, The Quest for Racial Harmony, 80-103.
26 Loeb interview.
sisters in the faith.

During the 1950s and 1960s, few newspaper articles printed on the subject of Jewish women organizations failed to mention Mrs. Robert Loeb.²⁷ True, the headlines often reflected social niceties and stereotypes common to the 1950s. Captions regarding fashions shows, teas, luncheons, and “hilarious” plays often dominated the society page of local newspapers. Black and white staged photographs reflected trim, chic, well-dressed women, sometimes wearing large hats, holding props, and smiling for the camera. But a closer look at the articles revealed much more.

The *Birmingham News* and *Post-Herald* articles informed the public that the Sisterhood of Temple Emanu-El sponsored inter-faith events, importantly bringing together Birmingham Catholics, Protestants, and Jews. According to other published articles, Hadassah, the Women’s Zionist Organization of America, promoted Zionism by educating the public and fundraising for aid to Israel. They also contributed to many local charities. Not surprisingly, the Birmingham chapter of the NCJW met, planned, and put words into action. Betty Loeb, elected twice as the president of the NCJW, held a variety of positions for numerous terms, chaired programs, and participated on the national organization’s board.²⁸ Loeb’s outspoken, clever, confident manner served the NCJW well. More importantly, her dynamic approach had an impact on the local Civil Rights Movement.

According to an article in the *Birmingham News*, the NCJW “Works for Better Community and World.”²⁹ The group had “more than 600 members,” leading the way in community service programs that included “social welfare, relief and health work, promotion of peace

²⁸ Ibid.
Civil Rights

and world understanding." 30 Notably, the NCJW "campaigned for improved laws" and citizen voting rights. According to Betty Loeb, one long-term project put NCJW volunteers in "any school that would have us." 31 Black and white schools allowed the women to mentor teachers and students. The group also provided a wide range of assistance to the school from supplies to books. Significantly, all children were given a free eye examination by trained NCJW volunteers. Any child, black or white, who exhibited a problem, would be treated by a local Jewish physician, Dr. Ed Miles, free of charge. Loeb and the NCJW diligently worked each year in Birmingham's local schools, providing eye care to students. Furthermore, Loeb chaired many other significant programs for the NCJW.

After the decline of the Interracial Committee, Betty Loeb sought solutions for the local racial struggles. She arranged for Phillip Hammer, president of an economic research firm in Atlanta to speak to the NCJW about a study of Negro public schools conducted by the Ford Foundation. According to Hammer, an increase of blacks in the city pushed them into "slum areas." 32 Further, blacks and whites competed for local jobs. He also stated that both black and whites in Birmingham lacked essential social services. Hammer alleged that "understanding is the racial problem key." 33 Loeb knew more was needed from the local Jewish community in order to make a difference. She succinctly stated that "not all of my friends share my views." "They still don't," Loeb dryly added. Yet, she believed that her sisters in the faith "knew it was the right thing to do." 34 Loeb also paid a price to her activism.

Asa Carter's racist publication, The Southerner, placed Mrs. Robert Loeb on the Rogue's Gallery. The former members of the Interracial Committee should be watched, according to the newspaper. The April/May 1956 edition claimed "another mongrelizing mob"

31 Loeb interview.
33 Ibid.
34 Loeb interview.
will appear with a different name but keep the same members. The Southerner’s predication held true. Loeb’s efforts in the American Jewish Committee and the Birmingham Council on Human Relations (BCHR) advanced her belief, and that of other former members of the Interracial Committee, that the Jewish community could improve the lives of blacks in Birmingham.

Betty Loeb faced the arduous task of motivating others to join the cause at a time when public Anti-Semitism, like that espoused by radical racist Asa Carter, filled the airwaves. Yet by their own admission, Birmingham Jews were not subjected to the most virulent hate crimes that rocked other southern communities. The KKK assured Irving M. Engel, a vocal opponent against black convict labor, that they had no intention of harassing local Jews. Joe Denaburg sold the local Klavern sheets and weapons. He became a link between local Jews and the Klan. Nonetheless, local Jewry adamantly opposed the Ku Klux Klan and their racist, oppressive hold on the city.

Asa Carter’s 1955 radio broadcast blasted the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ). He attempted to connect the group with communism and claimed the NCCJ promoted the mixing of the races. The Loeb’s, among others, “blackballed the radio station and sponsors.” The station subsequently fired Carter. By 1956 Betty and Robert Loeb began work with the American Jewish Committee (AJC) for the purpose of establishing a Birmingham Chapter. During the 1950s the AJC initiated a “massive campaign” in support of the national civil rights movement. By joining up with the national AJC platform and the BCHR, the Loeb’s and others hoped to gain strength against anti-

35 “Rogue’s Gallery,” The Southerner: Vol.1 April/May 1956 No. 2,3, page 2
36 Corley. Paying “Civic Rent,” 25
37 Webb, 18
38 Corley, Quest for Racial Harmony, 93
39 Loeb interview.
Civil Rights

Semitic zealots like Carter as well as legitimacy in the local civil rights movement.

The BCHR proved to be the only biracial group remaining in Birmingham after the Interracial Committee disbanded in 1956.\textsuperscript{41} The BCHR "spent most of its money financing legal challenges to segregation."\textsuperscript{42} But more importantly, the BCHR provided a stage for blacks and whites to communicate. Countless black citizens shared personal, tragic stories of police brutality and violence. They spoke of racial prejudice that existed in housing, shopping, and on the job. These accounts would not appear in the \textit{Birmingham News} or on the local television station. But their painfully detailed experiences moved everyone in the audience. In addition, the BCHR promoted publicity, "to step up school desegregation in Jefferson County," by canvassing neighborhoods and making personal contact with local citizens.\textsuperscript{43} The members of BCHR also surveyed "all the hospitals of Jefferson County concerning their racial policies."\textsuperscript{44} The BCHR brought integrationists together in Birmingham on the belief that "changes for the better in a community are never an accident; they are the result of people working together for a change."\textsuperscript{45} Betty Loeb and other Jewish women activists supported the endeavors of the BCHR.

The Loebs as well as a host of other Jewish couples regularly attended BCHR meetings. But there was a price to pay for publically supporting the Birmingham Civil Rights Movement and the BCHR. Commissioner "Bull" Conner sent police officers to note the license plates of everyone who gave rides to blacks attending the meetings\textsuperscript{46}. It also became apparent that the local KKK and white supremacist groups took down the same information. Attendees of the meetings like local activists Dr. Frederick and Anny Kraus, Dr. Abe and Florence Siegel,

\textsuperscript{41} Eskew, 145.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 146.
\textsuperscript{43} Letter from Joseph W. Ellwanger, BCHR President to Friends, 1964. Sol Kimmerling personal collection.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} Eskew, 145.
and Fred and Gertrude Goldstein all received harassing, threatening telephone calls at home and at work. Terrifyingly, the KKK “burned a cross in Rev. Hughes yard.” Rev. Hughes eventually left the group when the Methodist Church issued an ultimatum to stop his activism work or lose his ministerial license. Betty and Robert Loeb were hassled as well. Betty recalled receiving “terrible threats in the middle of the night.” The callers menaced the Loeb family by threatening to burn their house down. Robert lightheartedly reminded Betty that friends and family often joked they could not find their home because “the Loeb’s lived down a dirt road behind someplace.” If their friends could not find the house, how could the KKK? Further, Robert Loeb, through sources, found the identity of the late night callers. Betty remembered Robert turned the table on their stalkers one evening when he “started calling the harassers in the middle of the night.” Betty Loeb refused to be intimidated and continued to work with the AJC and the BCHR as did others.

Gertrude Goldstein

Gertrude Binder, born in St. Louis, came with her family to live in Birmingham at age six months. Her Russian born father, Sidney Binder and her mother, Bessie Loveman, a Hungarian Jew, raised their family on a traveling salesman’s salary. Growing up in Birmingham, Gertrude was “very aware of the black situation but I saw very few blacks.” She met and married Fred Goldstein in 1942. Gertrude remembers, “Freddie and I were always taking up for people. I guess that’s just something that’s born in you.” Fred and Gertrude Goldstein spent the 1950s raising a family and building a successful business. The tragedy of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in 1963 spurred many

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47 Eskew, 176
48 Loeb interview.
49 Ibid.
50 Gertrude Goldstein, interview with Horace Huntley, January 21, 1999, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute Archives. Oral History Collection, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, Birmingham, AL.
51 Ibid.
people in the community to take action, including Goldstein. Marjorie Linn, Goldstein’s close friend, wrote a letter to a local newspaper expressing her outrage over the bombing. Mrs. Linn received an invitation to the next BCHR meeting. Gertrude Goldstein went with her. As Goldstein recalled, Dr. Frederick Kraus spoke at the first meeting she attended, along with Rev. Herbert Oliver. She learned heartbreaking details about the bombing and other critical facts regarding mistreatment of blacks. Goldstein confirmed that she previously knew little about the local civil rights movement due to the local media blackout. She also explained information was not readily available because “you couldn’t get it on radio and television.” She attempted to share the reality of what happened to Birmingham blacks with her friends. According to Goldstein, “I would want to talk about it and everybody would shut up.” Her bridge group “steered clear” of the subject. And at the Hillcrest Country Club, Goldstein learned one member asked for her resignation. Sides were chosen and many friendships lost during this time in Birmingham. Yet Goldstein believes that the “friends I made during the civil rights movement are my friends today.” The changes that occurred in Goldstein’s life mirrored that of other southern Jewish women activists during the civil rights struggle. Her new friends took the place of those who refused to support the movement in Birmingham.

The BCHR met at the YMCA, the courthouse, and by 1965, a local black church, the First Congregational Christian Church on Center Street. Many more black families were invited to speak to the congregants. They too shared personal stories of intimidations, beatings, and murders at the hands of local law enforcement. On January 25, 1965, Hosea Williams gave a powerful speech about the tenuous black situation in Selma. The white oppression of black citizens resulted in widespread racial tension in Dallas County. Blacks were rendered powerless to vote. They suffered greatly at the hands of white segregationists and Sheriff Jim Clark. Several black citizens testified to the BCHR that they had been falsely arrested. One attendee spoke for

52 Goldstein interview.
53 Webb, 166.

184
many who were present that day when she asked, “What can we do to help?” Williams responded, “I’ll tell you one thing you can do to help. You can take some warm, white bodies down there and show yourselves, show that you care.” Gertrude Goldstein, Eileen Walbert, and many others were inspired to do more.

Concerned White Citizens of Alabama

Some members of the BCHR were not willing to go so far as Williams suggested. As a result of the desire to form an all white group, the Concerned White Citizens of Alabama (CWCA) surfaced under the gifted direction of Reverend Joseph Ellwanger and others. Ellwanger proved to be “devoted” to the cause. The CWCA “formed for the express purpose, initially, of going to Selma and marching in support of the planned Selma to Montgomery Voting Rights March.” Rev. Martin Luther King quickly sent a representative from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in Atlanta to give instructions on how to march and avoid violence. Rev. Ellwanger mailed a statement to potential marchers across the state. The letter read this way:

Many white citizens of Alabama have been shocked by recent events in Selma and neighboring towns. They have felt for years the injustice of their segregated society, which allows Negro disfranchisement, police brutality and suppression of dissent. The brutality in Selma and murder in Marion have focused their discontent


55 Ibid.


57 Gertrude Goldstein, interview by author.

58 Anderson.

59 Helen Baer, Mary Y. Gonzalez, and Eileen Walbert memoirs.
Civil Rights

and made continued silence impossible. In order to dramatize their opposition to the totalitarian techniques used to suppress Negroes and whites in many areas of Alabama, a group of white citizens of Alabama has decided to march on the county courthouse in Selma on Saturday, March 6 [1965]. The leader of the group, the Reverend Joseph Ellwanger of Birmingham, will read a statement prepared for this occasion in an effort to make public the suppressed beliefs of many white Alabamians.

The statement will protest: 1) the denial to underprivileged Alabama citizens of the right to vote, 2) the intimidation and fear which stifles dissent by white Alabamians, and 3) the brutalizing and murder of state taxpayers by state law enforcement officers.

Citizens throughout the state of Alabama have been asked to demonstrate their belief in the need to create a more just society by participating in this protest march. The number of marchers is expected to be between twenty-five and one hundred.60

In ten short days, Ellwanger’s letter and “heaven knows how many phone calls and meetings,” garnered an agreement from seventy-two concerned white citizens of Alabama to take their “warm white bodies” to Selma.61 The dedication of Ellwanger, plus the direct action of the members of the Concerned White Citizens of Alabama, led to “the first and only documented march of Southern whites in support of blacks during the Civil Rights Movement in the South.”62

The local black community rejoiced when Dr. Martin Luther King showed up in Selma in January 1965. As the local movement merged with the national one, King generated attention for the Southern Civil Rights Movement like no one else. Over the next two months,

60 Anderson.
61 Helen Baer, Mary Y. Gonzalez, and Eileen Walbert memoirs.
marches and protests occurred almost daily. Tragically, so did the "jailings, beatings, starvings, and killings." Racial tensions permeated Selma by March 1965. The CWCA gave blacks more cause for joy.

The CWCA, seventy-two strong, arrived in Selma on a cold, crisp day March 6, 1965. They were met with encouragement at the Reformed Presbyterian Church given by James Bevel, a SCLC civil rights worker and Father Maurice Ouellet. To lighten the mood Bevel jokingly told the group that when he heard white citizens would march in Selma to support the black community he had decided, "that the Kingdom was coming right today!" Fortunately, the virulent segregationist Sheriff Jim Clark left town for the day, leaving the moderate Director of Public Safety, Wilson Baker in charge. The procession started on Broad Street. The CWCA members marched two by two toward the courthouse, holding signs that read "Silence Is No Longer Golden," or "Decent Alabamians Detest Police Brutality." For several blocks the group met no one other than "Saturday morning shoppers" who were surprised to see the procession. As the demonstrators "turned the corner at Alabama Avenue" folks arrived who were aware of why the Concerned White Citizens of Alabama were in Selma.

According to Rev. Ellwanger,

"As we walked the one block from Broad St. to Lauderdale St., and the Dallas County Courthouse on the far side of the intersection and on the right, we saw the people who had come to witness this unusual happening. There on our right, gathered in the middle of

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64 Abe and Florence Siegel, interview with Horace Huntley, April 15, 1999, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute Archives, Oral History Project, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, Birmingham, AL.
66 Joseph Ellwanger, email.
67 Ibid.
Lauderdale St., were about 100 white men (I didn’t see any women), roughly dressed and many of them armed with baseball bats or pipes, and using foul language to let us know what they thought of us. To our left, on the far side of the intersection, in the street and on the grassy area around the federal building were about 400 blacks giving us words of encouragement.”

Amelia Boynton Robinson, an outspoken activist during the Selma Civil Rights Movement recalled the events of the day, “I can never do justice to the great feeling of amazement and encouragement I felt when, perhaps for the first time in American history, white citizens of a Southern state banded together to come to Selma and show their indignation about the injustices against the African-Americans. On March 6, 1965, seventy-two concerned white citizens of Alabama came to Selma in protest. They had everything to lose, while we, the African-Americans, who were deprived and on the bottom rung of the salary scale, had nothing to lose and everything to gain.”

As the white segregationists jeered, whistled, cussed, and harassed the group, the sheriff’s department arrested a few for beating a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) photographer. The harassers attempted to create a smoke screen covering the CWCA path, however the wind blew the offensive smoke back onto the culprits. After reaching the courthouse steps, Rev. Ellwanger and the CWCA were met by Dallas County Sheriff Deputies. One deputy read a non-supportive telegram from Rev. Ellwanger’s bishop, Dr. Edgar Homrighausen. Rev. Ellwanger then read the group’s statement. Then as the group sang “America the Beautiful” with seventy-two voices, the segregationists tried to drown them out with their rendition of “Dixie”. A strong, deep black chorus across the street at the Federal Courthouse helped the CWCA finish “America” then proceeded to sing “We Shall Overcome”. One witness said it sounded like a battle of the choirs. Another compared the event to a religious experience. The Director of Public Safety, Wilson Baker, approached Rev. Ellwanger. He

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68 Robinson, 101.
recommended that the group return to the Reformed Presbyterian Church using Church St. As they walked back to the church, the members of the CWCA felt euphoric. When asked if they were ever frightened, Goldstein put it this way, "No, I was never frightened. I just always felt I was doing the right thing and I felt good about it".\(^{69}\)

The CWCA was not finished with their activism. They continued to meet through 1966. Gertrude Goldstein, along with two other women, visited Montgomery during March to meet with Governor Wallace and read him the CWCA Statement of Purpose. Governor Wallace refused to see them but allowed three nameless men to see them. Two of the men walked out before the group finished reading the statement. One man remained yet failed to make a single comment.\(^{70}\) The CWCA continued to take direction action. They raised money for the defense of Caliph Washington, a seventeen year old who was arrested, tried, and convicted for the murder of a Bessemer police officer. The CWCA members sought "actions we might take in order to be most effect in hastening civil rights in Alabama." Many members suffered repercussions for their activism. Gertrude and Fred Goldstein received threatening calls to their business. Local papers like the *Birmingham Independent* published hostile pieces about many members. Several lost their jobs. Reverend Ellwanger received threatening and intimidating telephone calls, forcing him to use guards at home and church. One member upon reflection of the time remarked, "We could have done more."\(^{71}\) When asked what she believed has been accomplished by the Concerned White Citizen March in Selma, Eileen Walbert reflected that, "It helped us individually, maybe, more than it helped anybody else."\(^{72}\)

From the origins in Progressive social feminism, Birmingham Jewish women activists immersed themselves in social activism throughout the 1960s. Dorah Sterne accepted a position on the Jefferson

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\(^{69}\) Gertrude Goldstein, interview with Horace Huntley.

\(^{70}\) Concerned White Citizens of Alabama, Minutes of Meeting, March 16, 1965, CWCA Box, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute Archives, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, Birmingham, AL.

\(^{71}\) Abe and Florence Siegel interview with Horace Huntley.

\(^{72}\) Helen Baer, Mary Y. Gonzalez, and Eileen Walbert memoirs.
Civil Rights

County Committee for Equal Opportunity in the 1968 fight against poverty. Betty Loeb served on the board for the Children’s Hospital for many years. And Gertrude Goldstein’s valiant efforts through the Panel of American Women (PAW) brought women of different ethnic, religious, and socio-economic status together. PAW would go into the community, make a five minute speech, and then take questions about personal experiences with local prejudice and discrimination. PAW spoke in “local schools, churches, and civic organizations—anywhere, in fact, from where an invitation could be secured.” Collectively, these southern Jewish women, and others just like them, proved to be unwavering in the fight against social injustice.

Conclusion

Many scholars of the civil rights movement argue that “most southern Jews held back from the civil rights struggle.” Many Jews remained guarded with public support of the black resistance for fear of an anti-Semitic reaction in the community or negative consequences affecting their economic interests. Yet, a study carried out among southern Jewish rabbis established that up to seventy-five percent of their congregation might be unsure about the black concerns. However, they all feel empathy for blacks. Scholar Leonard Dinnerstein suggests that most Southern Jews may not have openly supported black rights but a select few were different. It is important not to reduce the impact of these extraordinary Jewish women activists during the southern Civil Rights Movement. In Birmingham, Jewish women have always sustained an excellent reputation for their local charitable accomplishments. Not surprisingly, their move from non-radical reform

73 Webb, 160.
76 Ibid.
to radical reform propelled local women toward activism during the Southern Civil Rights Movement. Sterne, Loeb, and Goldstein fought against black injustice, white segregationists, and racial prejudice. They were a unified voice that could not be silenced.

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