175 Years of Vassar Temple:
"From Generation to Generation"

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Poughkeepsie's Vassar Temple builds on its heritage to look forward in serving a very broadly defined community.

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The year was 1845. Jacob Baker, Isaac Haiman, Herman Hart, Aaron Morris, and Solomon Scheldburger, all orthodox Jews, began gathering for prayer in Poughkeepsie, New York. Three years later, the group formally organized themselves as a Jewish synagogue, Congregation Brethren of Israel, and filed a petition for incorporation at the county clerk's office, making it the first organized Jewish institution in Dutchess County. By then, the congregation boasted some 16 to 20 families, and it elected its first board of trustees. For newcomers to

America, and to a small city with few Jewish dwellers, the temple provided a place of worship, a sense of community and important friendships, and a resource to help one another make their way in a new land. Situated on Hooker Avenue in Poughkeepsie since 1953, the temple stands as the oldest functioning Jewish congregation between New York City and Albany, and among the oldest congregations in the nation. Throughout its 175-year history, while adapting to social and cultural changes, the temple continued to be a place of worship, study, and a vehicle for building community. In the 20th and 21st centuries, the synagogue broadened its commitment to helping people make their way, serving not only temple members, but reaching out to others, Jews as well as non-Jews, in the city, the country, and the wider world.

The 1800s: The establishment of Vassar Temple

Before the early decades of the 19th century, their small numbers made it impossible for Poughkeepsie Jews to even contemplate organizing a synagogue.[1] Social changes on both sides of the Atlantic soon created conditions for the emergence of a small, settled Jewish community in Poughkeepsie.

Situated on the Hudson River, Poughkeepsie early on served as a transport for grain from the hinterlands; the opening of the Erie Canal in 1826 increased the town's role as a thoroughfare for farm goods. Taking advantage of water power made possible by local streams, the Poughkeepsie area also could boast small-scale manufacturing in textiles, shoes, and breweries. Though it never became a major city—the expansion of the railroad limited the growth of river towns

[1] DCHS historian Helen Wilkinson Reynolds recorded in her study of Hudson Valley homes that in the mid-18th century, "three Hebrews of New York City, "owned a house at 103 Market Street, now the site of the Mid-Hudson Library. Eva Effron Goldin, *The Jewish Community of Poughkeepsie, New York: An Anecdotal History* (Poughkeepsie: Maar Printing Service, 1982), 3. Helen Wilkinson Reynolds, "Dutch Homes of the Hudson Valley before 1776," quoted.

like Poughkeepsie—the city attracted transplants from Ireland, from Britain, and from Germany, including Ashkenazi Jews.[2]

And, German Jews left in the wake came to the US to escape economic challenges they were experiencing, as industrialization had squeezed out occupations among poorer Jews who had been peddlers. In the 1820s, Jews also faced new restrictions on their ability to marry. German Jews also left in the wake of the upheavals surrounding the 1848 revolutions. In their new homeland, they replicated the kind of jobs they had done for centuries in Europe, working in commerce.[3]

Many Poughkeepsie Jews started out as peddlers, men who strapped goods on their back, or loaded them into wagons, setting out to the rural hinterlands to provide rural Hudson Valley residents with a variety of items. Often the peddlers left the road to open up small stores of their own. Once they settled in the community, wives, from as close by as New York City or as far as Germany, could join them, as families now put down roots.[4]

The men who organized the new temple were mostly small shopkeepers, with businesses on Poughkeepsie's Main Street. Many were connected to the making and selling of clothes, typical occupations for American Jews. Jacob Baker and Aaron Morris were clothiers, while Herman Hart was a tailor who began as a peddler and Isaac Haiman, who also started as a peddler, owned a "fancy" store which sold

[2] Clyde and Sally Griffen, *Natives and Newcomers: The Ordering of Opportunities in Mid-Nineteenth Century Poughkeepsie* (Cambridge,MA:Harvard University Press,1978),2,3. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the vast majority of Jews who emigrated from Europe were Ashkenazi Jews, from France and Central and Eastern Europe. including Germany, Poland and Russia.

[3] Griffen and Griffen, 4; Effron, 10; Deborah Dash Moore, *The Urban Origins of American Judaism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014),25; Hasia Diner, "German Immigrant Period in the United States," Shavli/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women, https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/german-immigrant-period-in-united-states#pid-609;

[4] Hasia Diner, *Roads Taken:The Great Jewish Migration to the New World and the Peddlers Who Forged the Way* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015),53; Goldin, *The Jewish Community,* 9; Dana Gordon, "The Jewish Community in Poughkeepsie, New York in the Late Nineteenth Century,"undergraduate paper, March 1982,3.

fashion accessories such as ribbons, laces, hoop skirts, and corsets. Temple member Morris Baker became "an auctioneer of real estate and private property" in 1867.[5] The enterprising Samuel Schultz, an early officer of the temple, made and sold shoes and boots. For the 1859-60 city directory, he took out a full page advertisement, which included an eight-stanza poem. It began:

> Now hark the tidings, hear the news,
> All ye that want boots and shoes
> A splendid store I did behold
> Where boots and shoes are cheaply sold. [6]

German Jews arriving in America certainly enjoyed greater economic opportunities and privileges than they had experienced in Central Europe, yet they still faced antisemitism. So it was the case with Poughkeepsie Jews. As Poughkeepsie historians Clyde and Sally Griffen noted, "the stability and wealth of many Jewish firms did not affect substantially the general distrust of Jews." Credit reporters often questioned the ability of Jews to actually succeed honestly in business. Once they were well established, evaluators would note that these folks "were exceptions that did not disprove the rule." Thus, early on, the credit reporter recommended that temple founder Isaac Haiman not be extended funds. When he became a proprietor of a clothing store, with "nice goods," with a reported worth of "$20,000 in 1866" (about $500,000 in today's money), he was judged "a fair man for a Jew."[7]

A house of worship, study, and assembly, as well as an institution that provided shelter for the harsh judgements of the wider world, Brethren of Israel grew along with the Jewish community.[8] Though the temple was still residing in a meeting room downtown, the congregation of about 16-20 families turned to the important business of purchasing

5 Goldin, *The Jewish. Community*, 189,13; Griffen and Griffen, *Natives and Newcomers,*121.
[6] Goldin, *The Jewish Community*, 4,5.
[7] Griffen and Griffen, *Natives and Newcomers,*122-123.
[8] https://www.britannica.com/topic/synagogue is one source for this traditional definition of the synagogue's purpose.

a cemetery. In Jewish tradition, one can assemble anywhere to participate in communal prayer, which requires ten people. Not even the presence of a rabbi is necessary, and in the early years the congregation used traveling rabbis when they could but, also, relied on its own members to conduct services.[9] However, traditional rituals regarding death require that Jews be buried only alongside other Jews. In 1857, the temple purchased land on Mansion Street (renamed after World War I as Pershing Street), which served until 1875, when the congregation purchased the still-used cemetery at Lagrange and Davis Avenues in the town of Poughkeepsie.

The growing congregation with approximately 30 families installed its first resident rabbi, Jacob Heilbron, in 1868. The group now needed a building of its own to accommodate the community. The temple did what other American Jewish congregations often did in the mid-1800s—they bought a building originally built as a church. The Old Congregational Church at Vassar and Mill Streets was close enough so that Jews could walk, rather than ride, to shabbat services, a requirement of Jewish ritual. In 1868, the temple purchased the building, taking out a $3,000 mortgage from Matthew Vassar Jr., nephew of the Vassar College founder. The location then inspired the nickname of the congregation, Vassar Temple (VT), which is still used today.[10]

The move to Vassar Street not only provided proper space for the congregation. Taking a new building was also an opportunity for the temple to announce itself to the local community. The historian Deborah Dash Moore writes, "synagogues represented Judaism on the civic stage, exemplifying public religious diversity and the inclusion of non-Christians in American urban society." Despite their understanding that antisemitism was alive and well in America, or perhaps because of it, the Poughkeepsie temple members, like Jews in other cities, chose to celebrate publicly the congregation's move into their own building, even inviting civic leaders to the consecration service.

[9] Charter Granted to Vassar Temple 100 Years Ago," *Poughkeepsie Sunday New Yorker*, February 29, 1948, n.p.

[10] On Jewish congregations using formerly Christian churches, and using the street names to name their temples, see Moore, *The Urban Origins, 24, 152.*

The opening of new temple buildings in America were moments for "elaborately staged performances, including processions where congregants carried the Torah (the sacred five books of the old testament) scrolls into the new building for placing in the ark…[that] showcased Jewish aspirations and achievements." So it was in Poughkeepsie in September 1868. The event included not only the carrying of the Torah but a large procession that began at the old synagogue on Main Street, ending at the new building. Street processions, including ethnic parades, were not new sights for mid-19th century urban residents; but this sight, to celebrate a Jewish temple, must have been novel for most Poughkeepsians. The *Poughkeepsie Daily Eagle* covered the event in detail, telling its readers the precise order of the march,

> …the Eastman Band, 25 girls in white, carrying flowers, the sacred scrolls carried by two men under a canopy, Rev. Dr. Vivader of New York, and Reverend [Sigmund] Isaac, the new minister [rabbi] in robes, members of the Aaron Lodge B'nai Brith [a German Jewish fraternal organization that assisted new immigrants], and other similar lodges from Newburgh and Hudson.[11]

Forty years later, when the temple wanted to pay off its remaining mortgage, the members again turned to a public event. In those days, fairs and exhibitions were all the rage, from local occurrences to world fairs in Paris, Chicago, and St. Louis . In 1906, Vassar Temple hosted a three-day Novelty Fair and Exhibition at the Columbus Institute in Poughkeepsie. It included a "display of fine Irish lace and embroidery, fortune telling, opera stars, and dancing nightly, from 10 PM to midnight." The event, scheduled from March 6-8 (weekdays that year), was so successful that the fair was extended for the rest of the week. Poughkeepsie Mayor George M. Hine opened the festivities, describing the exhibits as "the finest ever displayed in the city. " If these events were designed to help non-Christians integrate into American urban society, Mayor Hine accommodated the desire in his opening

[11] Moore, *The Urban Origins, 5, 37,36;* "Consecration of the New Synagogue, Achim of Israel," *Poughkeepsie Daily Eagle*, September 15, 1868, n.p.

remarks, lauding "the Jew as a useful and patriotic citizen and member of every community."[12]

Into the 20th century: the Growth of Vassar Temple and the Rise of Reform Judaism

By the turn of the 20th century, Vassar Temple was an established congregation, with German Jews as the mainstay of the community. The establishment of other Poughkeepsie synagogues during those years and, to some extent, the growth of Vassar Temple were the result of a new and vastly larger wave of Jewish immigrants to the US, mostly from Eastern Europe, principally from Russia and Poland but also the eastern provinces of the Austria-Hungarian empire. During the last decades of the 19th century, life for Eastern European Jews became increasingly hard, with continuing restrictions on their ability to earn a living; in the areas under Russian control, they endured organized, violent attacks, (pogroms). In response, from the 1870s to 1914, millions of Jews set out for communities in Western Europe, South Africa, and, especially, the United States.

Eastern European Jews arriving in Poughkeepsie often began, like the earlier immigrants, as peddlers in the streets of the city, later opening up stores. Others began as artisans, for example, as shoemakers, or watchmakers. Many ended up in the Hudson Valley because they had relatives in the area. Most arrived impoverished; they tended to cluster together on the streets of "downtown" Poughkeepsie, west of Market Street, while the more prosperous German Jews lived east of Market. As the new Yiddish-speaking immigrant community grew, five kosher butchers sprung up to serve the community, along with kosher delicatessens. Even though the prosperous German Jews often reached out to aid the arrivals, as in other Jewish American settlements, the

[12]"Novelty Fair and Exposition, Benefit of Congregation Brethren of Israel," *Poughkeepsie Eagle-News,* March,1,1906,n.p.; "On the 160th Anniversary of Vassar Temple," June 24, 2013, https://vassartemple.org/vt-160th-anniversary/; "Charter Granted to Vassar Temple,"n.p.

newcomers often felt the older settlers were elitists who looked down on Eastern European arrivals.[13]

By 1920, Jews made up about 9% of the Poughkeepsie population of 35,000 people, about three times the percentage of Jews in the American population as a whole.[14] Along with other synagogues, Vassar Temple continued to attract local residents. In the early 20th century, the temple conducted worship services but also social affairs. In the 1920s, the temple hosted a Youth Folks League, which included boys and girls, as well as a Boy Scout troop, bible classes, literary and social clubs, and boasted the sisterhood, an active women's group affiliated with the New York State Federation of Sisterhoods, with a membership of 100 that included non-temple member Jewish women. Sisterhood women gathered to socialize, support temple functions, and discuss topics of interest to them as Jews, as women, and as members of American society. The group often hosted professors from nearby Vassar College, who spoke to them on various topics related to their work. [15]

Vassar Temple women added their sisterhood activities to busy lives not only tending to home and children, but often, assisting in the family business. Helping in family enterprises was common for Jewish women wherever small scale enterprises were dependent on the labor of kin. Since families often lived above their stores, women would do both domestic caretaking and the work of the business on any given day. Elma Samuels Rosenberg, born in 1911, recalling the VT sisterhood of her mother's day, noted that most of the women "helped their husbands in their Main Street stores…Mrs. Greenfield (children's clothing), Mrs. King (King's Court Hotel)…Mrs. Rosenstein

[13] Arthur Levinsohn, Interview by Marjorie Katz, April 28, 1992, 1, in Vassar Temple archives. On Jewish residential patterns, see also Harvey Flad and Clyde Griffen, *Main Street to Main Frames: Landscape and Social Change in Poughkeepsie*, (Albany: State University of New York, 2009), 75.

[14] "Study of the Jewish community in Poughkeepsie," author unknown, date circa 1925,3,4. Paper available in Vassar Temple archives, Vassar Temple, Poughkeepsie, NY.

[15] Congregation Brethren of Israel (Vassar Temple), *Monthly Bulletin* 1:23, April 18, 1924; "Study of the Jewish community in Poughkeepsie, 16,-18; Elma Samuels Rosenberg," Sarah Peles Samuels, Joseph Samuels, and the Vassar Temple Sisterhood," March 25, 1993,3, in VT archives.

(toys)." Frances Rosen, wife of Morris, owner of a store specializing in millinery and jewelry, made hats for FDR's mother, Sara, and other Delanos. She was even invited to Roosevelt's first inauguration in 1933. Sometimes, among the new immigrants with little means, when necessary, mothers would sometimes "stick their infants in barrels," to help out a customer in the store. By the 1920s, many sisterhood women had the resources to employ domestic servants, which made their busy lives easier.[16]

One important activity of the early sisterhood was assisting at the early religious school. All of the local synagogues, including Vassar Temple, already supported a community Hebrew school, which was established in 1919. In the 1920s, with a membership of about 125, the temple organized its own informal religious school, held on Sundays, staffed by the rabbi and likely held in sisterhood members' homes; by the mid-1920s, they were meeting in a temple classroom. With the encouragement of Vassar College President Henry Noble McCracken, Jewish students at the college helped staff the religious school; Vassar students still do this today.[17]

During those years, the congregation moved beyond building community among its members. Committed to the Jewish tradition *Tikkun Olam* ("repair the world"), the temple called attention to the social issues of the day.[18] The monthly temple bulletins in the mid-1920s carried the slogan "A Religious Center for Community Service" just beneath the temple name. In 1923, Rabbi Charles Mantinband, who would devote his entire life to progressive causes, organized a City of Justice at the temple religious school. The City of Justice was "an organization of student self-government, enabling and encouraging

[16] Dana Gordon, "The Jewish Community in Poughkeepsie,, 3.; Elma Samuels Rosenberg, "Sarah Peles Samules, Joseph Samuels and the Vassar Temple Sisterhood," 2; Goldin, "The Jewish Community," 135. The domestic servants were likely non Jewish immigrants, or children of immigrants, from elsewhere in Europe.

[17] Jesse Effron, "The Jewish Community in Dutchess County", talk given on May 19,1998, 4; VT archives; Goldin, *The Jewish Community,* 37.

[18] The term Tikkun Olam has come to mean, in modern times, the commitment to social justice and social action. Its origins are from ancient Rabbinic literature. https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/tikkun-olam-repairing-the-world/

the citizens of the Sunday School community to translate into their child life the very principles and ideals in the class rooms." Both boys and girls held offices, which included mayor and vice mayor, with chairs of various departments such as social service and justice. [19]

Many American Jewish women at the turn of the 20th century took a special interest in the social issues of the day. Even before they had the power to vote, American women activists were defining a new role for themselves in the public arena by claiming expertise on particular issues that affect women, such as child labor laws, conditions of working women, sanitation, housing and the challenges of raising families in poor immigrant neighborhoods. Just as women in elite non-Jewish circles joined civic clubs to work on social reform, so too did prosperous Jewish women. For example, the temple sisterhood president in 1924, Josephine Kahn, a member of a prosperous German Jewish family, would go on to also serve as temple president in 1934, certainly one of the first women in America to serve in that capacity. She was not only a stalwart of the temple, as was her husband, she was a mainstay of the Young Men's Hebrew Association and the Poughkeepsie public library.[20] The temple encouraged activism on the social issues of the day, including the efforts of women social reformers to pass a constitutional amendment banning child labor. At sabbath services on Friday January 8, 1924, the temple announced Rabbi Mantinband would be preaching on "America's Shame: The Crime of Child

Above: Josephine Kahn, who became temple president in 1934, one of the first women in the US to hold such a position. *The Poughkeepsie Sunday New Yorker*. February 29, 1948, page 12.

[19] Congregation Brethren of Israel (Vassar Temple*) Monthly Bulletin* 1:10, January 18, 1924, 1.

[20] Paper by Mrs. Charles Mantinband, VT archives, **1**926. n.p. Today, there are several families with seventh generation descendants, including the Kahn family, who are active temple members.

Labor." A Miss Elinor Goldmark of Vassar College (a sophomore at the time), the notice said, would also be speaking.[21]

At the same time that the temple was engaging in the larger Poughkeepsie community, it was turning away from some traditional rituals of Jewish worship. The Reform Jewish movement, which began taking hold in the United States in the late 1800s, was by the early 20th century, making its mark at Vassar Temple. Gertrude Friedman Weiss recalled that although her parents belonged to Anshe Ungarn (where women and men sat separately for worship), unlike her brothers, who had to attend the parents' synagogue for bar mitzvah, she was allowed to go to Vassar; she liked that the men and women sat together, and she attended religious school classes, in English on Sundays. At age 13 in 1914, she was one of the first adolescents to celebrate confirmation at the temple, as an affirmation of one's commitment, through study, to the religious community.[22]

Reform Judaism emphasized the need to adopt religious practices that reflected modern American life. The Reform movement encouraged the adoption of English as part of the worship service in order that temple members could more easily understand the meaning of the prayers. To the surprise of the new Eastern European immigrants, Rabbi Sigmund Israel (serving from 1910-1922) began introducing English versions of the psalms and in other parts of the worship service. In 1923, new rabbi Morris Clarke decreed that no *keepahs* (head coverings for men) could be worn at Vassar Temple. That decision proved to be too much for some congregants; 13 families left and eventually formed a new congregation that became the Conservative synagogue in Poughkeepsie, Temple Beth El. In 1923, VT adopted the Union Hebrew Prayerbook, completing the process of adopting Reform Judaism. In 1951, the temple joined the organization of reform temples, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.[23]

[21] Congregation Brethren of Israel (Vassar Temple), *Monthly Bulletin* 1:10, January 1924, frontispiece.

[22] Gertrude Friedman Weiss, interview by Deborah Satz Scheer, June 8, 1993, 4-8, VT archives. Anshe Ungram was founded by Hungarian Jews.

[23] Arthur Levinshohn, Interview, 5; Goldin, *The Jewish Community,* 37. Keepahs are the traditional caps used by men to fulfill the requirement that their heads be covered while in prayer, or, in the case of traditional Orthodoxy, at all times.

At a time when many Jewish immigrants were arriving in the United States, the adoption of Reform Judaism was partly a reflection of a desire to assimilate Jews into the practices of the dominant culture. Such efforts were not enough to stave off the continuing reality of antisemitism. Vassar Temple youth experienced this reality when they found themselves excluded from Poughkeepsie High School fraternities and sororities. In 1923, a group of boys consulted Rabbi Mantinband, who then helped them organize their own social club, which met at the temple. Named the Harding Club, after recently-deceased President of the United States Warren G. Harding, what started as a youth social club became an ongoing adult men's club for Jewish men in Poughkeepsie, still in existence today.

If club exclusion was the softer side of antisemitism, Hudson Valley Jews experienced the more strident, potentially dangerous kind, when the Ku Klux Klan, enjoying a renaissance in the 1920s in many parts of the country, made its mark in Dutchess County. The post-World War I era saw an explosion of anti-Black and anti-immigrant sentiment in the US, along with antisemitism. The upsurge in nativism would result in a draconian immigration law in 1924. Celebrated by the Klan, it practically barred the immigration of Jews and others from Eastern and Southern Europe to the United States, as well as Asians.[24] That same year, according to Jesse Effron and Eva Goldin, the Klan held a parade and meeting in Poughkeepsie. This invitation-only event was attended by approximately 3,000 people, who came from neighboring counties as well. One temple member, businessman Simon King, somehow obtained an invitation. One explanation was that he mistakenly received the invitation that was intended for another prominent businessman, John D. King. Simon apparently denounced the organization and once recognized, he was severely beaten by a number of attendees, with state troopers apparently standing by.[25]

The 1930s brought other challenges for the Jewish community regarding antisemitism. In 1933, one of the temple leaders, Albert D. Kahn, reached out to the prominent Reform rabbi and progressive reformer,

[24] The Immigration Act of 1924 was not completely overturned until 1965.
[25] Goldin, *The Jewish Community, 178;* Jessie Effron, "The Jewish Community," 5.

Stephen Wise, head of the American Jewish Congress, an outspoken leader known for his warnings about the rise of Nazism.[26] Kahn wrote to the rabbi to express his concern about a professor of German at Vassar College, Magdalene Schindelin, who had given a talk at St. Peter's Church that justified Hitler's recent declaration of Jews in Germany as enemies of the state, arguing that since they arrived in Germany after World War I the Eastern European Jews were responsible for all the known cases of corruption in the country. Kahn expressed concern for the Jewish students at Vassar who might be taught by the professor and asked Wise to speak to college president Henry N. MacCracken, a man the rabbi knew well. Wise did not take up Kahn's suggestion; while he agreed that this was a very serious matter, he advised that the matter be taken up with the church, rather than the college.[27]

In addition to the rise of fascism and antisemitism, in the 1930s both the United States and Europe experienced deep economic depression. During the Great Depression, activists in the Jewish community worked to assist those among them who were especially hard hit. In 1933, at the height of the crisis, a group of men organized the Hebrew Sheltering Society to assist the Jewish unemployed, particularly the women and men who landed in Poughkeepsie while traveling the highways and riding the trains, looking for work. The society collected money from those who could afford to contribute so that they could pay families $1.50 to take in the travelers for one night and provide them with one meal. For most this meant contributing between 25 cents and a dollar. The biggest contributor by far was temple member George Salberg, owner of the men's clothing store M. Schwartz, an institution on Main Street for over 100 years, who regularly donated $15.00. During and after WWII, the focus of charitable giving shifted

[26] The American Jewish Congress was founded after World War I as a political liberal organization working for the equal rights of all Americans, and also advocating for Jewish rights around the world. See https://ajcongress.org/about/

[27] "Hitler Upheld in Local Talk," *The Poughkeepsie Eagle -News*, May 4, 1933, 1. Correspondence between Albert Kahn and Stephen Wise in possession of Albert Kahn's daughter, temple member Muriel Lampell. Whether the matter was ever taken up with the church is not known.

to the needs of European Jewish refugees and to support for the newly created state of Israel. [28]

Community building involved organized charity, but the temple reinforced a sense of connection among Jews through friendships. In 1934, the members organized the Men's Club, which provided assistance to the worship programs, help in fundraising, and, very importantly, social opportunities for the congregation's men. In a city with a small Jewish population, Vassar Temple, like the other synagogues, had an especially important role in connecting Jews with one another. Larry Edell recalled that in 1940, when he moved to Poughkeepsie to open a women's clothing store, a woman walked into his store as he and his wife were setting it up and asked if he was Jewish. When he said yes, she introduced herself as Belle Sacher. The high holidays were approaching and she asked him where he was going to attend services. When he answered that he didn't even know if there was a temple in Poughkeepsie or other Jewish people, Mrs. Sacher responded, "Yes, we have a wonderful temple and I would like you to be our guests for the High Holy Days." Edell continued, "Irene and I attended services at Vassar Temple. The people welcomed us with open arms. We made wonderful, wonderful friends…And that was the beginning of loving Poughkeepsie, loving our Temple, working for our Temple and making a life for ourselves here in Poughkeepsie." [29]

The American entry into World War II in 1941 touched the Vassar Temple, now with a membership of about 100 families, both directly and indirectly. Twenty-nine members of the congregation or the sons or daughters of family members served in the war. At home the temple hosted a Mobile Blood Bank, part of its work in the Red Cross Emergency Hospital.[30]

[28] Melvin Matlin, "A history of Vassar Temple, " December 7, 1963, written by the temple president on the 115h Anniversary of the temple, 2; Arthur Levinsohn, speech at Vassar Temple Sisterhood Meeting, November 27, 1989, 9,11, , Levinsohn, Interview, 5, all in VT archives. See also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Jewish_Appeal, https://www.jewishdutchess.org/ .

[29] Larry Edell Interview by Marjorie Katz, April 22, 1992, , 8, 9. VT archives.

[30] Marjorie Katz, Documentary History of Vassar Temple, from the The Jewish Federation of Dutchess County, *The Voice* , May, 1998, VT archives.

From the Post-War Era into the 21st Century

After World War II, the growing US economy provided opportunities for second- and third-generation American Jews to find good jobs and continue to prosper in small business; many used GI Bill benefits to pursue higher education or purchase homes. Some of these young Jewish adults, ready to start families, arrived in Dutchess County. In addition to business entrepreneurs, the community now consisted of many professionals, engineers who worked for IBM, doctors, dentists, and lawyers. Dutchess County Jews now spread out further from downtown Poughkeepsie, finding homes further away in the city or in the town and surrounding communities.

Vassar Temple grew after the war, at a time when Jews throughout the US turned to synagogues. In the early 1900s, many immigrant Jews who arrived in American cities were not religious; in those early days, Jews didn't need synagogues to maintain their identities. Many lived in neighborhoods with other Jews, kept kosher, and even observed the holidays without a temple. As the Jewish "way of life" waned by the second half of the 20th century, especially as Jews moved to the outer areas of cities or to the suburbs, joining a temple was an important way of maintaining one's identity in an era of greater prosperity and cultural assimilation. And, after the Holocaust, temple membership and a strong commitment to the state of Israel became important ways for Jews to assert their identity in a meaningful way, for themselves and, importantly, to the larger society.[31]

In 1948, with the temple growing quickly, the synagogue celebrated its centennial, with member Henry Morgenthau, a long-time Dutchess County resident and former US Secretary of the Treasury under FDR, serving as honorary chair of the gala committee. As part of the centennial celebration, leaders turned in earnest to the construction of a new building. With property on Hooker Avenue donated by Richard Satz, and an additional piece of adjacent land on Underhill Avenue made

[31] Moore, *The Urban Origins*, 56,57; on the increasing importance of Zionism among post-war Poughkeepsie Jews, see Levinsohn, interview, April 29, 1992 , 5.

possible by the purchase of ten anonymous temple members, the congregation began construction in 1952, with completion in May 1953. [32]

Above: Groundbreaking for the Hooker Avenue temple. *Poughkeepsie New Yorker*, July 12, 1952, page 1. Left to Right, Richard H. Satz, Rabbi Alton Winters, George Salboro, Temple President Dr. Jacob Erdreich, with spade.

The move to Hooker Avenue called to mind the traditions of the move in 1868, with the congregation designating a special day for different temple members to bring the candelabras, Torahs, prayer books, and the Eternal Light. Despite the intense fundraising for the new building, the temple did not have money to furnish the bare building; thus they improvised. Determined to hold High Holiday services in the new building in 1953, Al and Elma Rosenberg provided an old closet for an Ark to hold the torahs, covered cinder blocks were used for the first *bimah* (pulpit), while a local funeral parlor and IBM donated folding chairs. Edell recalled that at the first Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services, "we had no carpeting…the creaking of the chairs…made it

[32] "Charter Granted to Vassar Temple 100 Years Ago," *Poughkeepsie Sunday New Yorker* ", 12A; On the 160th Anniversary of Vassar Temple in 2008," June 24, 2013 https://vassartemple.org/vt-160th-anniversary, Matlin, "A history of Vassar Temple, 2.

difficult to pay attention to the service itself, but everybody had tears in their eyes that…we were in our new temple.[33]

With continued hard work, which included fundraising, the congregation added pews, carpeting, and an ark, and it renovated and added rooms. In 1954, the sisterhood was proud to host its most famous neighbor, Eleanor Roosevelt, still living in Hyde Park, at an event in their new social hall, which opened that year.

The sisterhood hosting Eleanor Roosevelt in the new social hall, 1954. Left to Right: Rose Kraut (likely), Mildred Gould, Claire Montel (possibly), Marion Richards, and Katherine Michel. *Vassar Temple archives*.

The post-war years saw the expansion of social and recreational activities at American temples, as well as at Jewish community centers. Synagogues, according to Deborah Dash Moore, responding to "the competition from commercial recreation " in the larger society, offered "theater, higher education classes, lectures, dance, and music," as part of temple membership.[34] At Vassar Temple, Belle Sacher, with a back-

[33] Edell interview, April 28, 1992, 9,10.
[34] Moore, *The Urban Origins,* 58.

ground in theater, began putting together musical reviews and skits at temple gala events. One show in 1950, "The Red Mill," generated so much community interest that it had to be moved from the Masonic Temple to Arlington High School. When the new temple opened, the Vassar Temple Players put on two or three shows in the new space before Sacher retired the enterprise in the 1950s. In their heyday, the Players helped the temple by fundraising but were actually a crucial part of the temple's social life, and in Sacher's words gave people "confidence to do the things they had never done before."[35]

When the move to Hooker Avenue was completed, the temple had 175 member families, with about 80 children in the religious school. By the early 1960s, as the baby boomers came of school age, the religious school boasted an enrollment of some 200 children. Today, the religious school no longer enrolls that many pupils, but it remains a vibrant part of the temple experience for member families; in 2013, the temple named the school after the recently- deceased Seth Erlebacher, president of the temple who died in 2011, at the young age of 46. Erlebacher had prioritized enhancing the educational experience of the students. That same year, the temple expanded its educational offerings by creating its own Hebrew school at the temple. In recent decades (and continuing today), adult temple members participate in various opportunities to learn together under the leadership of the rabbis, including Torah study and the tenets of Reform Judaism. And the Adult Education Committee organizes a variety of programs to bring speakers on various topics of interest to the Jewish community. [36]

In his prayer consecrating the new building in 1953, Rabbi Alton Winters told the audience that the construction was never a final goal in itself. "With cold stone and steel, we cannot serve Thee. Only by our lives and the deeds of those who come after can Thy name be truly praised."[37] In the decades since Winters spoke those words, those

[35] Isabel Crystal Sacher, Interviewed by Marjorie Kaz, April 21, 1992, 4-13; quote is 11, Vassar Temple archives

[36] On adult education opportunities, see Lisa-Sue Quackenbush, "President's 175th Anniversary Gala Message," in possession of the author.

[37] "On the Dedication of the New Vassar Temple Building in 1953," https://vassartem-

deeds included honoring Jewish traditions such as temple restoration, adapting to social and cultural changes within Reform Judaism and the society at large, and working on social justice initiatives in the community.

Part of tending to traditions in these past decades has meant restoring the material remnants of the past. In 1981, under the leadership of temple president Elaine Lipschutz, members embarked on a clean-up program for the Pershing Avenue cemetery, which was in deplorable condition; since then, a special committee tends to the burial ground. In 2008, to restore four of the temple torahs, member Sandra Mamis and a committee successfully enlisted a professional *sofer*, someone who can repair old and deteriorating torah scrolls in accordance with Jewish law. In 2024, the temple continued this task.

Temple President Elaine Lipschutz with the newly installed stained-glass windows. *The Poughkeepsie Journal*. September 4, 1980, page 35.

Honoring the old also went hand in hand with constructing the new. In 1979 and 1980, the temple installed three new stained-glass windows.

ple.org/dedication-of-building-1953/

In September 1980, the dedication of one of the windows, in honor of the five founders, depicted the harvest and thanksgiving holiday of *Sukkot*. Rabbi Stephen Arnold saluted the temple's long tradition of caring for each other in times of sorrow and joy, and also "sharing the harvest with the stranger, the poor, and the helpless." [38] This commitment has truly been a hallmark of the recent decades, and it has meant significant work with other organizations in Dutchess County. In 1972, the temple became a founding member of the Dutchess Interfaith Council (DCIC), an "inclusive vehicle for cooperative religious endeavor in the county."[39] The council promotes understanding and tolerance between religious and racial groups and fosters cooperative action in providing for those in need in the community, including help for refugees and the annual Crop Walk to fight hunger. The temple also works with the Dutchess County Jewish Federation as well as the Mid-Hudson Islamic Association on various community projects. Since 1985, the temple's Social Action Committee has been providing lunches on a regular basis for those in need at The Dutchess Outreach Lunch Box in Poughkeepsie. In 1986, the sisterhood took responsibility for providing survival kits for battered women and children at Grace Smith House. In 2023, in recognition of its decades of social action in the community, the DCIC awarded Vassar Temple its Legacy Award.

Over the past 60 years, movements for social justice emerged throughout the United States and in the local community. The feminist mobilization of the 1970s profoundly affected Reform Judaism, which ordained its first female rabbi in 1972. Vassar Temple currently is served by a female rabbi and cantor. Prayer books now make use of gender-neutral language. In the 1960s, social justice movements turned to promoting democracy and participation of ordinary Americans at the grassroots. So, too, at the temple, during services, prayers are led by members as well as the rabbi. To a greater extent than earlier, the congregation participates in singing along with the cantor. The resurgence of ethnic pride throughout the country, beginning in the 1970s, had

[38] "Remarks delivered by Rabbi Stephen Arnold for the dedication of the "Sukkot Window" to the Founders of Vassar Temple," September 5, 1980, VT archives.
[39] https://www.dutchesscountyinterfaith.org/History

its effect on Reform Judaism as well; traditions that were abandoned early in the 20th century have returned. At Vassar Temple, services incorporate more Hebrew and many men, and women, use *keepahs* and prayer shawls.[40]

Important social changes not only affected traditions at the temple. Outside the temple walls, congregants have remained active participants in efforts to build a better world. During the 1980s, the temple participated in campaigns on behalf of Jews facing antisemitism in the Soviet Union. In 1982, the congregation adopted a Russian refugee family. Continuing the tradition of support for and outreach to refugees, in 2016, the temple became a founding member of the Mid-Hudson Resettlement Project. As early as 1982, the sisterhood was educating its membership about protecting women's reproductive rights. Today, Vassar Temple continues its tradition of social service and the pursuit of social justice, including initiatives to combat racism, foster inclusion in the temple community, and protect the environment. During election season, the Civic Engagement Committee mobilizes postcard writing campaigns to remind people across the country to vote.[41]

In worship and in celebrations, Jews often invoke the phrase "from generation to generation," in Hebrew *l'dor vador*, which "signifies the perpetual obligation to pass on rituals, traditions and knowledge, indeed, the collective heritage of the Jewish people."[42] On the occasion of the temple's 175th Anniversary gala, Rabbi Altman invoked that ancient Jewish phrase in her blessing:

May Vassar Temple, our beloved congregation, go *m'chayil l'chayil,* from strength to strength, *l'dor vador*, from generation to generation—from the generation of our founders 175 years ago to the future generations yet to be.[43]

[40] Rabbi Renni Altman, "Notes for Anniversary Service," April 9, 2024, in possession of the author.
[41] On the temple's community and social action initiatives see Quackenbush, "President's 175 Anniversary Gala Message."
[42] Emma Grace Sinkoff, "L'dor V'dor: From Generation to Generation," Jan 19, 2020, https://sites.psu.edu/academy/2020/01/19/ldor-vdor-from-generation-to-generation/
[43] "Anniversary Gala Blessing," April 14, 2024.

A growing temple, with a membership of over 180 member households, the congregation looks to future generations yet to be who will, through their own innovations and their commitment to traditions, continue writing the history of Vassar Temple.

Above: Vassar Temple on Hooker Avenue, n.d., Vassar. Inset: artist sketch earlier site. *Temple archives.*