

# Some Jewels of Maine

**JEWISH MAINE PIONEERS**

**BY CELIA C. RISEN**



**Shirley Povich  
Louise Nevelson  
Lillian Berliawsky**

**Summer Bernstein  
Sam & Saul Stern  
Philip W. Lown**

**Esther Lipman  
Sophia Slosberg  
Morris Sacknoff**

## James Albert Abramson

Albert Abramson, born in Portland on November 4, 1905, to Rose and Lazarus Abramson, who had come from the Ukraine and Lithuania, was retired from Bowdoin College when I met him. This courtly gentleman taught economics for thirty-four years while he served in many capacities in Maine, Europe, and Washington during leaves of absence.

According to *Who's Who*, "Jim" earned a master's degree in economics at Columbia University in New York in 1927. He joined the faculty as the first Jew to be hired by Bowdoin and taught as a professor from 1928 to 1947 and then became dean of the faculty from 1950 to 1961.

Meantime, he served in the U.S. Army as a private in the OSS, contacting members of the Refugee Underground under Major Arthur Goldberg (later a justice on the Supreme Court) and with Henry Morgenthau (later secretary of the U.S. Treasury). He worked for Raoul Wallenberg, who wanted gold in order to rescue people from the Nazis. He met Sol E. Mayer of the United Jewish Appeal, who offered to exchange lorries with Nazis to rescue refugees.

His experience in the National Refugee Service in 1928 and the Works Progress Administration in 1934 was possible under President K.C. Sills, the liberal president of Bowdoin.

After World War II he became assistant secretary to Louis Schwellenbach in the Department of Labor under President Harry Truman. He was executive director of the Jewish Occupational

Council from 1934 to 1937; executive director of the National Refugee Service in New York from 1941 to 1943; and he became assistant director of the War Refugee Board in Washington from 1944 to 1945. After that he served in the Department of Labor, the National Labor Relations Board, the President's Materials Policy Commission, and U.S. Civil rights Commission in Washington.

By 1955 he served United Jewish Appeal as an economist. Then he began to work for the State Department on the Panel of Mediators and the Economic Advisory Board. In addition, he was chairman of a commission of U.S. civil rights from 1958 to 1960, on the National Manpower Commission in New York, and on the board of directors of the American Cancer Society. In 1969 he was an economist on price policy in the Department of Commerce in Washington.

He told me he never had trouble identifying with Jews in Portland, where he spoke for the United Jewish Appeal and aided about a hundred families on the Maine W.P.A. Even as a student at Columbia, he ate only kosher food. Since there were few students at Bowdoin who identified themselves as Jews, he had the "Yom Kippur test." If they were absent that day, he assumed they were Jews. He was unhappy with the "hippie" culture; he didn't think the hippies who came to Maine contributed to the state. As a fund raiser he learned that people give when they are insecure; in the 1950s and 1960s he had no trouble raising money.

He lived alone near Bowdoin, but ill health prevented him from serving the college he loved. He received an honorary doctorate in 1976. Many people in Maine gratefully acknowledged his help in writing legislation and speeches to raise money for the needy. Representative Benjamin Stern, Biddeford, acknowledged his help in drafting legislation during his two terms. *Who's Who* lists only his work, but this gentle person is especially remembered for his kindness and erudition by his former students and associates at Bowdoin.