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# Alamoer's

magazine

## Still Time to Get Into a Good College

Benjamin Fine

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The Extreme Jews

Tom Wicker

George Wallace:

A Gross and Simple

Heart

Also

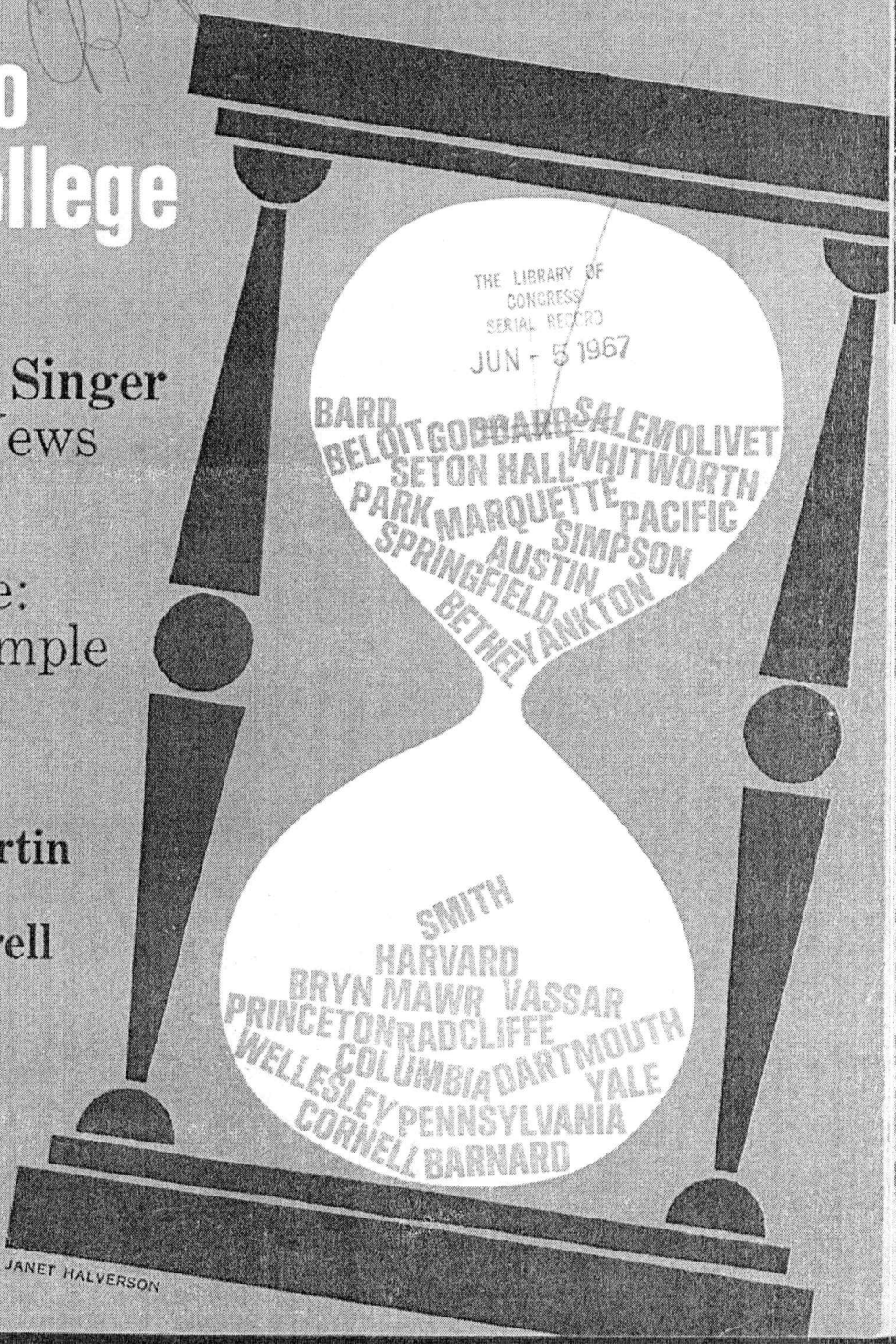
John Bartlow Martin

Milton Friedman

Mrs. Randall Jarrell

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JANET HALVERSON

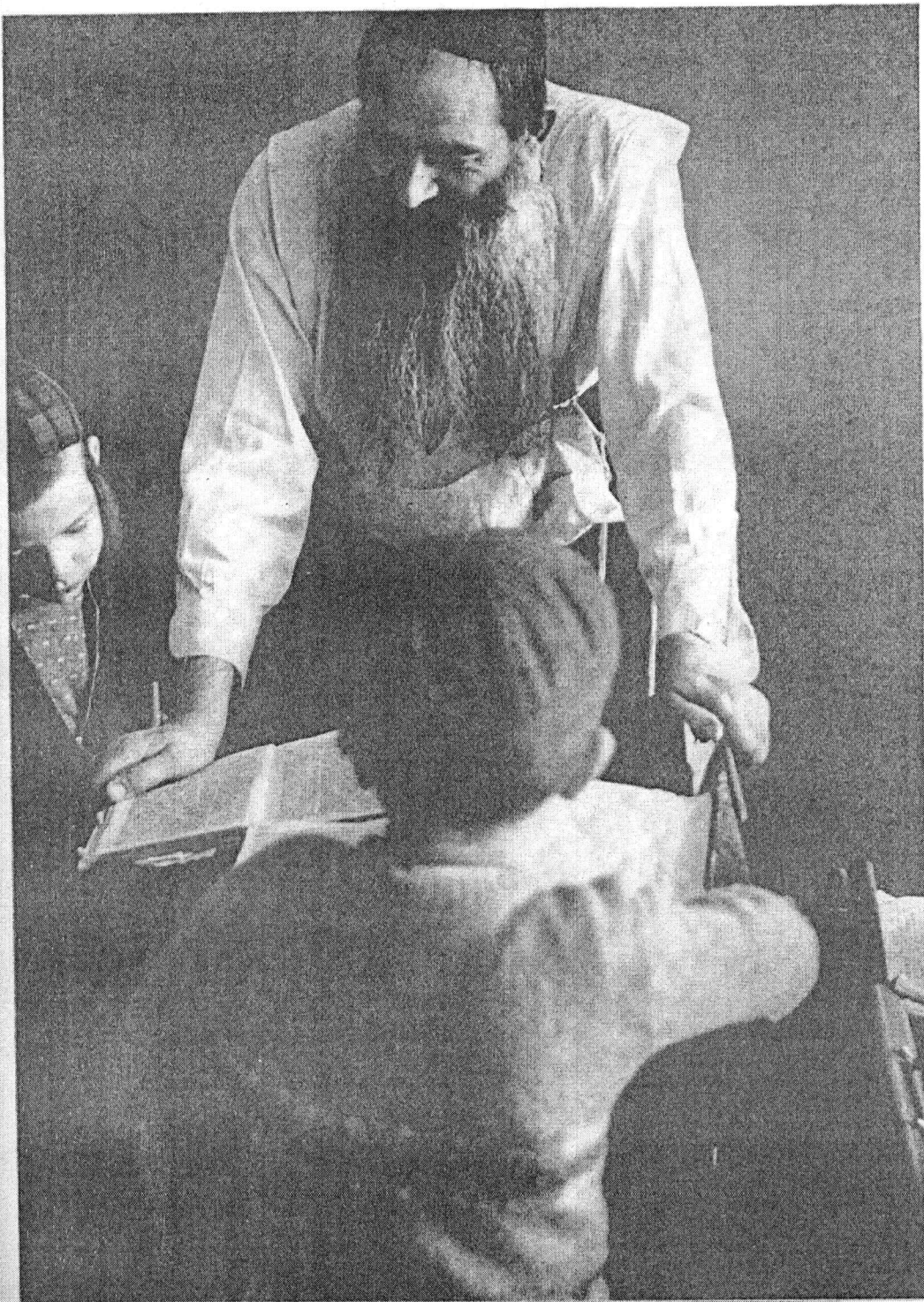




*Isaac Bashevis Singer*

# **THE EXTREME JEWS**

*Photographs by Nancy Rudolph*



**B**efore me lie dozens of photographs of religious Jews in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, New York. I see fur-edged rabbinical hats, long gaberdines, big beards, sidelocks, women in wigs and in bonnets that were already obsolete even in my youth in Warsaw. I know that thousands of Jews and non-Jews who see these people want to know: What does this signify? Are they all rabbis? Does it say anywhere in the Torah or Talmud that Jews must dress this way? Do they belong to some special Jewish sect? Neither the Reform, the Conservative, nor even those Jews who attend Orthodox services dress this way—therefore, to what group do these people belong? And what is their reason for wearing clothes that make them so conspicuous?

It is even more astonishing to see Jews dressed this way driving trucks, carrying bundles, or delivering goods. Among them are businessmen and workers. Since that is so, what reason is there for their rabbinical garb?

I must admit that I once shared similar feelings when I looked at nuns. Why the black and white habits, the shaven heads, the ankle-length garments? Did Jesus demand that his brides wear such uniforms? Was not religion a matter of the heart only? Would a long habit or a gaberdine serve as a guarantee against hate, envy, lust, glory-seeking, slander, and vengefulness?

I was often puzzled too when I saw pictures of Gandhi wrapped in a sheet. Similarly, the world was amazed nearly a century ago when Tolstoi suddenly donned a Russian peasant's smock. Why did he do this? Many people in and out of Russia accused him of exhibitionism or simply of publicizing himself, although they should have known better. No matter what he did he could not have made himself more famous than he already was.

Well then, what about the beatniks in New York and in all the European cities who seem to have responded simultaneously to some silent command to grow long hair and beards, to neglect their clothes, and to associate with girls as sloppy as themselves? Is this nothing more than a fad or does such attire disguise some idea?

People seldom realize that a style of dress, of hair, and of every kind of external nonconformity represents a sort of language, albeit frequently vague and unintelligible. So far, no one has compiled a dictionary of these "languages" nor researched their grammar and syntax. Nevertheless, they are forms of expression. Long hair, beards, and moustaches express meanings that short hair and clean-shaven upper lips and chins simply do not. A long garment "speaks" differently to us than does a short one. Languages themselves

would have no significance if objects did not possess a speech of their own. World literature would be meaningless if the human spirit did not try to express itself in the most divergent possible ways. We are curious to see a celebrity because his face, his manners, his gestures, and his garments say things we cannot glean from his words and deeds only. Gandhi becomes much more understandable to us when we see his face and mode of dress. Tolstoi somehow would not seem the same without his patriarchal beard. We cannot imagine him looking like Lord Byron, nor Dostoevski resembling Kaiser Wilhelm. It would somehow seem inappropriate. Bare souls undoubtedly exist somewhere, but the souls with which we are familiar have wrapped themselves in bodies, in clothes, and in manners.

Women are more sensitive to these "languages" and therefore place more emphasis on such externals as clothes, hairdos, and jewelry. A man will seldom criticize another man's choice of suit or tie but a woman will accurately analyze another's outfit and gather meaning from the way she dresses and fixes her hair. Homosexuals often dress exotically not only to facilitate recognition among themselves but out of a strong compulsion to express their personalities. Even people for whom it would be prudent to be inconspicuous, such as criminals, often dress in identifiable fashion. The Russian revolutionists of the nineteenth century all had good reason to remain anonymous; yet many of them let their hair grow long and wore wide-brimmed hats and red or black blouses with sashes and tassels. Today, the American radical frequently dresses somewhat differently than the conservative.

Besides expressing the human spirit, clothes and hair styles also hold a key to self-discipline. A priest may occasionally be tempted to ride a carousel and eat an ice-cream cone but he is not likely to do this while wearing his priestly garb. His very costume dictates that he conduct himself

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*Isaac Bashevis Singer, the son and grandson of rabbis, was a student at a rabbinical seminary in Warsaw. He turned to journalism instead, immigrated to New York in 1935, and wrote for "The Jewish Daily Forward." Since then, through his many stories, novels, and sketches of Jewish life in Poland, he has become known as one of the great Yiddish writers.*

*Nancy Rudolph is a free-lance photographer specializing in documentary subjects.*

*Mr. Samuel Landa, a former Hasidic rabbi now on the staff of the New York City Housing Authority, introduced Miss Rudolph to the places and people pictured here.*



with dignity. A rabbi in a long cloak, a beard, and sidelocks is not likely to dally with a girl on a street corner. Tolstoi—by donning the peasant smock—forever precluded his attendance at the elaborate balls of the aristocracy that he described so well in his novels. Gandhi's attire kept him from becoming a man of the world. Clothes guard a person just as words do. Even if a nun got the urge to attend a nightclub her habit would keep her from fulfilling this whim. Religious people in all times were aware of the weaknesses inherent in man's nature. They knew that he is often more ashamed before his fellow human beings than before God. A person ready to betray the loftiest principle will still take pains not to appear laughable nor to make himself an object of other men's anger and scorn.

### How to Be Impregnable

When the Jew was driven from his land he knew the peril that threatened his future existence—the necessity of mixing with strangers. No exiled people has lasted as a group for more than a generation or two. But the Jew was determined to endure many generations of exile if necessary, to remain true to his God, to the Torah, and to his native land even though it lay in ruins and was occupied by strangers. It was an undertaking without counterpart in the history of mankind. It could only be effected thanks to a mighty discipline and a colossal mysticism of upbringing and education. The basis of this discipline was the total estrangement from the peoples among whom the Jew would dwell; not a physical estrangement but a spiritual one. True, the Jew was forced to do business with the gentile and often to work for him. But that was the extent of their association. The Jew had to erect a spiritual ghetto around himself that was immeasurably more isolated and impregnable than the physical ghetto to which he was later confined. To the Jew, the A to Z of his religion was the law of the Torah, as written in Leviticus 18:3: "After the doings of the land of Egypt, wherein ye dwelt, shall ye not do; and after the doings of the land of Canaan, whither I bring you, shall ye not do; neither shall ye walk in their ordinances."

If the gentile wore a short coat, he, the Jew, would wear a long one. If the gentile's hat was round, his would be pointed. According to the Talmud, the book of Jewish religious law, the Jew dared not even tie his shoelaces in the same way as his gentile neighbor. These laws were established not out of enmity toward the gentile but rather as a reminder for the Jew to adhere to certain con-

ditions if he wanted to retain his identity for hundreds if not thousands of years.

The men of the Jewish version of the Enlightenment who wanted the Jews to take off their gaberdines and become Europeans often mocked the rigors that the rabbis had imposed upon the Jew through the generations. But all these laws and rigors were intended as shackles to curb the Jew from mixing with others. Assimilation is a natural process. A minority always seeks to fit itself into the majority. The weak will inevitably fashion themselves after the strong. The temptations were tremendous. Often the people among whom the Jews lived forced them to integrate. Romantic unions between Jews and gentiles were unavoidable. For hundreds and thousands of years the Jew forced himself to go against human nature.

The form of dress he adopted made this integration more difficult. He instinctively altered the language of his host nation so that it became his own dialect and seemed alien and comical to his neighbors. He shaved his daughter's hair and himself grew a beard and sidelocks that labeled him a Jew even from a distance.

History shows that the segregation between gentile and Jew was not uniform through the ages. It was less pronounced in the Arab lands than in the Christian, and even there variations existed in different times and in different places. The Italian and Spanish Jews spoke the native languages among themselves and had close relations with the inhabitants. The Jews in France, Germany, and Eastern Europe were the most isolated from the native populations. It is almost a truism that wherever segregation was least severe assimilation was the strongest. It was axiomatic among Jews that once one of them made the slightest move to adjust his ways to those of the gentiles, that individual stood poised on the threshold of conversion. And Jews preferred to lose such a person completely than to retain him in their camp and chance his infecting other Jews with his ideas. The community boasted but one weapon: excommunication.

By cutting away from the community all those who broke the rules of spiritual segregation the Jew practiced a kind of selection which retained in the community only its most devout members. For centuries a Jew had but one choice—either to bear all the burdens of his faith or to go over completely to the religion of the majority. Assimilation in today's sense of the word was nonexistent. It only came about through Emancipation after the Napoleonic wars.

The Emancipation created a new type of Jew, one who could renounce the laws of his religion yet

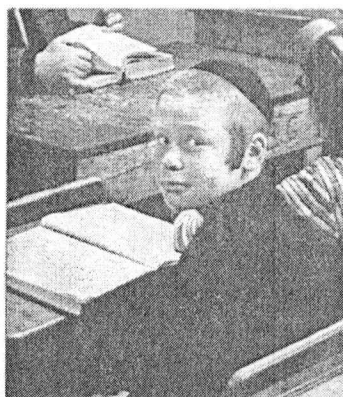
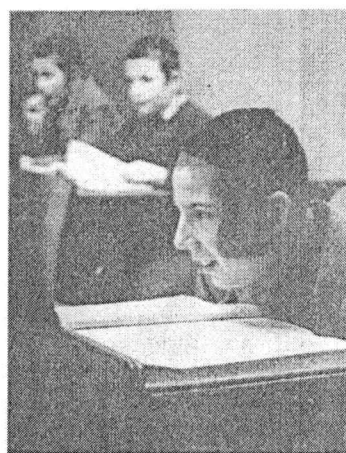


remain a Jew; or at least not go all the way toward conversion. This so-called worldly Jew was a riddle both to himself and to the Christian world. Since he disobeyed the laws of his religion what constituted his allegiance to his faith? Some people of this kind called themselves national Jews. Their Jewishness consisted of belonging to a group or of speaking Yiddish or Hebrew. This modern Jew created Zionism and waged a struggle against anti-Semitism. His kind includes many who claim that even if they wanted to assimilate they would not be allowed to do so. Thus the worldly Jew who lives outside of Israel belongs to a group that has no land and often no language of its own, but shares common interests, character, and personality. The modern Jew's identity may not be defined in any dictionary, but it exists nevertheless. In Soviet Russia, for instance, a generation of Jews has evolved that neither practices its religion nor speaks Yiddish nor Hebrew nor plans to settle in Israel, yet considers itself Jewish, or at least is so labeled in passports.

### A Soldier Surrounded

**T**he religious Jew, the pious one, does not believe in the national Jew or in his future. To him, a Jew without a religion is what he is to many non-Jews—an enigma, a mass of contradictions, a paradox. If the pious Jew of former times had to exert every effort to segregate himself from the gentile, today's pious Jews must redouble these efforts to remain apart not so much from gentiles as from the great number of nonreligious Jews or those who have tried to reform Jewishness. To the very pious Jews of Williamsburg those Jews who are Communists, freethinking Zionists, or members of Reform or Conservative congregations are all heretics and candidates for assimilation and mixed marriage. And they place in this same category those Jews in Israel who either don't practice Jewishness or try to reform it there. Since danger lurks for him both in and outside of his group, today's pious Jew must exercise a twofold vigilance. He is like a soldier caught up in a civil war—surrounded by enemies on all sides. Any effort to mitigate this or that rigor leads promptly to licentiousness and assimilation. Today's pious Jew must enforce ever-stricter and more rigorous measures in order to retain his historical role and to raise a generation that will follow in his ways.

Thus, if the worldly Jew dresses in short garments, the pious Jew must stick to his long gaberdine. Since the former shaves his beard and side-locks the latter must let them grow as long as



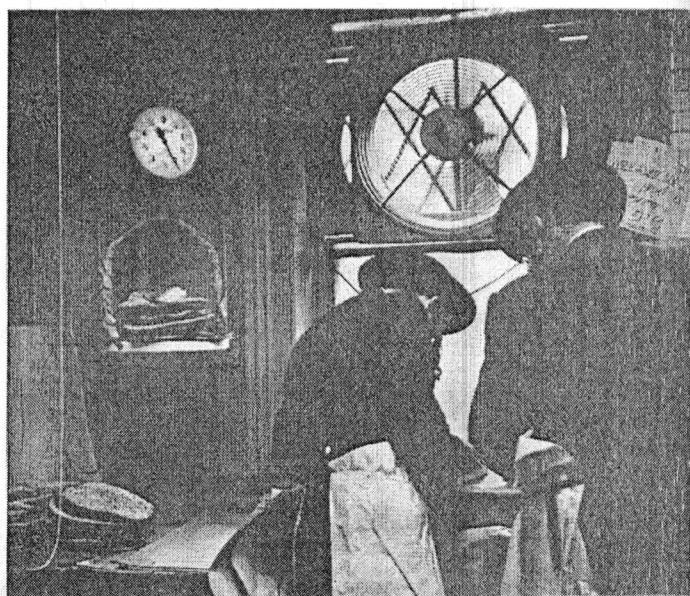
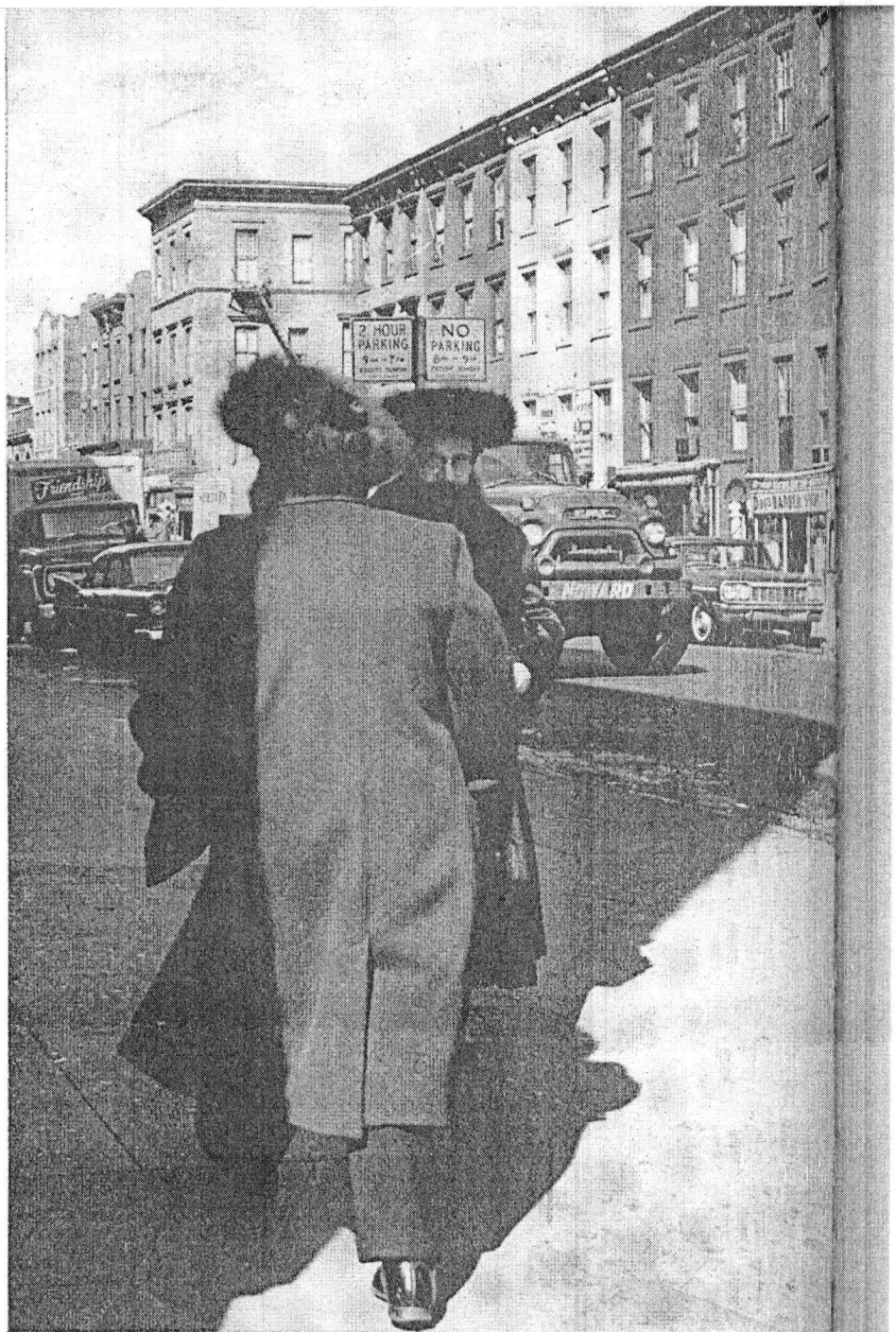


*The first sizable group of Hasidic Jews in New York were Hungarian concentration-camp survivors. After World War II they chose to make their homes in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn chiefly because some of the earlier immigrants in this area were also Orthodox Jews from Hungary. However, the newcomers were far more fanatical than their predecessors, most of whom have since moved away. The Williamsburg Hasidic community now numbers some 12,000. Indoctrination of children begins at the age of three or four when—strictly segregated by sex—they start attending religious school (Yeshiva) from morning till night six days a week.*





*Piety and religious learning rather than wealth or occupation determine social rank in the Hasidic community. The fur hat, made of sable, is a status symbol, worn by the ultra-devout on the Sabbath and holy days. Many Hasidim earn a living in the manufacture and sale of the clothing, food, household equipment, and religious articles requisite to their way of life. During Passover, for example, Hasidim do not eat commercial matzah (unleavened bread) but only those baked under strict supervision in their own community, as shown at right.*





*Dairy products—like all other foods—must be prepared and handled according to religious law.*



*A thriving local industry has evolved from the requirement that married women cut off their hair and wear wigs.*



*Birth control is strictly prohibited. Families with fifteen children are not unusual though the average is six.*

*Hasidic boys and men don comic masks to celebrate Purim—a joyous holiday.*





possible. The worldly Jew has founded a number of organizations to protect Jewish interests but the pious Jew must keep far away from their activities. If a Jew must choose between entering a church or a Reform temple, Rabbi Moshe Sofer judged that he should rather enter the church—it represents less danger to him than does the temple where scrolls of the Torah are kept and where people allegedly pray to the Jewish God. A new kind of segregation has been established among the most pious Jews—a segregation from the modern Jew and his institutions. All the efforts of these Jews are now bent to this end.

Nor is there unity among the pious themselves. They too are divided into factions both in Israel and in the lands of the diaspora. Those belonging to the Mizrachi are willing to work with the modern Jews and their organizations. Those of the Agudas Israel, on the other hand, stay at a greater distance from the nonbelieving Jews, but they recognize the state of Israel and have representatives in the Knesset and often in the ruling government. Those Jews stand ready to work alongside heretic Jews just as pious Jews have had to consort with gentiles throughout history. The fact is that heretic Jews are very able and have set up the various funds which have made the Jewish state possible. To ignore them entirely would often be impracticable. So even the members of Agudas Israel have made numerous compromises. Many have donned short garments; others have trimmed beards and sidelocks. When the Germans began to make reparation payments to victims of Nazi persecution, the members of the Agudas Israel at first grimaced and called it blood money as despicable as idolatry. Later they relented. The gentile may be *tref* but his money is kosher. They applied this same principle to the "Jewish goy."

But the extremists of Orthodoxy—the Szatmar Hasidim (who came from Hungary to the United States) and the Naturei Karta (watcher of the city of Jerusalem) in Israel—those Jews in the

fur-edged hats and high stockings—still contend that every step nearer to the modern Jew, no matter how small, is the path to corruption. It is not out of malice that the Szatmar rabbi calls the members of the Agudas Israel heretics and men of evil. The ultra-orthodox Jew adheres to the principle that once the movement toward the other side is launched, total homogeneity can only be a matter of time.

What is the number of these extremists? Not large. Throughout the whole world it comes to perhaps 100,000. These Jews have never recognized the Jewish state. In Israel, they do not cast votes nor have representatives in the Knesset. They do not speak the modern Hebrew but stick to the Yiddish of their grandfathers and great-grandfathers. They have rejected modern Jewishness and isolated themselves just as their ancestors isolated themselves from Spinoza and Uriel Acosta. The ultra-orthodox Jews have unofficially excommunicated the modern Jew although they themselves constitute a small minority among the world Jewry. To them, we all are branches broken off from the Jewish trunk. They are convinced that our future is the obliteration of our Jewishness. They, few as they are, will maintain the yoke of our religion. They, the extremists, will be there to receive the Messiah.

Are they right or do they represent an ossified sector of the Jewish community, an anachronism that time will disperse? Only history will tell. One thing is clear—their way of life is based on a profound religious logic and a historic reason. The long beards and sidelocks, the old-fashioned garments, and the clinging to all the rigors and customs are directed toward one purpose only—complete segregation from the gentile, and even more from the Jew who is heading toward ultimate disappearance. This segregation is as old as Jewish exile itself and has maintained the Jew through the two thousand years of his existence in the diaspora.

*A special wall decoration invokes the festive spirit of the Purim holiday.*

