

Time of Transition

During World War II Kappa Beta and the other fraternities at Albany State closed down. Most young men enlisted or were drafted into military service. Students who were scheduled to graduate in 1943 to 1945 now had to postpone their graduation until 1947 to 1949. Overall enrollment at Albany State fell by more than a third, from 1,379 in 1939 to 865 in 1943, and military service denuded the college of male students. In the late 1930s, they had constituted about one-third of the student body, but in 1944 and 1945, they constituted only one-twelfth. (Birr, 84.)

When World War II ended and military personnel were discharged, they were encouraged by the G.I. Bill to return to or enroll at colleges and universities, and they did so by the millions. When students on military leave returned at the end of World War II, they were allowed to re-enter almost as soon as they were mustered out, and many additional veterans were quickly admitted. The three-year surge of returning veterans meant that the percentage of male students on the Albany campus rose from eight percent in 1945 to 29 percent in 1947. (Birr, 94.) More mature in every respect, they transformed the character of Albany State, and every other college and university in the United States, and compiled an outstanding academic record, a record replicated by every wave of older students that followed in their footsteps.

Paul Wagner '48, who earned a doctorate at the University of Rochester and served as a scientist and administrator at Los Alamos, New Mexico, was a typical returning veteran. He was originally in the Class of 1945, along with Harold (Goldstein) Gould, Lou Rabineau, Sam Scott, and Gordon Baskin, and pledged Kappa Beta in December 1941.

Wagner writes as follows: "The fraternity effectively disappeared in June of 1942 and we all got involved in the war, many of us with the feeling that we would never return—those were dark days. I served with the US Army Air Corps [ref. my book, The Youngest Crew, Lagumo Press, Cheyenne, WY, 1997] as a combat bomber pilot in Europe. I was discharged as soon as the war ended in September 1945 and was actually the first veteran back at NYSCT [as we were known those days] in October. In January of 1946, the first wave of veterans returned to college, among them several of the KB folks. We notified the administration that KB was again to be active and I was elected president. My first act was to change our by-laws making KB a non-sectarian fraternity [previously only Jews could be rushed and admitted, except for faculty member advisors]....The driving force for the founding of the fraternity was to have a kosher home for those to whom this was important. This appeared to be a less popular regulation after World War II ended. I finished my time at State before the renewed KB really got going so I have few memories of what went on from 1946 to 1948 at which time I left for graduate school."

Michael Levine '48, a friend and KB brother of Paul's who served in the New York State Education Department for almost 25 years as an administrator, remembers Paul as an outstanding Chemistry major whose mentor at the time was Dr. Oscar Lanford, an excellent chemistry professor who later became Dean of Instruction at Albany State. Paul, after he returned to NYSCT, took Dr. Lanford for a plane ride, which both survived.

Paul Wagner's first significant act as President of KB, with the concurrence of his fraternity brothers, in the Spring of 1946, to make Kappa Beta non-sectarian was highly significant and initiated what would become a dramatically changed fraternity. Marianne Sanua ends her book, Going Greek: Jewish College Fraternities in the United States, 1895-1945, at the end of World War II. Her concluding chapter is titled "Epilogue: World War II and the Beginning of the End for the Jewish Fraternity System." The majority of Jewish fraternities on college and university campuses were changing to non-sectarian fraternities, sometimes with a good deal of pain and soul searching. Public and overt anti-Semitism, one of the most important reasons for the formation of Jewish fraternities to begin with, had, thankfully, diminished. Non-Jews as well as Jews were shocked and horrified as they became more fully aware of the six million Jews, one-quarter of them children, who were murdered by the "civilized" Nazi Germans and their "civilized" European collaborators. Millions of non-Jewish American men and women had fought and died, along with their Jewish-American comrades, to destroy Nazism. The other major reason for the original formation of Jewish fraternities, to maintain Jewish identity and support Jewish students who faced a sometimes unfriendly or hostile world, was a much more complex issue. Did Jewish fraternities want to give up the closeness that resulted from Jews doing their own thing in their own way with their fellow Jews? Most Jewish fraternities took the same path that Kappa Beta did and became non-sectarian, but it was an emotional wrench for some of them to do so.

Civil rights and non-discrimination issues in the public arena also started impinging upon fraternity life. The three local fraternities, Potter Club, Sigma Lambda Sigma, and Kappa Beta by this time did not have any discriminatory restrictions. However, the fourth fraternity, the Albany chapter (chartered in 1915) of a prestigious national fraternity, Kappa Delta Rho, did have problems. Although KDR had "officially" removed discriminatory clauses from its national by-laws, it retained a "gentlemen's agreement" that it enforced which excluded Jews and African-Americans from all of its college chapters. The dramatic story of what happened when the Albany chapter in the Fall of 1952 offered a bid to Stuart Macnofsky '54 and four other Jewish students is recounted in an absorbing article by Paul Grondahl, "The Right Thing," which appeared in the Spring 2002 issue of UAlbany Magazine. The Albany State chapter refused to retract its bids to the Jewish pledges, the KDR national organization refused to bend much less eliminate its covert anti-Semitic and racist policy, and a huge ruckus ensued. The outcome was that the sixty-one members of the Albany State chapter resigned from the national, formed a new local fraternity, Alpha Pi Alpha, and inducted its five Jewish pledges. John Zongrone '54, then President of the Albany chapter of Kappa Delta Rho, received a modest amount of hate mail from KDR brothers, but he and the Albany State chapter members all believed that they had done the right thing. The five Jewish students who were inducted into newly formed Alpha Phi Alpha very much appreciated the fraternity's support. And the incident was written up in the New York Times, reflecting favorably on the Albany students. Possibly prodded by this incident, the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York in 1953 ruled that no organizations on SUNY campuses could bar students because of race, creed, color, religion, national origin, or other artificial criteria, and additionally barred fraternities or sororities with national affiliations from SUNY campuses. The ban held despite legal challenges, and the local fraternities continued to flourish. (Birr, 103.)

Robert Barron '52 was the first non-Jewish member to join Kappa Beta and was initiated into Kappa Beta in a far less dramatic way than the five Jewish students were initiated into Alpha Phi Alpha. Bob recalls vividly the slow, personal process of joining Kappa Beta.

"When I got to State I was assigned housing at St. Mary's Park more commonly known as The Barracks. My assigned roommate was Bill Kirman '52. My folks did not like The Barracks and found a room for me in a private home that took in students on South Lake Ave. I was the only one there from NYSCT. I saw a lot of Bill but we actually did not live together. Another close friend at The Barracks was Mitch Burkowski '52. One of the first people I met on campus was Max Fallek '51. He got me a job in the cafeteria in Lower Husted and I worked there for 5 years.

"At that time the KB house was on Quail St. near Myrtle, and since I had no State friends at 73 South Lake, I got in the habit of going around the corner to the KB house where I got to know Don Cohen '51, Howie Rosman '51, Harvey Milk '51, Phil Malafsky '51 and the others. In the cafeteria I worked with Sy Ferish '50. When it came time for the Spring Rush of 1949, Sy asked if I would accept a KB bid. I told him that I was flattered but my parents had forbidden me to join a fraternity in my freshman year and also that I did not qualify as I was not Jewish.

"My "Big Brother" was Clifton Thorne '49. (Cliff later became a Professor at Albany.) It was unusual for a senior to be a big brother, but he wanted to do it. Cliff introduced me to his friends, who were mainly seniors, and they all belonged to KDR. In fact it was sort-of accepted that I would join KDR when I was a sophomore. However, by that time all the seniors at KDR whom I liked had graduated; the members of my class who had joined KDR were not my friends. Bill and Mitch had joined KB so when they...again extended a bid to me, I thought why-not-I know everybody there, so I was the first non-Jewish member. The following fall a lot of Dick Wander's friends-Neil Ryder '52, Ed Castillo '52, and Ed Cummings '52 joined KB.

"During that summer KB had taken over Sayles Hall Annex, 203 Ontario St., where Doug Nielsen '53, Ken Schoonmaker '54, Arnie Smith '54, Bill Taylor '53, Konrad Maier '54 and George Schaeffer '54 had been living so they all accepted bids to KB so they didn't have to move. And there you have the big change."

The transition of Kappa Beta from a Jewish fraternity to a non-sectarian fraternity took place peacefully and naturally. Friends joined the fraternity where they had made friends. Groups of friends who had been living together joined the fraternity *en bloc*. The only unusual note sounded in Bob Barron's lively, thoughtful recollection of the "big change" in Kappa Beta is that Bob seemed unaware that Kappa Beta had been officially non-sectarian since 1946 and that none of the KB brothers made it clear to him that it was not restricted to Jews. Possibly the KB brothers, when they rushed Bob in the Spring of 1949, may have been testing the waters of non-sectarianism cautiously.

Historical details in this and subsequent chapters are taken from Professor Kendall Birr's engaging book, A Tradition of Excellence: The Sesquicentennial History of the University at Albany, State University of New York, 1844 to 1994. Virginia Beach, VA: The Downing Company, 1994.