

Although Brandeis University was truly born 50 years ago, in 1948, with the admission of its first class of students, it was conceived some time earlier. Its two-year gestation period is a story in itself. Actually it is several stories, four of which—"The Founding,

"Albert Einstein's Early Involvement," "Naming the University," and "The First President"—you will find throughout this issue. These pieces were written by Arthur H. Reis, Jr., associate provost and associate vice president for development.

in concept

The Founding

by Arthur H. Reis, Jr.

February 7, 1946, was an unusually balmy 45-degree winter day. At 4:30 in the afternoon in the Lincoln Room of the Harvard Club of Boston, distinguished men from Boston and New York gathered to ratify the transfer of the Charter of Middlesex University to a yet unnamed new university founded by the American Jewish community. The University would eventually be named Brandeis.

Middlesex University was founded in 1927 by action of the Massachusetts Legislature and included a College of Arts and Sciences, School of Medicine, School of Podiatry, School of Pharmacy, and the only School of Veterinary Medicine in New England. Its founder and faithful

leader was Dr. John Hall Smith, born in Granville Ferry, Nova Scotia, in 1872. C. Ruggles Smith, son of the founder, wrote that, "From its inception, Middlesex was ruthlessly attacked by the American Medical Association, which at that time was dedicated to restricting the production of physicians, and to maintaining an inflexible policy of discrimination in the admission of medical students. Middlesex, alone among medical schools, selected its students on the basis of merit, and refused to establish any racial quotas."

Dr. John Hall Smith grew ill in 1943 and died in 1944 without concluding the long struggle with the American Medical Association. His son, C. Ruggles Smith, an alumnus of Harvard and Harvard Law School, left his law practice to assume the presidency of Middlesex. The University was almost bankrupt; the Massachusetts Legislature

suspended the first three years of the Medical School Program; C. Ruggles Smith needed an out.

Major moments of historical importance occur in several ways, but mainly they are either well-planned events or happen through sheer serendipity. The founding of Brandeis University happened almost by chance.

The dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Middlesex University was Dr. Joseph Cheskis, a Lithuanian Jew. He had close ties to a number of national Jewish organizations. One of Cheskis's close friends was Joseph Schlossberg, general secretary/treasurer emeritus of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America and general chairman of the

Histadrut. Schlossberg informed Cheskis that he was aware of a New York committee of Jews seeking a campus to establish a Jewish-founded University. The committee was headed by Rabbi Israel Goldstein of New York, who had many years of experience organizing projects within the Jewish community. Other members of the committee included Julius Silver, vice president and general counsel of Polaroid Corporation; Samuel Null, justice of the New York Supreme Court; Dr. Israel Wechsler, professor of neurology at Columbia University; Dr. Alexander Dushkin, executive vice president of the Jewish Education Committee of New York; and Abraham Wechsler, a wealthy and influential New York merchant.

On January 7, 1946, C. Ruggles Smith wrote to Goldstein about the opportunities that were possible in Waltham. "The Trustees of the University realize that they will be unable to overcome the

opposition of organized medicine or to attain its cooperation, although they have tried very sincerely. It is obvious that without powerful backing or a substantial endowment the goal of approval cannot be won. The Trustees would be very glad to turn over their responsibilities to any new group of trustees that might possess the apparent ability to reestablish the School of Medicine on an approved basis. They believe that you might be in a position to secure the support of a group of trustees who would be interested in an educational institution which could offer college and professional education in the field of the healing arts on a democratic American basis, with the complete elimination of racial, religious, or social discrimination in the selection of students and faculty."

Goldstein wrote about his reaction to this letter and another he received from Cheskis. "I read and re-read the letters with an eye to the possibilities which the Middlesex campus might present for realizing at long last, the plan for a Jewish-sponsored secular university in America. The thought of having to turn immediately to the problem of the medical school is disconcerting. It was not the way to start to build the university I had in mind. According to my thinking, the Medical School should come only after a number of years would elapse following the inauguration of the College of Liberal Arts. What intrigued me most of all was the opportunity to secure a 100-acre campus not far from New York, the premier Jewish community in the world, and only 10 miles from Boston, one of the important Jewish population centers, a campus situated in the environs of great educational institutions such as Harvard, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Wellesley, and others."

Goldstein started discussions with Smith and Cheskis and first visited the campus on January 15, 1946. He was concerned about the physical condition of the campus, yet pleased in what he envisioned, "I

was sure that this campus was intrinsically worthy of becoming the site of a great Jewish-sponsored university." Goldstein conferred with Julius Silver, who accompanied him on his next trip to Waltham, to review the location, the Charter, and the financial structure. Goldstein, Silver, and Smith agreed that, "steps for the consummation of the negotiations should go forward without delay." Smith emphasized that the Middlesex Board needed to be assured that the financial condition could be stabilized.

Goldstein turned to Dr. Albert Einstein in late January 1946 and received Einstein's commitment on January 22, 1946, to become part of the venture and "to help in creation and guidance of such an institute."

Silver and Goldstein also felt strongly that the project should have strong Boston roots associated with it. Silver suggested that Mr. George Alpert, a Boston attorney, was the best person to take the Boston lead. They spoke to Alpert on January 24, 1946, and he agreed to become a leading

member of the enterprise, doing the necessary legal work for the transfers of charter and land. Brandeis's first President Abram Sachar writes about Alpert, "Alpert, a product of the Boston schools, was a fortunate choice. He was a sharp, hard-headed lawyer of unusual resourcefulness, especially effective in tough legal battles. His primary asset was a compelling elegance and fund-raising experience that had earned him the position of national vice president of the United Jewish Appeal."

The plan, negotiated between Goldstein and Smith, was that five of the seven members of the Board of Trustees of Middlesex University would resign and then five new trustees representing Goldstein's committee would be elected and the control of Middlesex University, including the charter, land, and all financial resources and obligations would be transferred. At that eventful meeting at the Harvard Club of February 7, 1946, Dr. Israel Goldstein was elected as president of the Board of Trustees, Julius Silver was elected secretary, George Alpert was elected treasurer. Also elected were Judge Samuel Null and Major Abraham F. Wechsler.

The gestation period for developing Brandeis University had thus begun. ■