



"The fuss which you are making"

The Chelsea Carol Incident of 1949

Numerous discussions about “the war on Christmas” have occurred in recent years, prompted by non-denominational season’s greetings and celebrations. But such controversies are not new. A glimpse into the archives at the Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center reveals how a 1949 request for inclusivity led to a widespread misunderstanding, and eventually caused panic and uproar within the Jewish community of Chelsea, Massachusetts.

The trouble began for Abraham and Frieda Wolper family in 1945, just after the Second World War ended, as soldiers returned home, and Americans breathed a sigh of relief. In Chelsea, with a population that was 45% Jewish, 45% Catholic, and 10% Protestant, a Jewish family began to raise concerns over the degree to which Christmas was celebrated in Chelsea’s public schools. When her son, seven-year-old Ben Shalom, was ejected from his classroom for not singing religious Christmas carol lyrics along with the rest of his class, Frieda Wolper spoke with school officials. For a few years she took



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no further action, but each subsequent December she felt slightly more determined to protect her son from exclusionary treatment in his classroom.¹

By 1948, the situation had worsened enough to motivate at least four Jewish mothers to write to the New England offices of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) to express their concern about religious Christmas music, poetry, and pageantry in Chelsea schools. For the second consecutive year, Jewish children were required to sing Christmas carols from an unofficial textbook (not approved by the Chelsea school board) that contained religious hymns such as “Away in a Manger” and “Little Town of Bethlehem.” Schoolchildren were also required to memorize lengthy religious Christmas poems.²

The Anti-Defamation League suggested recruiting a Christian clergyman to reach out to the school board on behalf of the Jewish children. Several names were discussed, but ultimately the ADL intervened and held discussions with the school board. Principals were then instructed to hold Chanukkah celebrations alongside Christmas ones, with cooperation and assistance from the parent teacher association (PTA). Although dual holiday observances did occur in December 1948, many



Top left: A postcard sent to the Wolpers from Chicago. The opposite side contained a threatening message. Above: Karl Schulte, *Christmas Carols* (Dell, 1942).

Jewish students were instructed by their Hebrew school teachers to refuse to sing Christmas carols—and some students even covered their ears during carol-singing. This time, Chelsea principals initiated a dialogue with the Jewish community, to curb the “disrespectful behavior” of the Jewish children.³

Perhaps lingering tension from 1948 offers some explanation for the disproportionate response of the Chelsea community (both Jewish and Gentile) when the Wolpers requested an audience with the school board on December 5, 1949, in a petition presented here in its entirety:

This is to respectfully request undersigned [Abraham and Frieda Wolper and Goldie Roller] to appear before its committee [the school board] to present our views in reference to the singing of Christmas carols and the presentation of religious pageants.⁴

This petition made no specific requests, other than to be heard in front of the school board. In statements at a PTA meeting days before, where the Wolpers initially raised the topic, Frieda Wolper and Goldie Roller did not object to more secular Christmas music like “Jingle Bells” and did not call for Christmas music to be banned. The women explained that they were sympathetic to children who were unhappy about the requirement to

sing Christian carols and were singled out and embarrassed in front of their peers for refusing to participate. Frieda Wolper explained that some Jewish children even “dread this season” of Christmas pageantry.

The petition garnered a cold reception within the offices of superintendent J. Frank Herlihy, who, upon the petition’s submission, asked Mrs. Wolper, “Are you sure you want to do this?” Herlihy indicated that as a Catholic he was unhappy with the version of the Lord’s Prayer that his own children recited in public school, but that such laws couldn’t be changed. Undeterred, Mrs. Wolper replied, “Well, I’ll help you fight for what you believe.” Frustrated, Herlihy changed tack, saying that he had witnessed Jewish children hanging around the street on Jewish High Holidays instead of attending services. He alluded to the likelihood of unfortunate repercussions for Jewish students, noting he could use his influence to force school attendance on the Sabbath, “I am considering taking out Saturday School Sessions. There is precedent for it. If you don’t come in truant officers will get them.”⁵

But Frieda Wolper persisted, and when the committee considered the petition, a member keen on publicizing the issue suggested that the hearing be opened to the public and postponed, to build interest. Chelsea’s mayor moved that the meeting should be advertised

in the press, which surely set the stage for what followed. The committee chose a date of December 15 and alerted the *Boston Post*, which seized on the story, publishing an article the next day—December 6—with the headline, “Public Hearing Set as Mother Hits Carol-Singing in Schools.” The article falsely claimed that Mrs. Wolper asked for Christmas carol singing to be banned.

News of the petition was picked up and published in local newspapers and across the country, with increasingly hyperbolic language. The *Chelsea Record* headline, for example, was “Seek to Ban Singing of Carols in Public School,” and that tone was mirrored in papers in New York City, Chicago, and elsewhere. The *Pilot*, the official paper of the archdiocese of Boston, opened their editorial on the matter with the following:

Children, between midnight on Saturday, December 24 and the first moments of December 26 a twenty-four hour period will elapse. This can be figured out from astronomy or from any trustworthy clock if you care to sit and watch it. I am not allowed



“How could it make anyone sad to know about Jesus?”

A card and letter sent to the Wolpers from Yakima, Washington.

Public Hearing Set as Mother Hits Carol-Singing in Schools

Chelsea, Mass., Dec. 6 (U.P.)—Christmas carols in the Chelsea schools?

No, says a Jewish mother, because they make many of the children unhappy.

Yes, says a school official—to ban them would only add fuel to the fires of intolerance. On Dec. 15, it was decided today, the school committee will rule whether childish voices may sing "Silent Night" and "Oh, Little Town of Bethlehem."

The situation came to a head at a Parent-Teacher Association meeting when Mrs. Abraham Wolper moved that the singing of carols be banned.

No vote was taken but a petition was forwarded to the committee governing the schools, whose population is about 45 percent Jewish, 45 percent Catholic and 10 percent Protestant.

"This is a happy season for the children," said Mrs. Wolper. "It is wrong for them to have songs which some children feel they can't sing. It makes my son unhappy when his classmates ask him why he doesn't sing the songs. There are pageants, too, of a religious nature. Such things should not be in the schools."

Mrs. Wolper said they might

sing songs like "Jingle Bells" or others concerning Santa Claus that are not of a religious nature. Children from Jewish homes "dread this season" of carols written for a particular religious group, she said.

J. Frank Herlihy, superintendent of schools, believes the carols should remain.

"The children also sing songs pertinent to the Jewish feast of Chanukah, which falls during the Christmas season," Herlihy said.

It's 102 in Buenos Aires!

Buenos Aires, Dec. 6 (U.P.)—Forty cases of sunstroke—none fatal—were reported today while the city sweltered in 102-degree heat.

Charles Town Results

FIRST RACE—1800, allowance: two-year-olds; six and a half furlongs. **Golden Fox (Moyamensing)** 5.50 2.50 2.25 **Peace Theater (Down)** — 2.20 2.40 **Sweet Art (David)** — 2.40 **Time** 1:24 4.5. **Chal Ann, Lewis A. D., Baker Bay, Retnasale.** One Dale also ran. OFF 1:20 1/2.

SECOND RACE—4100, claimant: four-year-olds and up; 9 1/2 furlongs. **Quick Seas (Palumbo)** 6.50 4.50 2.40 **River Street (Griffin)** — 2:40 11.00 **Village (Yocum)** — 5.50 **Time** 1:25 1/2. **Stonewall Run, First Major, Alameda, Perfect Charms, Pilgrim** Made also ran. Off 1:20 1/2. **DAILY DOUBLE PAID \$15.00.**

TROPICAL RESULTS

Librab, 12.10-5.90-3.70; Gro-Up, 4.70-3.30; Mucho Manana, 4.10 Off 1:32 1/2.

Carols should be sung.

United Press article dated December 6 [1949].

in schools, and that their children simply did not sing Christ's name (so no one noticed). One letter, signed "a Jewish mother," explained that "the fuss which you are making will certainly cause prejudice, and you know as well as I do that some people look for things to pick on our race for." Many Jews feared that the fires of antisemitism were being stoked because of the Wolpers' selfish actions. Not one letter from a fellow Jew expressed sympathy with the idea that religion should be kept out of public schools.

Within days after the newspaper coverage began, the Wolper parents and their two children were driven from their home and schools. Fearing for their safety, the family went into hiding. After contacting the police for protection, they were told, "You stuck your neck out. What can you expect?"¹² Local ADL representatives found a safe house for the Wolpers, the home of a rabbi and his family in Brookline. According to the Wolper daughter, a teenager at the time, cars were roving the streets in search of them. The family packed light, dressed in dark clothes, and escaped the house at night.¹³

Meanwhile, the petition's only other signer, Goldie Roller, received similar threats and, in a panic to protect

herself and her child, published a retraction in the *Chelsea Record* on December 10, claiming that she had been misled and pleading for amity. She insisted that she had not been aware that the Wolpers wanted to ban Christmas carols; in fact, the Wolpers never advocated such a ban.¹⁴ She explained that she had been told the goal was only to ask that Jewish children be excused from carol singing, and that she would be one of over 1,000 signatories. The American Legion also threatened Roller, claiming that since her son had received a \$1,000 MIT Legion scholarship and she had proven herself "ungrateful," Legion representatives were considering canceling his award.¹⁵

In consultation with the Jewish Community Relations Council, the Wolpers submitted a letter to the school committee on December 12, withdrawing their petition and explaining their intentions had been misinterpreted. The public hearing for the 15th was canceled, and local papers were asked to stop publishing letters on the topic, to quell the drama.¹⁶ In Chelsea public schools, Christmas observances continued as usual: carols were sung, poems were recited, and pageants were staged.

In the months that followed, the Wolpers stayed out of the public eye, making one of their first appearances in the Jewish community at a women's B'nai B'rith meeting on February 23, 1950. A representative from the ADL gave a brief review of what he called "the carol incident." He was subsequently confronted by a disheveled and furious Abraham Wolper, who apparently accosted him outside of the venue. The ADL representative was so shocked by this frenzied confrontation that he did not register what Wolper said. He noted, however, that Wolper grabbed him so roughly by the lapels that he tore his overcoat.¹⁷ Although the reports written by the ADL member stated that he had respectfully not mentioned the names of the Wolpers in his presentation, this incident makes clear that even a cursory recounting of the events was traumatic and triggering for Abraham Wolper. The Wolpers were living as social pariahs, blamed entirely for the fiasco, despite not having done more than request to present their views to the school board.

That December, Abraham Wolper again asked for support from the JCRC, explaining that his son, Ben Shalom, refused to sing carols in school, and the teacher required him to stay in the music class for detention after school. The family's rabbi urged Abraham Wolper to tell his son to merely pretend to sing, or to quietly replace those words that offended him without drawing attention to himself.¹⁸ Ben Shalom also found an ally in his school's vocational guidance teacher, who backed up his refusal to sing carols.¹⁹

The Wolper parents remained members of the Jewish community in Chelsea for the rest of their lives. Both children left the area when they came of age. In a recent interview, the Wolpers' daughter said she "escaped" Chelsea, went to college and "never looked back. Never."²⁰ Abraham Wolper insisted that he and his wife remain in the city, but Frieda withdrew from public life in Chelsea. Although she had previously been an active community member, she limited her outside involvement to Jewish and political life in Brookline.²¹ The Jewish community in Chelsea clearly hoped that the story would be forgotten. But it was not; the JCRC continued to receive reports of antisemitic incidents from people who were convinced that the antisemitism was caused by lingering resentment over the Wolper carol incident.²²

The carol incident tells a story of misunderstanding and mob mentality, but more than that, it highlights a unique moment in American history. Americans were desperately relieved by the end of World War II, but still traumatized by the existential threat it had posed to their way of life. The defeat of totalitarianism filled citizens with pride and faith in democracy, but they still felt the rising threat of the Soviet Union.

The letters in the Wolper files contain several themes that hint at the tension of the moment: veterans who resented Jews for getting the United States involved, those who openly stated that the job Hitler started ought to be finished, Jews who feared that the Wolpers' actions would bring more misery on the community, and people who accused the Wolpers of being "commies" or Russians. Written by people torn between their pride in American inclusivity and their fear of those unlike themselves, many of the letters present a preview, in the heated moment, of the Red Scare which was gaining momentum and would increase over the following decade.

Such instances of community outrage over the suggestion of altering public school Christmas pageantry are rare, with few comparable cases in American history, and none as clearly vitriolic. As unique as the Wolper family's case is, it is even more fortunate that the collection came to an archival institution for posterity, and lives at the Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center for future generations to reference, examine, and revisit as our understanding of the role of religion in American school systems continues to change and evolve. ♦

NOTES

¹ Jewish Community Relations Council, Boston, Massachusetts, Box 180, Folder 4, Isadore Zack, ADL Memorandum, December 7, 1948; Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center at NEHGS.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., memorandum from Isadore Zack, December 20, 1948.

⁴ Papers of Abraham and Frieda Wolper, Box 1, Folder 3, letter to school board, December 3, 1949; Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center at NEHGS.

⁵ Jewish Community Relations Council [note 1], "Memorandum Regarding Chelsea Christmas Carol Problem," December 8, 1949.

⁶ "Morris Wolper Is Not in Accord with Ban on Christmas Carols," *Chelsea Record*, December 8, 1949.

⁷ Jewish Community Relations Council [note 1], minutes of Administrative Committee meeting, Thursday, December 8, 1949.

⁸ The *Chelsea Daily* also claimed they received scores of letters, many unsigned and scurrilous.

⁹ "Affairs and Folks," *Chelsea Record*, December 8, 1949.

¹⁰ The complete collection of these letters is available through the Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center website, at digital.americanancestors.org/digital/collection/p15869coll4/id/31620/rec/2.

¹¹ Jewish Community Relations Council [note 1], letter from the Executive Director of the Jewish Community Council of Metropolitan Boston, December 29, 1949.

¹² Jewish Community Relations Council [note 1], memorandum, December 8, 1949.

¹³ Judith (Wolper) Ennis interview conducted by Miriam Mora, January 8, 2023. Collection P-531, folder 5, 2023-042. Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center at NEHGS.

¹⁴ "Claims She Was 'Misled' Into Signing Petition," *Chelsea Record*, December 10, 1949.

¹⁵ Jewish Community Relations Council [note 1], minutes of Administrative Committee meeting, p. 3, December 8, 1949.

¹⁶ An Anti-Defamation League memo indicated that Harry Coltun, president of the Chelsea Lodge of B'nai B'rith, wrote to the *Record*, and asked that they cease publication of the inflammatory letters. An announcement was published stating the matter was closed and no more letters would be printed. Jewish Community Relations Council [note 1], memo from Isadore Zack, December 19, 1949.

¹⁷ Jewish Community Relations Council [note 1], letter from Isadore Zack, February 28, 1950.

¹⁸ Jewish Community Relations Council [note 1], letter to Sol Kolack, December 15, 1950.

¹⁹ Jewish Community Relations Council [note 1], Box 179, Folder 1. Letter to Sol Kolack, December 22, 1950.

²⁰ Judith (Wolper) Ennis interview [note 13].

²¹ Ibid.

²² For instance, on March 17, 1950, a Jewish mother reported that at school her son had been told by "an Italian girl" that she could not dance with Jews because they killed Christ and, if she did, she would have to leave her church. The mother believed this situation occurred as a result of the carol incident. Jewish Community Relations Council [note 1], Box 63, Folder 7.