Bloomington lawyer led fight against anti-Semitism
Bill Kemp
The Pantagraph, July 15, 2018

This combination photo shows an undated portrait of Sigmund Livingston and the dust jacket of his study of anti-Semitism, “Must Men Hate?” published during World War II.

“I have an abiding faith that religious prejudice and mass hatred will be vanquished, in time, by reason and truth.”

So wrote Sigmund Livingston in his 1944 book “Must Men Hate?” Livingston grew up in Bloomington and practiced law here before moving to Chicago in the late 1920s. While in Bloomington, he established the Anti-Defamation League, a national, still-active organization dedicated to combating anti-Semitism in the U.S. and abroad.

Born in 1872 in Germany, Sigmund was one of eight children of Mayer and Antoinette “Dora” Livingston. The family emigrated to the U.S. and arrived in Bloomington in the early 1880s.

Sigmund’s father was one a dozen or so German-Jewish immigrants to dominate the city’s clothing and dry goods trade. After partnering with his brother Samuel, Mayer set out on his own and established a clothing store called Newmarket at the northwest corner of Front and Center streets (Montgomery Ward later occupied this building). Sons Herman, Maurice and Harold helped with the family business, while Sigmund and his brother Irvin went into law.
All things considered, Bloomington’s small but influential Jewish community enjoyed life relatively free of overt discrimination. The Pantagraph treated the Jewish community with respect, occasionally reporting on visiting rabbis to Moses Montefiore Temple, and noting the passage of the High Holidays. Although the Bloomington Country Club had no Jewish members in Sigmund Livingston’s time, most of the community’s professional, social and fraternal organizations welcomed Jews.

Even so, local Jewish residents were still the target of prejudice, especially in popular culture. Vaudeville, for example, relished the sickening stereotype of the money-grubbing, hook-nosed Jew, and the word “Jew” was commonly employed as an adjective or verb to indicate greed, dishonesty, selfishness or even uncleanness.

Sigmund Livingston graduated from Illinois Wesleyan University’s law school in 1894, forming a partnership with classmate William R. Bach, the first of several legal associations in his career. Sigmund then moved his law office into the six-story Livingston Building when it opened in the early 1900s. Located at the southwest corner of Main and Washington streets, the city’s first steel-frame “skyscraper” was built by his uncle, Ike, yet another with Livingston involved locally in the clothing and retail trade. The Ike Livingston Building still stands today, with Elroy’s occupying the first floor.

By this time, Sigmund Livingston was active in Jewish affairs, playing a national role in the Independent Order of B’nai B’rith, a Jewish social and charitable organization also known as the Sons of Israel. In 1908, he headed a standing committee charged with rooting out anti-Semitism. His successful campaigns to combat such prejudice included pressuring the publisher of a travel booklet to halt the practice of including hotel and resort advertisements featuring the phrase “No Jews Wanted.”

In 1912, Livingston, representing the national executive committee of B’nai B’rith, embarked on a lengthy tour of Europe and the Middle East, with stops including London, Berlin, Vienna, Jerusalem, Cairo and Paris. In London, he delivered an address titled “The Condition of the Jew in America,” and in Berlin, at an international meeting of B’nai B’rith, he spoke prophetically on the moral necessity of intervening in the internal affairs of sovereign nations “when humanity and civilization dictate.”

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) was established in Bloomington in October 1913 as an arm of the B’nai B’rith, with Livingston as its first director. “The immediate object of the League,” read its founding charter, “is to stop, by appeals to reason and conscience and, if necessary, by appeals to law, the defamation of the Jewish people.”

The grim backdrop to the creation of the ADL included the lynching of Leo Frank, wrongfully convicted and sentenced to death for the murder of a 13-year-old coworker. Frank, a college-educated Jew from the North, worked in a pencil factory in Atlanta, GA. After that state’s governor commuted Frank’s death sentence to life in prison, vigilantes kidnapped the “Yankee Jew” from jail and lynched him before a gleeful mob.
Livingston continued to help shape the ADL for three-plus decades, remaining active all the way up to the time of his death. In 1916, the ADL asked local B’nai B’rith chapters (known as lodges) to organize Vaudeville Vigilance Committees to monitor “defamatory” or “scurrilous” caricatures that would prove “distasteful to the Jewish patrons of the theatre.”

The ADL remains active today, keeping an eye on “alt-right” leaders and hate groups, including neo-Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan, white supremacists and the despicable purveyors of Holocaust revisionism. The league has also been an unwavering (some critics would say unnecessarily deferential) supporter of the State of Israel.

In 1929, Livingston moved north and spent his remaining 17 years earning a living as a corporate counsel in Chicago.

“Superstition and bigotry have so long enslaved the mind that even today their shadows darken the truth,” the Bloomington-raised attorney noted in his book “Must Men Hate?,” first published by Harper & Brothers during World War II. “Anti-Semitism can feed only on hatred; it cannot survive without hatred,” he added. “It has been employed by the political charlatan, by the opportunist, by the witch hunter, and by the frustrated psychopath.”

In a clear reference to Nazi Germany, Livingston warned that political and religious leaders “can arouse the subconscious mind to bigotry and superstition, and, with their sophistry, incite public opinion to cruelty more despotic than that of ancient tyrants, and more inhuman than that of the pagans of old” (his book also included an appendix listing Jews who received Purple Hearts or other awards and commendations for service during World War II).

By 1944 there were whispers of vast atrocities perpetrated against Jews on the blood-soaked European continent, though few could conceive the scope of the Holocaust and its 6 million dead. “It may be that the cruelty, the savagery and the utter wickedness of Nazi anti-Semitism, when fully known,” observed Livingston, “will so shock the conscience of the civilized world that anti-Semitism will be anathematized by all civilized governments and by all justice-loving people.”

Sigmund Livingston passed away in June 1946 at the age of 73. He died at his home in the Chicago suburb of Highland Park, and was laid to rest at the Jewish Cemetery on Bloomington’s south side.

-30-