

HISTORY COMMENTARY

Elected Office and the Case of Mark Litchman, One of Washington's Jewish Political Pioneers

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In the year 2000 a Jewish senator from Connecticut nearly became vice president of the United States, while in the local Democratic primary Jewish insurance commissioner Deborah Senn finished second in her bid to become Washington state's first Jewish senator. This prominence of Jews in elected politics is emblematic of the important role Jews currently play in the national political scene. The presence of Jews in national elected politics, however, has not always been so common. Moreover, prior to the 1950s, Jews rarely held elected office in this state. With so much success in other spheres of American life, why did Jews historically fail to win elected office throughout the United States, and why have they been particularly absent from Washington's political history? The story of Mark M. Litchman, a politically active Seattle attorney who aspired unsuccessfully to elected office, can help us answer these questions.

In the early 20th century, when the state's population numbered about 1 million, there were fewer than ten formal Jewish congregations. Jews began arriving in greater numbers, some from distant parts of the United States and others from as far away as the Island of Marmara in Turkey. Among these new arrivals was Mark M. Litchman.

Before coming to Seattle, Litchman spent his first 21 years traveling the world. Born in New York in 1887, Litchman left the Lower East Side in 1902 to become a naval apprentice and, ultimately, the youngest veteran of the Spanish-American War at age 14. He spent his remaining teenage years sailing from port to port in Europe and even around Cape Horn in South America.

By the time Litchman arrived in Seattle his extensive travels had forever changed him. Reflecting on his early experiences many years later, he commented that as a teen he had gained "both a heart and a viewpoint for the underdog, and my early ideal...to become a lawyer for the downtrodden." After he passed the bar in May 1913, this is exactly what he became.

As a young attorney Litchman argued a number of important cases. He secured election filing rights for Socialist Party candidates, fought for free tuition at the University of Washington, and helped establish the eight-hour work day in the lumber industry. He also successfully defended the *Seattle Union Record*, labor's daily newspaper, against charges of sedition in addition to founding and serving as the first president of the Seattle Labor College. The pinnacle of his early legal career, however, came in 1926 when he won a longshoreman's case before the United States Supreme Court, which paved the way for passage of the Federal Harbor Workers Compensation Act.

Litchman continued to fight for workers, arguing two more important cases in 1933. He successfully represented 100 picketing fruit workers in Yakima, and then in a later case

defended the constitutionality of the Old Age Pension Act. In merely 20 years of practicing law, Litchman had gained a reputation as an excellent orator and an important labor lawyer, winning the nickname, "The Little Giant."

Due to his successes in the courtroom as a people's advocate, Mark Litchman was undoubtedly well-qualified to be a superior court judge. He filed to run in the 1934 primary election for King County Superior Court Position 15. Joining four other candidates, Litchman finished fourth in the September 11, 1934, primary.

Two years later Litchman was even better qualified to serve as a superior court judge, and therefore he decided to run again, this time challenging Judge Roscoe Smith for King County Superior Court Position 12. In the two years since the 1934 election, Litchman had added a year of experience as the Washington State Legislature's legal advisor to his already impressive list of credentials. Given his extensive experience as an advocate of citizens and workers, he secured endorsements from the Washington Commonwealth Federation, Senator W. R. Orndorff, and the Lumber and Sawmill Workers Local Union of Snoqualmie No. 2545.

With his added experience and increased knowledge of the campaign process, Litchman finished second in the September 8 primary, advancing to the November 3, 1936, general election. Nevertheless, on November 4, 1936, the *Seattle Times* reported that Judge Roscoe Smith had been reelected to Position 12, receiving more than twice as many votes as Mark Litchman. The newspaper provided no analysis of Litchman's unsuccessful Superior Court bid, but given his expertise and experience it is interesting that the final results were not closer.

The most apparent explanation is that Roscoe Smith's greater name recognition and financial backing from influential conservatives was too much for Litchman to challenge. In addition to Litchman's difficult task of unseating a well-financed incumbent, it is possible that his strong labor views were too progressive for Seattle in 1936.

Still, upon deeper exploration into the 1936 election, an entirely different explanation arises: anti-Semitism. There were three parties that ran candidates for every statewide and congressional office in 1936—the Republican Party, the Democratic Party, and the Christian Party. The Christian Party ran on an explicitly anti-Semitic platform, promising to "Shovel out Communism and International Capitalism, both Jew Controlled." While Christian Party candidates didn't win more than a handful of votes, it is alarming that it was the only party in Washington State to rival the breadth of the Democratic and Republican parties. Though often subtle, anti-Semitism clearly had a foothold in Washington politics of the 1930s. Only three months after the general election, for example, Seattle City Council member David Levine found himself fighting against Windemere, a residential development that was open "only to gentiles and white people." This anti-Semitism may have had some effect on Litchman's attempt to become the first Jewish superior court judge in Washington State.

Despite Litchman's unsuccessful superior court campaigns, he finally became a public servant in 1938 when he was appointed to the state senate. Nevertheless, he decided not to stand for reelection in 1940. In previous elections Litchman was not able to overcome the difficulties of defeating wealthy incumbents and the forces of anti-Semitism by running with progressive political views. These challenges had most likely also kept other aspiring Jewish politicians out of elected office. Historically, Jews have not only failed to win elections in Washington and across the country, but perhaps more importantly, they have often decided not to run for public office, convinced that "Jews make better staff people." Over the years Jews have been politically

influential behind the scenes, both as staff people and financial supporters of politicians, but they have often declined to enter elections as candidates. In 1940, given Litchman's increased name recognition and experience in campaigning, he might have become an elected state senator if he had only chosen to enter a third political race. Yet, like so many other Jews of his day and a number of Jews since, he decided elected politics was not for him.

Mark Litchman spent his final 20 years continuing to champion community causes, most notably as the director of the King County Housing Authority, president of Americans for Democratic Action, and as a board member of both B'nai B'rith and the Seattle Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union. He also founded and was a commander of the Seattle post of the Jewish War Veterans of the United States.

Finally, throughout his life Litchman was a prolific lecturer and writer, writing both fiction and nonfiction and numerous articles to state and county bar associations. Quite ironically, in a piece he published in the *Jewish Transcript* about the "Contributions of Jews to Human Progress" in the realm of statesmanship, he hardly mentioned American Jews, instead choosing to focus on biblical and European Jews. It is instructive that even he, a former candidate for superior court judge and an appointed state senator, had little to say about American Jewish statesmen, leaving his own political aspirations as an American Jew shrouded in mystery.

Unfortunately, with Mark Litchman's death in 1960, it is now nearly impossible to completely unravel the mysteries behind his 1934 and 1936 superior court campaigns and his later appointment to the Washington State Senate. If he were here today, we would undoubtedly grill Litchman with a series of questions, attempting to better understand his experiences as a Jew running for elected office in the state's early years. Why did he chose to run for office? How did his being a Jew affect this decision? What role did anti-Semitism play in his election bids?

Although it is impossible to turn back the clock to interview Mark Litchman, historians can turn to other members in the Jewish community to ask them similar questions. It is for this reason that undertakings such as the Washington State Jewish Historical Society's newest oral history project, a project focusing on Jews in politics, is so important. It is the voices, histories, and insights of former and current Jewish politicians that will help historians better understand the difficult paths of our state's Jewish political pioneers, bringing greater clarity to the rich Jewish history of Washington State.

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