

A trailblazer in education

(Editor's Note: The following contains excerpts from a speech about Maxine Goldmark Aaron given by Frances Aaron Hess as part of a program, "Trailblazers: Jewish Women's Contributions to the Quality of Our Lives," presented by the Western Pennsylvania Jewish Archives of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.)

Maxine Goldmark Aaron

I am grateful for this opportunity to talk about my mother, Maxine Goldmark Aaron and her outstanding contributions to public education in Pittsburgh. It proved to be a labor of love and one that brought me tremendous pleasure as I listened to the hours of oral history tapes, poured over the newspaper clippings and letters in my mother's files and pulled this speech together.

Given the Aaron family's central involvement in Rodef Shalom Congregation and the Pittsburgh Jewish community for more than 100 years, it may surprise many of you to learn that as a child, my mother had no formal religious training and her parents had had no religious upbringing.

Her father, Emil Goldmark, the son and grandson of cantors in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was an avowed agnostic and yet very much identified with the New York Jewish community.

From her parents my mother inherited a strong sense of the importance of community service and the centrality of ethical and moral values. At Vassar she developed an acute sense of community responsibility -- that one had an obligation to one's own community and was responsible for the kind of world in which one lived.

Her active participation in Jewish religious and institutional life has occurred in the almost 67 years since she married Marcus Lester Aaron in 1926 and has lived in Pittsburgh. The Aaron family's deep involvement in Rodef Shalom, my father's having been a religious temple-goer all his life, and Dr. Samuel Goldenson's (rabbi of Rodef Shalom, 1918-1934) great emphasis on the universal and moral aspects of Judaism were the key elements affecting my mother's Jewish development.

Though her great contribution to Pittsburgh was in the field of public education, she herself was educated at a private school in New York - Horace Mann School for Girls, the demonstration school for Teacher's College.

Her mother, Maxine

Heller Goldmark, had been a teacher -- but my mother, as part of an early generation of feminist assertiveness that wanted to pursue new careers, vehemently rejected that possibility. A 1924 Economics and History major at Vassar, she worked as a statistician for a consulting engineer until she moved to Pittsburgh in 1926.

Her focus on public education began when she married into a family that had always attended the Pittsburgh Public Schools. When she arrived in Pittsburgh in 1926, her father-in-law, Marcus Aaron, was then president of the School Board. He had been on the original appointed centralized School Board since its inception in 1911. He served as president from 1922 to 1942 and remained on the Board till 1947.

All four of her children are Pittsburgh Public School graduates -- from Wightman and Alderdice. My mother's own active involvement in public education began with P.T.A. as soon as her first

child entered grade school. She served as president of the Pittsburgh Council of the P.T.A. at the time she was appointed to the School Board in December 1948. She also served as legislative chairman of the State P.T.A. for several years while she was on the School Board.

Maxine Aaron served on the appointed Pittsburgh School Board for 27 years (1948 to 1975). She was vice president from 1953 to 1966 and was also chairman of the Education Committee. In November 1966, she was elected the first woman president, a position she held for three years. It also should be noted that she was the second Jewish president in the Pittsburgh School Board's 55 year history.

Her service on the Board was motivated by her faith in the vital role of the public schools and her belief that "... the quality of public education pretty much determines the quality of the community." This was expressed so aptly in her 1975 letter to Judge Ellen-

bogen requesting non-reappointment to the Board: "The quality of life in American cities will depend in large measure on the character and quality of Public Education. It is my earnest hope that the community will continue to support the Public Schools and that the Board will furnish the necessary leadership as trustees for all the children of Pittsburgh."

In an interview with a Pittsburgh Press reporter in 1960, she stated: "The large city public school can give the child a social education he can't get anywhere else, if we provide academic excellence equal to that of any private school. And in Pittsburgh we do just that."

In December 1966, when she was cited as one of 10 of Pittsburgh's outstanding Women by the Pittsburgh Post Gazette, she articulated her position on the primary function of the public schools: "Children today do not quit ... They must be educated -- the slow ones as well as the bright ones, and we must know how to

reach them all. More and more responsibility is being placed upon the schools. Society expects us to handle all kinds of problems -- that of discrimination, for instance -- and it is education that is the best channel for taking care of these challenges."

I realize now that the three years she served as School Board president, 1966 to 1969, were a period of tremendous turmoil in American life in general and in education in particular. Major issues that she had to face were: unionization of teachers (a strike in 1968 and pickets at the house on Inverness), integration of the schools, vociferous demands for increased community participation in School Board matters, and more adequate financing (trying to get a fairer share of state aid).

She acknowledged that several times she felt beyond her depth but she always kept the Board focussed on what she believed was their main task -- providing quality education for all the 70,000

children in the Pittsburgh Public Schools.

With superb support from the other School Board members, she persevered and was able to stand up to all the threats.

My sister, Elinor Aaron Langer, carried on the Pittsburgh School Board Aaron legacy when she ran for the first elected School Board in 1976. She served on the Board until she and her husband left Pittsburgh for Santa Barbara in 1982; she was president from 1979 to 1981. From 1911 to 1982 there were only two years without an Aaron on the Pittsburgh School Board.

In her many years of community service, my mother, Maxine Goldmark Aaron, served as a role model not only for me and other members of the family, but also for the greater Pittsburgh community -- an inspiring example of a Jewish woman who enriched the quality of life for all.

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