in Washington that is today a staple of American Jewish political life.

Born in Brooklyn in 1914, Rabinowitz was the son of the "Brownsviller Rebbe," Rabbi Samuel A. Rabinowitz, a sixth-generation direct descendant of the Ba’al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism. Raised in Canada and Bayonne, New Jersey, Baruch traveled to Jerusalem in 1932 to study under Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook, the first chief rabbi of British Mandatory Palestine, from whom he received biblical ordination. During those years, Rabinowitz became a follower of Vladimir Ze’ev Jabotinsky, founder of the militant Revisionist Zionist movement. When Palestinian Arab rioting erupted anew in 1936, the Revisionist leadership sent him on a speaking tour to raise funds for the Igum Zion Leumi, the underground militia established by Revisionists to combat Arab violence. In 1938, Rabinowitz began a promising new career in the rabbinate as spiritual leader of Congregation B’nai Abraham in Hagerstown, Maryland. But less than two years later, his life was shattered when his wife, Harriet, was killed by a reckless driver. Three months after that came another traumatic loss—the sudden death of his revered leader, Jabotinsky.

“I had just begun to come back into the stream of the living,” Rabinowitz later recalled. “I had just begun to think in terms of the world around me and the problems of my people rather than my own tragedy.”

Instead of allowing his grief to break him, Rabinowitz resolved to devote his life to furthering the ideals of Jewish pride, self-defense and the forthright political action for which Jabotinsky stood. He resigned from B’nai Abraham in late 1940 and moved to New York to work full-time for the American Friends of a Jewish Palestine, a Revisionist faction involved in promoting Aliyah Bet—immigration from Europe to Palestine in defiance of the British White Paper restrictions. Among Rabinowitz’s close colleagues in the Aliyah Bet campaign was Rabbi Louis I. Newman of Temple Rodeph Shalom in New York City, one of the few Reform rabbis who supported Jabotinsky. Despite their theological differences, the Orthodox son of the Brownsviller Rebbe and the Upper West Side disciple of Stephen Wise worked side by side and developed a deep personal admiration for one another.

From New York to Washington

The group for which Rabinowitz worked in New York was led by a dynamic Jabotinskyite emissary from Jerusalem named Hillel Kook. The nephew of Rabinowitz’s revered teacher, Chief Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook, Hillel adopted the pseudonym “Peter Bergson” in America to shield his family from any embarrassing publicity. Bergson arrived in the United States in the spring of 1940, and under his leadership the American Friends of a Jewish Palestine was transformed into the Committee for a Jewish Army, which campaigned for the creation of a Jewish armed force to fight alongside the Allies against the Nazis. The British rejected the proposal because of Arab opposition, and because they feared the Jews would eventually use such military force to help bring about the creation of a Jewish state. Bergson realized early on that to influence London, he had to go through Washington. With England desperate for US aid in its war with Germany, the British government would have difficulty resisting a plan endorsed by the Americans. Bergson needed someone full-time in the nation’s capital to press the case for a Jewish army. He turned to Rabinowitz, whose plea of “I’ve never met a congressmen in my life—I wouldn’t know how to begin,” fell on deaf ears. Although Rabinowitz was a novice in the political world, he was an experienced public speaker and possessed good interpersonal skills.

Earlier attempts at Jewish lobbying in Washington had never taken hold. During the late 1930s, the mainstream American Zionist movement briefly operated a Capitol Hill office led by Idaore Breslai, but that lobbying effort soon fell victim to budget cuts and divisions among Zionist leaders over the propriety of pressing Jewish issues in Washington. Likewise, in 1940 the Revisionist Zionists had sent one of their representatives, Benjamin Akezin (who later became the dean of the Hebrew University law faculty), to meet with members of Congress on occasion, but they did not have the resources to sustain the effort. Now Rabinowitz would try to succeed where his predecessors had failed.

In the autumn of 1941, Rabinowitz began his work on Capitol Hill. “Day after day I visited members of Congress of both Houses,” he recalled. “I saw an average of six congressman a day, five days a week.” His first and closest ally in Washington was an Irish-American congressman from New York, Andrew Somers, whose hostility to the British drew him to support Zionism. Rabinowitz worked out of Somers’ office and used his connection with the congressman to cultivate ties with numerous other members of Congress. He built relations on both sides of the aisle, although Republicans were often more receptive to Rabinowitz’s appeals, while many Democrats hesitated to defy the Roosevelt administration’s line on Palestine or refugees. The tireless young
Leventhal (regarded as the chief rabbi of Philadelphia). Also among the marchers were many young rabbis who would later become prominent such as Rabbi Michael Feinman of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Shocked by the realization of the full scope of the Holocaust, rabbinical figures such as Eliezer Silver (the most prominent Orthodox rabbi of the day), Rabbi Samuel A. Rabinowitz (the Brownsville Rebbe), who is holding the sefer Torah, and Bernard Rabinowitz produce the Jewish boxer as their keynote speaker. He did so, and the gathering raised over $100,000. Cohen himself organized a fundraiser at Slapsie Maxie’s nightclub in Hollywood. As Hecht described it, the audience consisted of “a thousand bookies, ex-prize fighters, gamblers, jockeys, tutors and all sorts of lawless and semi-lawless characters—and their womenfolk.” An estimated $200,000 was raised that night.

A long list of celebrities backed Bergson’s work both during and after the Holocaust. When, in 1943, the Bergson group staged We Will Never Die, a Hecht-authored pageant that roused public awareness of the Holocaust, such famous actors as Edward G. Robinson, Stella Adler, Sylvia Sydney and Paul Muni volunteered for the cast. A Show of Shows, held in Madison Square Garden in 1944 to raise funds for Bergson’s Holocaust rescue work, featured skits and comedy routines by Bob Hope, Gracie Fields, Jimmy Durante, Ethel Merman, Zero Mostel, Molly Picon and others. Milton Berle served as master of ceremonies. Musical numbers were performed by Paul Robeson, Perry Como, the Andrews Sisters, the Xavier Cugat Band and the Count Basie Band, among others.


Lobbying to Save Lives

In 1943, after reports of the Nazi genocide were confirmed by the Allies, Bergson established a new organization, the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe. Rabinowitz went door to door on Capitol Hill, pleading for US government action to save Jews from Hitler. At the same time, the Committee’s frequent full-page newspaper ads and public rallies were instrumental in raising American public interest in the suffering of Europe’s Jews. The ads, often authored by the Academy Award-winning screenwriter Ben Hecht, bore hard-hitting headlines such as “Time Races Death: What Are We Waiting For?” and “How Well Are You Sleeping?” In The Nation, he asked “How Could You Have Done to Save Millions of Innocent People—Men, Women, and Children—from Torture and Death?” As part of the rescue campaign, Rabinowitz helped organize a dramatic march of 400 Orthodox rabbis to the White House just before Yom Kippur in 1943 to plead for US action to save Jewish refugees—the only such protest in Washington during the Holocaust.

The marchers included such illustrious rabbinical figures as Elizer Silver (the most prominent Orthodox rabbi at that time) and Bernard Rabinowitz (age eleven, in the summer of 1925 (right), with his sister, Sylvia (left) and an unidentified friend. Photo courtesy of Sharon Rabinowitz Ettkin
The OU in Washington

In 1986, the OU established the Institute for Public Affairs (IPA) to protect the interests and promote the values of the American Orthodox Jewish community. Working with members of Congress and the executive branch, the IPA addresses issues ranging from religious freedom, to Israel’s security, to education-funding policies.

The IPA files legal briefs in federal and state courts, meets regularly with the diplomatic corps and conveys the OU’s views in broadcast and print media outlets. The IPA pursues its goals through educating our community’s grass roots activists to help bring about the desegregation of other theaters in the city.

Paving the Way

Rabinowitz pioneered lobbying in Washington helped pave the way for full Jewish participation in American political life in the era following the Second World War. This was a generation of immigrants and children of immigrants, many of whom did not feel fully secure in American society and were reluctant to press Jewish issues in the public arena.

Yet Rabinowitz aggressively pleaded his people’s cause on Capitol Hill and in the mass media. In his era, Orthodox rabbis typically focused their energies on maintaining traditional observance in the face of social and economic pressure on their congregants to assimilate. Yet Rabinowitz forsook the pulpit and focused his attention on the national struggles of the Jewish people. In those days, it was unheard of for an Orthodox rabbi to pound the corridors of Capiton Hill or hobnob with Hollywood stars or other public figures.

Yet there was Rabinowitz writing speeches for Congressmen, meeting with the president of the Dominican Republic, talking up the Irgun at Frank Sinatra’s pool, rubbing shoulders with gangsters at Salsipie Maxie’s and working with African-American leaders to smash racial barriers in Baltimore.

For young Orthodox Jews today, none of this may seem extraordinary. After all, Orthodox organizations now have full-time lobbyists in Washington; more than a few Orthodox rabbis have left their pulpits to pursue careers in the public arena; several prominent Orthodox rabbis have developed well-publicized friendships with Hollywood stars, and an Orthodox rabbi in New York is the head of an organization devoted to strengthening Black-Jewish relations. What is remarkable is that Rabinowitz did all of these things—and he did them sixty years ago, helping to pave the way for the future of political activism by American Orthodox Jews.