



THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR JEWISH FILM

A scene from the documentary "Of Stars and Shamrocks."

# A shared past for the Jews and Irish

'Of Stars and Shamrocks' details communities' common ground

By Daniel M. Kimmel

**T**he Jews and the Irish of Boston have an interesting and intertwined history. "Of Stars and Shamrocks," a 1995 documentary now out on DVD, originally aired on WGBH. It's a must for

## Movie Maven

any local synagogue or school library. You may want it for your home collection as well.

The massive Irish and Jewish immigration to Boston in the 19th century was separated by a generation, but both were driven by hardship and oppression. The Irish were affected by the potato famine, caused by the British exporting most of the Irish food crops for themselves. The Russian Jews were fleeing the pogroms and harsh decrees of the Tsar. In Boston, both groups tried to get a toehold in a society ruled by the Brahmin

elite, who looked down at both as outsiders.

For the first half of the 20th century, the two groups also looked down on each other. The Irish imbibed the anti-Semitism of Father Charles Coughlin, the "Radio Priest," although Boston's Cardinal William O'Connell was one of the first Catholic authorities to publicly denounce him.

Jews accepted some of the stereotypes about the Irish, as well. Slowly — sometimes very slowly — things changed. Boston Mayor James Michael Curley came to power with Jewish voters very much part of his coalition. And Curley raised Jewish Bostonians to powerful places in his administration. Still, he was

not above using anti-Semitic slurs, such as describing some deal in which he made a lot of money as having "killed a Jew."

There was a sea change of relations with the arrival of Cardinal Richard Cushing. Motivated, perhaps, by his Jewish brother-in-law, Cushing made the condemnation of anti-Jewish bigotry and warm ties with

the Jewish community hallmarks of his administration. The film also notes the eventual destruction of Boston's Jewish community through the notorious "redlining" real estate policies of the 1960s

and early 70s, in which banks were encouraged to provide home loans to African-American families, but only in certain neighborhoods.

If anything dates the film, it is coming across old friends or acquaintances who are no longer

with us. Among the people giving "contemporary" interviews are Gregor Shelkan, the cantor of Congregation Mishkan Tefila, and Lenny Zakim, local director of the Anti-Defamation League. Both are now gone. An articulate Kevin White, former mayor of Boston, reminds us of the man before Alzheimer's withdrew him from the public eye. The appearance of Cardinal Bernard Law, on the other hand, may simply cause one to cringe.

The result is a movie that is an important look back at our own community.

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"Of Stars and Shamrocks" is available through the National Center for Jewish Film for \$36. Public performance rights separately available. Call (781) 736-8600 or go to [www.jewish-film.org](http://www.jewish-film.org).