

JEWES AND MARDI GRAS "KREWES"

Mardi Gras, the last day of merry-making before the solemn fast of Lent, is "a big extravaganza — unbelievable to watch and fantastic to be in," enthuses Saul Kahn, an Orthodox Jew who grew up in New Orleans.

Kahn has paraded as a member of a krewe — one of the carnival organizations that mount the elaborate floats and costume balls of the Mardi Gras season. Yet he and others acknowledge not only the pagan and Christian overtones of the holiday but the anti-Semitism of some of the participants.

Dr. Joseph Cohen, professor of English and chairman for Special Projects of the Jewish Studies program at Tulane University, has

noted the prejudice against Jews in a number of krewes. Nonetheless, he says he "masks" for the holiday — dressed as a Chasidic rabbi. "I go as 'Jewish looking' as I can," he says. "It's a statement that Mardi Gras should be open."

In the beginning, it was. The first "rex" (king of carnival) was Lewis J. Salomon, great-grandson of Jewish financier Haym Salomon, back in 1872. In the 1880s Jews were active in the Pickwick Club and the Boston Club, to which many early krewe members belonged.

But at the start of this century, these groups began what Cohen calls "the retreat into discrimination." Jews were barred from many krewes and from the Pickwick, Boston and Louisiana clubs, which "represent an overwhelming concentration of the city's inherited wealth and power," says Cohen.

The highly-ritualized masked balls, coronation dinners and parades are the social highlight of the New Orleans year (and the occasion for the debuts of young ladies) and the aristocracy expends prodigious amounts of time, energy and money on them. In earlier years they were not particularly secretive about their anti-Semitism: in 1939 one krewe historian wrote, "No Cross, No Crown."

As they did elsewhere when barred from country clubs, Jews formed their own krewes, as well as eventually finding their way into some



Proclamation declaring Lewis Salomon the king of Mardi Gras. Courtesy Carnival Collection, Special Collections Division, Tulane University Library.

established groups. At the turn of the century, the Young Men's Hebrew Association held a carnival ball, as did the German Jewish Harmony Club. Other Jews left town for Mardi Gras.

Today, Jews are represented in a number of krewes, especially newer ones. Marty Scudder has been active in the Krewe of Caesar since it was formed ten years ago. The first year the 20 or so Jewish members, who joined together and were all members of the B'nai B'rith Archibald Marx

Lodge, rode on a float adorned with the Star of David. Several years ago an all-Jewish, family-oriented krewe, Hestia, was formed.

Some Jews still leave town during Mardi Gras but most enjoy "the greatest free show on earth." B'nai B'rith member Saul Kahn knows that some rabbis frown on Jewish participation in the manifestly un-Jewish Mardi Gras. But he points out that "there are those who say it has become a civic holiday. I'd say about 95 percent of the Jews in

New Orleans take part in Mardi Gras festivities."

Kahn's son, Zvi, also has some misgivings. "But if you grew up with it, you take it for granted," he says. He will be out in the streets as usual this year (February 7), vying with the crowds for the beads, trinkets and ersatz coins thrown from the floats by outlandishly costumed krewe members.

"Mardi Gras is my weakness in life," Zvi adds. "I really love to collect doubloons."

Edward Yutkowitz