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Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*
MarkKBauman@aol.com

Bryan Edward Stone, *Managing Editor*
bstone@delmar.edu

Scott M. Langston, *Primary Sources Section Editor*
sclangston@charter.net

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swhitfie@brandeis.edu

Ashley Walters, *Exhibit and Film Review Editor*
waltersa1@cofc.edu

Shari Rabin, *Website Review Editor*
srabin@oberlin.edu

Lance J. Sussman and Karen S. Franklin
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lancejsussman@gmail.com, karenfranklin@gmail.com

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The Constitution, Corpus Christi, and the Statue on the Bay

by

Mary Jo O'Rear [*]

A quiet but clear voice commanded attention in the Corpus Christi city council chamber one hot August afternoon in 1979. A controversy that had been tearing the coastal city apart for more than two years was soon to end with a council vote, anticipated since the preceding April. But citizens wanted their input first, and although the person standing at the microphone had been there before, people quieted down to listen. "I think all of you are aware that I have been opposed to this project since the inception of it," Helen Wilk began. "At this point in time it seems to me that whether it is legal or illegal, constitutional or unconstitutional is really secondary to the fact that it has been a very negative and divisive issue in our community. And perhaps as you were forced to face this issue it occurred to you, as it has to me, that the discussion of a statue of Jesus does not belong in the realm of city governmental business."[1]

The eternal question among those who exist as a minority in a culture dominated by the majority is to what lengths will one go to survive, or, to put it more bluntly, how far does one go along to get along? A small community of Jews faced this dilemma nearly fifty years ago in a Texas coastal city that not only overwhelmingly embraced Christianity but also bore the name of the Christ. How Corpus Christi Jews met the challenge while maintaining their dignity is a story of strength, wisdom, and a whole lot of letter-writing.

[*] The author may be contacted at krobsgran@aol.com.

Statue of Jesus? City governmental business? What was going on in Corpus Christi that hot summer in the seventies? A busy metropolis of approximately 230,000 people built around a deep seaport, with a naval air station, army maintenance and repair facility, and booming petrochemical industry, the city was a virtual prototype of twentieth century normality.[2]

Yet the issue being decided was far from normal. It extended beyond domestic feuds and stretched even beyond any typical church and state altercation. For the past two years, Corpus Christi had become a battlefield of opposing voices, Constitution supporters and effigy advocates, each arguing the very nature of the city—and all associated with its name.

Background

The name Corpus Christi did not seem divisive at first. The appellation represented a step up from the settlement's original designation as "Kinney's Rancho," a hideout for smugglers using the waterways of that part of the gulf as trafficking routes to and from Mexico. By 1841, however, the hamlet's denizens had renamed the metropolis after the bay beneath their wharves, and eleven years later the Texas legislature officially incorporated Corpus Christi.[3]

Corpus Christi downtown bayfront, c. 1980.
(Courtesy of Corpus Christi Caller-Times.*)*

The bay, spread along a curved part of the coast and opening into the gulf, had acquired several appellations by that time. Tradition held that Spanish explorer Alonso Álvarez de Pineda discovered the water body in 1519 and, because that happened near the Roman Catholic feast day of Corpus Christi (the Latin term for the Body of Christ), Pineda named the bay Corpus Christi.[4] Subsequent research has revealed, however, that not only did Pineda's route keep him a distance from the bay, he was also not the one who named it. Joaquin Orobio y Basterra was the first European to sight it more than two hundred years later, naming it "Playa de San Miguel Arcángel." Not until Colonel Diego Ortiz Parilla designated it "Playa de Corpus Christi" on his 1766 Gulf Coast map did Corpus Christi became the official name of the moon-shaped bay—and, seventy-five years later, the official name of the city.[5]

Nonetheless, the tradition that Pineda discovered and christened the bay remained embedded in civic consciousness. It cast a romantic haze over grubbier days and gave a patina of elegance to a town early characterized as "the most murderous, thieving, gambling, cut-throat, God-forsaken hole in the 'Lone Star state.'"[6] Well into the twentieth century, seawall shelters retold Pineda's legend, and courtly coronations reenacted his legacy.[7] Partly because the supposed 1519 commemoration of a religious feast day idealized Corpus Christi's past, it was no real surprise when various entities began offering statues of Jesus to grace the bayfront.

The first came in 1927 when sculptor Gutzon Borglum, soon to start work on Mount Rushmore, visited the city for the first time. Asked to share his thoughts about improving the shell piles and sea rubble bordering the shoreline, he came up with an image of "a great waterfront development . . . [with] esplanade and boulevard extending the entire front of the city." The more he pondered, the vaster his vision grew; soon playgrounds and parking spots emerged. But the city's name especially inspired him: "Corpus Christi—Body of Christ!" he exclaimed. "I will include the character of Christ in the general design . . . and I shall locate Him well out into the sea." Within a year, plans emerged for a thirty-two-foot-high figure of Jesus, situated outside the breakwater facing the gulf to welcome ships coming into the new harbor. The sculptor intended to give the statue to the city as part of a comprehensive program including land reclamation, park formation, and airstrip construction.[8]

Sculptor Gutzon Borglum in the 1930s. (Courtesy of Robin Borglum Kennedy.)

Plan for the bayfront by Gutzon Borglum, 1927, including a seawall, breakwaters, and the figure of Jesus at the far right. (Courtesy of Corpus Christi Public Library.)

That the project came to naught had nothing to do with the statue's proposed location on submerged city land. Instead, questions of idolatry, property rights, and financial compensation derailed Borglum's grand scheme. His ire was so great that he turned the very name of the city back onto itself. "'Corpus Christi' is a mis-nomer. . . . [I]lliterate[s] call her—'Corpus.' . . . I don't like to use that word. But if I think of Corpus as she is . . . and what she might have been . . . I never want to see her again."[9]

Nor did he. But the concept of commemorating the name of the city as a symbolic monument on the bay returned in 1953, twenty-five years after Borglum's plan collapsed. This time the statue of Jesus would be situated, as before, on water, but now it would be three times taller than that proposed by Borglum and formed from rolled aluminum to "eliminate glare in the daylight and be more attractive under floodlights." Its significance as a "symbol of Christian faith," especially compelling during the anticommunist McCarthy era, further accentuated its political and cultural allure. But contributions were never sufficient to launch the project, and the problem of placing it on submerged city land did not arise.[10]

Eighteen years later, in 1971, at the Sheraton-Marina Inn, Meliton Salas, professor of fine arts at the University of Guadalajara and sculptor of the Two Eagles monument in Del Rio, Texas, presented his vision of the city's name: a model of a sixteen-story-high figure of Christ, standing on a base and sheltering within itself a stairway and an elevator. The statue, again to be erected on public property, would have an observation deck within its head, providing visitors "a birds-eye view in all directions."[11]

Proposal and the Jewish Community

The grandiosity of such a structure, rather than its placement, may have killed Salas's "tribute to . . . Corpus Christi, USA," but the idea of a statue of Jesus upon the bay lingered. On October 20, 1977, a brief announcement appeared in the *Corpus Christi Caller-Times:* "Referred to the Municipal Arts Commission a proposal from Dr. Sherman Coleman to sculpture, at no cost to the city, a 30-foot bronze statue of Christ if the city will provide a location for the figure and build a base for it. The arts commission is to study the feasibility of the project, plus a possible location, and report back to the council."[12]

Six weeks later the arts commission met publicly and announced its decision—to recommend to the council that the offer from Coleman,

prominent physician as well as sculptor, be accepted. Amid a chorus of supporters speaking in favor of building the statue on public land, the statement of Dr. Michael Meaney, local author and former theology professor at Notre Dame University, stood out. The statue of Christ "would be a fitting symbol of the city," Meaney stated, then added that it was "highly likely" that a majority of the local Jewish community would not oppose the project.[13]

"Highly likely"? This after Stern Feinberg, leading member of the Jewish community in Corpus Christi and one of the few members of the commission to oppose the decision, had just castigated his associates for "'their total lack of understanding of the Constitution of the United States and its separation of church and state.'' "Highly likely"? This after Helen Wilk, member of the Jewish Community Council and former president of the Temple Beth El Sisterhood, had just reminded them, "We are not a Christian city, we are a secular city." Wilk continued, "I did not choose the name of our city, but I accept it . . . not . . . its religiosity." Her voice, as she concluded, was almost plaintive. "A religious symbol, any religious symbol, does not belong on public lands. Putting this statue up makes me an outsider in my own city."[14]

Wilk had not always felt that way. Born Helen Goldman in Wisconsin in 1939, she moved with her parents to Detroit when her father, brought to the United States when only three, began managing the family's jukebox business. In Detroit Helen became close to her Ukrainian-born grandmother, who instructed her in Yiddish, showed her how to bake, and probably encouraged her independent streak. "I attended Sunday school [for] Confirmation but did not attend the . . . ceremony," she later admitted. "I felt that most of my classmates were only going in order to have a big party [afterward]." Such self-sufficiency emerged again in her mid-teens when she became engaged to twenty-two-year-old Larry Wilk, whom she married in 1957. In 1963, with Larry's orthopedic residency completed and two years in the service to fulfill, Helen and Larry left Michigan for Fort Hood (now Fort Cavazos) in central Texas. "We packed up our Pontiac station wagon . . . with a four-year-old, a two-year-old . . . a three-year-old and a dog [and] drove to Texas!"—and ultimately discovered Corpus Christi.[15]

Located on the Gulf Coast and neither as big as Houston nor as small as Nacogdoches, it was just the right size for the young physician to start

Helen Wilk, c. 1980. (Courtesy of the Wilk Family.)

his practice after his military discharge. The addition of another child a few years later cemented the family's bond with Corpus Christi—a city that, in political terms, was growing and changing as much as the Wilk family. Jumpstarted from seedy village to emergent town by the addition of a deep seaport in 1926, the community had merged its interests with those of big business after World War II. By the time Helen and Larry moved there during the sixties, the city had increased to more than 168,000

residents with leaders in oil, industry, and retail commerce shepherding its growth.[16]

But more than municipal vigor attracted the Wilks; the Jewish community had grown as well. Originally too small to do more than hold High Holy Days services in individual homes, two hundred Jews lived in Corpus Christi by the time of the port's dedication. Three years later, the congregants purchased land to build Temple Beth El and in 1932 hired their first permanent rabbi, Sidney A. Wolf.[17] Thirteen years later, a second congregation took form, B'nai Israel Synagogue, moving into its sanctuary in 1944. Separate in affiliation—Temple Beth El members were Reform, B'nai Israel was Orthodox—the two worked to ameliorate the horrors of World War II, providing free phone calls to servicemen, catering meals for uniformed personnel at the Naval Air Station, and providing homes for Holocaust survivors. The congregations' women sold $226,000 in war bonds, and Jewish men comprised 10 percent of those from Corpus Christi who served in uniform, clearly a disproportionate number in a city where Jews were less than 2 percent of the population.[18]

Original building of Temple Beth El, Corpus Christi, constructed in 1937.
*(*Our Golden Years: A History of Temple Beth El*, 1983).*

Jewish activities were not just war driven. Jews had actively participated as Corpus Christi citizenry since their arrival in 1858. By 1942 businessmen like Morris Lichtenstein had become so valued to the chamber of commerce that he was nominated for director. His brother Al served as city mayor ten years later. Fanny Alexander administered the county chapter of the American Red Cross and helped organize the Nueces County Tuberculosis Society. Nat Selinger was named Young Man of the Year by the Jaycees, and Sam Kane, former resistance fighter in Czechoslovakia, fast became in the postwar years a major figure in the local meatpacking industry.[19]

More than livestock, oil, and agriculture interests fueled Corpus Christi's economy by the late sixties. City leaders' efforts to attract more commercial development—like petroleum refining, chemical research, and tourism—paid off in increased population and heightened opportunities for young professionals, including for many Jews, since "the quotas that limited Jewish entrance into many universities" had been lifted.[20] Donald Feferman, Harvard graduate and 1965 recipient of a doctorate in jurisprudence, established his law practice in Corpus Christi and became a member of Temple Beth El. Stern Feinberg, graduate of Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration, relocated to the city, became partner and manager in the Best Western Sandy Shores motel, and joined Temple Beth El as well. Alan Zane, member of B'nai Israel Synagogue, received his medical degree in otolaryngology (ears, nose, and throat) from Wayne State University in Indiana before practicing his specialty in Corpus Christi. Cornelia Levy, born in Matamoros, Mexico, and recent recipient of a master's degree in English and speech from Texas A&I University in Kingsville, moved to the city to teach, but a chance encounter with another transplant, chemist Leon Levy from New York, led to marriage. They too were part of Temple Beth El. Even hometown boys returned. Jack Solka, with a master's degree in architecture from Columbia and certification from the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards of New York, chose to go back to Corpus Christi and build his architectural practice there rather than remain in the East. With Helen and Larry Wilk and the other Jewish families numbering around three hundred at that time, Jack and Davie Lou Solka interacted comfortably with the secular life of the city while sharing in the spiritual life of their synagogue.[21]

This commitment involved participation in the local Jewish Community Council. Formed in 1953 out of concern that members of the two synagogues were becoming increasingly isolated from each other, the Jewish Community Council quickly became an active force of shared Judaism in the city guided by an elected board of directors and an executive director. Its spacious center hosted youth activities, lecture series, and art exhibitions, while a monthly newsletter, the *JCC Focus,* advertised future events. But the *Focus* did more than "serve" its members, as its masthead promised. Under the direction of San Antonio–born businesswoman Lillian Racusin since 1963, the publication also "informed," centering attention on events and developments with local impact.[22] By the seventies in Corpus Christi, these were considerable.

Changes and Reactions

Some portended political change. The combined business-civic interests so long in control of the city were now challenged by civil rights leaders like Tony and Ruben Bonilla, members of the League of United Latin American Citizens, and Dr. Hector Garcia, founder of the American G.I. Forum—Latin American civil rights organizations that had been founded in Corpus Christi. Their influence in forming "loose centrist coalitions" that would encourage more jobs, better housing, and increased social services for minorities within the city already promised to upend voting patterns.[23]

Proud, like many citizens, that voluntary integration of restaurants, hotels, department stores, and the city's junior college had been accomplished by 1964, Mayor James Bernard safely assured a ministerial group that "Corpus Christians have made a lot of progress without major disruptions." But the 1970 ruling by Federal Judge Woodrow Seale that the local school district had deliberately maintained a segregated school system shocked the city, and the subsequent order by Judge Owen Cox to transfer students from one section of town to another to fully accomplish integration was shattering.[24]

Seven years later, the unease and acrimony caused by such a damaging blow to established custom still festered. Consequently, when a local newspaper reported that Jews at the arts commission meeting had objected to the use of city funds to display a statue of Christ on the bay, anger surged. Accusing Feinberg and Wilk of "frontal audacity" by

claiming constitutional rights, Robert Bluntzer, member of one of the oldest families in the area, likened them to infamous atheist Madalyn Murray O'Hair. Rejecting Helen Wilk's handwritten request that he "reconsider his goals," sculptor Sherman Coleman maligned her plea as a hate letter. Acknowledging that Jews know "how a majority can abuse the rights of a minority," newspaper publisher Ed Harte ignored Wilk's appeal to reconsider his approval of the statue.[25]

Neither Helen Wilk nor Feinberg faced the firestorm alone. The moment the proposal of placing a statue of Jesus on public land was made, a cadre of leaders from the Jewish community emerged to protest.[26] In an article that appeared three weeks after the commission meeting, Jack Solka reminded readers of the sectarian aspect of the offer: "[A] statue of Christ is a religious symbol," he wrote, and emphasized that it not "be constructed on public property or through the use of public funds." Cornelia Levy emphasized the same points in her December 22nd letter to the editor: "Yes, the Jewish community has spoken with disapproval about . . . a statue of Christ at the entrance of Corpus Christi Harbor," but the objection was because "taxes—everybody's taxes—will be used."[27]

At a public hearing, Alan Zane, president of B'nai Israel, expressed the Jewish community's concern "that the proposal before the City Council infringes on [constitutional] guarantees." He expounded more strongly in a letter he and two others—Madelyn Loeb, first woman president of the Jewish Community Council, and Donald Feferman, president of Temple Beth El—presented to the city council that same day at the public hearing. "It has been stated that the majority will should control, and since the majority of the citizens may be in favor of the project, it should go forward. Those who express this view have a misconception of the purpose of the Constitution. . . . [It] establishes certain rights to which the majority will does not control . . . [and this prevents] the majority from violating those rights of the minority."[28]

The three also challenged the proposal made by sculptor Coleman that people see Christ only as a historical figure, that "This would be a historical statue relating to the name of the city" rather than a religious symbol. They succinctly rejoined: "Jesus is uniquely inherent to the Christian religions. There is no more basic symbol of Christianity than a depiction of Jesus Christ."[29]

Corpus Christi Caller, *December 9, 1977. (Newspapers.com.)*

Historic Symbol versus Constitutionality

The problem, however, persisted that many in Corpus Christi had no objection to that "basic symbol of Christianity" being erected on public land. Marilyn McLair, in her letter to the editor of the *Corpus Christi Caller* in December, extolled the statue on the bay: "A fantastic idea! I cannot think of anything more beautiful than seeing Christ as we enter our city." James Dougherty, another long-time South Texas resident, echoed her: "The name of this city . . . Corpus Christi . . . had special meaning to its originators, for they believed Him their savior. . . . I think it only fitting that a statue of Him be erected . . . in the city's harbor."[30]

Even more threatening was the partisanship gradually emerging. Members of social circles began to be slighted because of the controversy, and relations among old friends suddenly soured. McLair publicly prayed "that the Jewish Community will not hinder . . . this marvelous idea," and the original sponsor of the project, Mercedes Quintero Eugenio, wife of neurosurgeon Marco Eugenio, blatantly accused statue opponents of "using half-truths and personal innuendoes." Active on the board of the Art Museum of South Texas, Eugenio was the arts commission member who originally persuaded Coleman to offer his services to the city. Fifteen months of debate had failed to convince her that a statue of Christ on the bay represented anything more "than a work of art." In a column on the Public Forum page of the *Caller* on March 2, 1979, Eugenio went so far as to denounce those opposing her for confusing "religious bias with a constitutional concern" and "senselessly treading on the rights of others."[31]

Harold Alberts, former regional chairman of the B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation League, early legal advisor to B'nai Israel Synagogue, and one of the foremost lawyers in South Texas—he had been admitted to practice before the Supreme Court of the United States, before the Treasury Department, and before the Court of Military Appeals—also appeared on the Public Forum page, as well as at the Tuesday Luncheon Club and in city council chambers. Alberts's presentations, ranging from church and state history to city charter particulars, confounded Eugenio's accusations by their objectivity. His scenario predicting the kind of community that would result from the statue's placement was persuasive—at least to those

Mercedes Quintero Eugenio in 1979. (Courtesy of Corpus Christi Caller-Times.*)*

Harold Alberts in 1969. (Courtesy of Corpus Christi Caller-Times.*)*

who opposed the statue. "Religious sectarianism [would then] become the symbol of Corpus Christi," he argued, and his promise of judicial condemnation was clear: the U.S. Supreme Court "would support the unconstitutionality of erecting a religious monument on public land [even if it meant going] against the will of the people who want the statue."[32]

Two recent court cases had strengthened his position, both of which Alberts shared with Racusin, who was reporting on the controversy in the *JCC Focus* newsletters, and with Helen Wilk, who continued to address city council members. A California Supreme Court decision affirmed that Los Angeles "may not display [a] lighted, single-barred cross on city land by any means whatsoever." And a U.S. Supreme Court judgment, the second case, reversed an appeals court's approval of a Ten Commandments monument on courthouse grounds.[33]

Action and Responses

Unconvinced by legal arguments and desperate for a solution, city officials finally made two decisions: to support the creation of a nonprofit group to "finance the construction of the base of the statue and pay for its installation and its annual maintenance," and to put the question of "whether a religious statue can be erected on city property in Corpus Christi" directly to the state's attorney general, John Hill. Hill's answer, given three months later, proved ambiguous since he failed to address the basic legal question, "whether by allowing the statue the city would be aiding an established religion." But he did address the practical aspect: "A city may sell or lease land to an individual even though the individual may subsequently intend to use the land for religious purposes."[34]

Sketch indicating the location of Sunfish Island in Corpus Christi Bay, c. 1978. (Helen Wilk Papers, Courtesy of Helen Wilk.)

Despite Alberts's immediate promise of a lawsuit ("I assure you that litigation will be pursued"), the city council authorized a contract guaranteeing a five-year lease on a spoil-formed landform called Sunfish Island, lying two-tenths of a mile out in the bay. On it, a new nonprofit organization would erect a statue of the Christ, bearing "all costs of sculpting, erection and maintenance." Furthermore, a plaque would sit on the base "disavowing any religious endorsement by the city."[35]

The logical impact of such an arrangement bordered on the ridiculous: "Inasmuch as the statue is to be located on [an] island, 1,100 feet from the seawall, totally surrounded by water, the sign is ludicrous to say the least," Helen Wilk wrote in the Jewish Community Council newsletter. The *Dallas Morning News* was even more explicit, the controversy now getting statewide attention: "That may clear up the matter for a fair share of the fish, but not too many land-dwelling beings."[36]

Even more withering was Alberts's indictment of the decision: "Religious freedom is not first lost when a policeman padlocks the doors of the Synagogues. . . . The loss begins subtly and gently with the ruling authority . . . indicating favoritism . . . toward their own religious persuasion. . . . If our City Government lends the authority . . . of civil government to one religious persuasion in denigration of others, it will have taken the first step in repudiating . . . that 'wall of separation' between church and state."[37]

Just as concerned, Lillian Racusin used the March 1979 edition of *JCC Focus* to rally her readership. First singling out Alberts and Wilk for special praise, she then commended Jack and Davie Lou Solka, Madelyn Loeb, recently retired rabbi Sidney Wolf, newly installed Temple Beth El rabbi Stephen Fisch, and others for fearlessly speaking up "at four [city council] meetings, . . . to the press, at several organizational meetings and in private conversations." Then she called on the entire Jewish community to speak up as well through letters to the editor and other valuable contacts: "We are beginning to gain support from many varied sources. By continuing our efforts, this support will grow."[38]

The Jewish Community Council went one step further in late March 1979 by creating an ad hoc statue committee. The timing was excellent, because before the lease proposal could be legitimized, it had to have an official vote of approval three times. By mid-April, the council had voted twice to approve the statue lease on Sunfish Island; all that was needed

was one more vote. But a city election loomed ahead, charter rules kicked in, and a moratorium on all city-allocated contracts went into place. A final vote would not take place on a statue in the bay until after the April election.[39]

The next few weeks seethed with activity, controversy now raging as much around the political situation in Corpus Christi as the statue situation. Disgusted with the reactionary stands taken by the current city council, Luther G. Jones, Jr., vice-president of the Mercantile National Bank and former commander of the Corpus Christi Army Depot, agreed to run for mayor, and others of similar thought joined him on a ticket. Faced with an ever-growing field of candidates, many of them running as independents, the ad hoc statue committee, chaired by Alberts and comprised of over thirty members, refined its efforts against the imminent lease agreement. Some volunteers kept the Jewish community informed, whereas others approached Christians opposed to the statue. A few generated publicity and maintained editorial consistency while others like Helen Wilk and Davie Lou Solka and the many letter-writers of the committee contacted and addressed city council candidates.

Interviewing them may been the most crucial job, however, because the reactions of the different campaigners to the placing of a statue of Jesus on city land varied markedly. Francisco Rodriguez, an independent running for the first time, flatly opposed putting the statue on city land. "We're being threatened by a lawsuit," he stated. "We need to avoid any litigation. If you're going to spend the public's money, you need to spend it fixing potholes." David Diaz, office holder from the administration in office, disagreed. "You don't stand back if you are threatened by a lawsuit." The statue should be built, he continued, and let the Supreme Court settle the issue "once and for all." Jack Dumphy, local business owner and air force veteran, was one of the few to consider the constitutional aspect: "The question submitted to the attorney general was whether the City Council has the authority to lease land for public use. What should be part of the decision is the question of the separation of church and state." His opponent for a seat on the council refused to take a stand, unlike realtor Betty Turner, another independent running for the first time, who would only support the statue of Christ if it were erected on private land.[40]

The Election, Delay, Decision, and Denouement

The general election on April 7 reinstated one incumbent and added two new members, both on Jones's slate. But the runoff election to be held three weeks later would determine the direction the new council would take. Tensions ran high and comments brutal as the results came in that Saturday night. On the morning of April 29, the *Corpus Christi Caller* headlined, "Jones is elected." The makeup of the council had changed. New mayor Luther Jones, Jr., incumbent David Diaz, and two independents, Betty Turner and Jack Dumphy, joined those earlier elected. Of the seven Corpus Christi City Council members elected in April 1979, Harold Alberts and the JCC's ad hoc statue committee had endorsed three: Turner, Dumphy, and Jones.[41]

Nonetheless, a final vote on the contract regarding a statue in the bay did not come soon. Mayor Jones "said he would like to see this [issue] explored further before it becomes an agenda item," and "city manager Marvin Townsend thought it the better part of valor to delay . . . until the newly elected city fathers had a chance to study the issues." Thus, as spring rolled into summer, forums continued to be held, opinion letters continued to be published, alternative sites continued to be discussed, and even more national news sites including in Milwaukee and New York City took notice. Finally, in a late July meeting already seething with heated attacks on airport management and bus system rates, statue advocate Mercedes Eugenio pointedly accused the city of ignoring the issue. "I heard it loud and clear," councilman Dumphy remarked. "We've been accused of purposely not putting it on the agenda." So the date of August 8, 1979, was set for the council to finally decide whether the city would allocate a contract "to lease public land for the placement of a statue of Jesus."[42]

Alberts again gathered committee members together: "It is of utmost importance that you plan to attend the City Council meeting . . . and that you urge your friends to attend with you." Then he instructed committee members and their supporters to proceed with the "personal contacts and/or personal letters" they had already been directing "to the Councilmen who have shown their sensitivity to the best interests of our community [and] to all the Councilmen . . . [reminding them] that the Attorney General's opinion did not address itself . . . to the issue in Corpus

Letters from Helen Wilk to city officials.
(Helen Wilk Papers, Courtesy of Helen Wilk.)

Christi." He ended with the hope that "this 'low key' but persistent effort . . . will resolve an issue that may [otherwise] erode our constitutional guarantee of 'Separation of Church and State.'"[43]

Like her fellow committee members, Wilk needed no further urging. Within a day after the meeting, she mailed handwritten letters to individual council persons, thanking those who had indicated support and urging dissenters to understand her position. "I truly feel this is not properly city business," she insisted, "and I am hoping that your concern

. . . will persuade you that it is in the best interests of our lovely city *not* to approve a religious statue on public land."[44]

These beliefs she had expressed continuously from the original arts commission meeting to the present, she shared that hot summer day of August 8 when, for the last time, she urged the council to "not involve the city" in the proposed land lease. Rabbi Stephen Fisch, Jack Solka, and almost a dozen more also begged the council to vote against the contract, even as Mercedes Eugenio argued that it be approved because "a great majority of the people of Corpus Christi" supported it. But a phrase Helen had included in a letter to Mayor Jones four months earlier may have had the greatest impact: "I do feel [the placement of this statue on public land] is unconstitutional, but in the depths of my being is the hurt that has come from realizing that although this statue will never represent me, or many others, it may stand on *my* land and announce to all that I am an outsider in my city."[45]

Mayor Luther Jones took up that cry of the dispossessed minority—the same cry that had influenced his run for office—as he addressed the chamber audience that hot afternoon:

> It has been suggested that the statue ought to be built because the majority of citizens want it. This may or may not be true; however, many in this community can remember when many Mexican Americans could not enter some restaurants in town and if the issue had been submitted to the voters at that time, the majority would have preferred the status quo. The fact that the majority favored the status quo did not make it right. Others can recall that within the last fifteen years a black man or woman could not vote in many parts of the United States, and there's no doubt that if the issue had been submitted to vote the majority would have favored maintaining the status quo. But that did not make it right. . . . I intend to vote against granting a lease of publicly owned land for the purpose of erecting a statue of Christ.[46]

After each council member added personal remarks, Jones ordered the members polled; three voted aye, three voted nay. Then the city secretary turned to councilman Dumphy. "I knew when I was elected to the City Council," he later confided to a reporter, "I would face critical issues. But I never knew my vote would determine whether or not there would be a statue." He then voted no."[47] No statue of Christ would be erected on city land in Corpus Christi Bay.

Aftermath

Repercussions ensued—insults thrown, aspersions cast, apologies demanded. Many remember years later the hostility they unexpectedly encountered, and certain friendships damaged were never repaired. But as the city returned to its usual interests and things "went back to the way before, maybe with a little strain," one result became obvious: the Jewish community in Corpus Christi had stood firm against a constitutional threat. Its group and individual efforts had clarified the church/state issue involved and had propelled citizens to fight for "[a] system of government that represents *all* its citizens."[48]

This story exemplifies how Jews in the South protested when they saw their interests and identity challenged. Rather than selected individuals, virtually every Jewish organization and its leaders undertook principled stands. A small but respected minority, they could not have succeeded without the support of non-Jews including elected public officials.

Yet not everything remained settled. The concept that Corpus Christi was a "secular city," as Helen Wilk had asserted in that 1977 arts council meeting, had not been fully accepted. Its vulnerability to sectarian pressure was challenged again during the 1990s, when still another effort emerged to erect a statue of Christ on the bayfront. This later attempt culminated in the completion of a statue by noted Corpus Christi sculptor Kent Ullberg of Jesus delivering a sermon from a boat, today one of the city's most conspicuous and beloved landmarks—facing the bay on the grounds of the First United Methodist Church.[49] Even more recently, a nonprofit group has purchased acreage along the highway approaching the city upon which to set a cross, promising it to "be the largest . . . in the Western hemisphere." However high the structure may eventually loom, its base will rest on private property, a quiet reminder that, even in a city named Corpus Christi, religious interests have no place on publicly owned land.[50]

NOTES

The author expresses her thanks to Patty Block, Davie Lou Solka, and Bryan Edward Stone for their assistance.

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[12] Tompkins, "An Idea Blossoms"; *Corpus Christi Caller-Times,* October 20, 1977.

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[15] Jan Siegel Hart, "Helen Wilk: A Biographical Sketch of Our President," *Texas Jewish Historical Society Newsletter,* June 1999.

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