By Nina Bondarook

When Kathie Alhadeff Barokas was growing up in Seattle, she felt pressured to find a good Jewish husband and raise a family. It was the 1940s, the United States was immersed in a world war, and her family wanted her to stay true to her cultural roots.
But Barokas, now a Mercer Island resident, said she and other children of immigrant Jewish families faced a double whammy: widespread anti-Semitism and the “segregationist” attitudes of various Judaic sects that had settled in Seattle’s central neighborhoods.

At the time, there were about 13,000 Jews living in the city, compared with 40,000 today. Most traced their ancestry either to the Mediterranean, home of Sephardic Jews, or to the Ashkenazim of Europe. Barokas said the phrase “Good girls marry their own kind” echoed throughout both communities.

As a result, more than 19 youth organizations were formed in Seattle in the 1940s, ’50s and ’60s to provide Jewish teens with safe venues through which to socialize, and to engender a sense of community.

During a recent standing-room-only reunion at Hillel at the University of Washington, about 300 members of those groups reminisced about their enduring friendships and the prominent Jewish families they spawned.
“When I was in high school, there were very few Jews. We were really quite secluded,” said Barokas, 75, whose children and grandchildren attended the reunion. “We had to rely on each other, so these little clubs and groups sprang up in a way, as self-defense.”

Life for the children of Seattle’s first Jewish settlers was not easy.

Joyce Dickhaut, 74, a researcher and writer for the Washington State Jewish Historical Society, said that if it hadn’t been for the youth groups, the combined internal and external pressures could have ripped the community apart.

The youth groups were affiliated with Seattle’s Jewish Youth Council, which coordinated youth activities and fundraising events. They included chapters of national sororities such as Phi Sigma Sigma and Alpha Epsilon Phi, and three fraternities: Sigma Alpha Mu, the “Sammies,” the Zeta Beta Tau “Zebes,” and the “AEPi’s” of Alpha Epsilon Pi. The fraternities recruited along conservative and orthodox lines, the same divisions that existed in the community at-large. And all but the “AEPi’s” which restarted a year ago at the University of Washington, have disappeared from the campus.
Dickhaut of Seattle and Irving Israel, 66, a Mercer Island resident who attended the reunion, met their spouses through youth organizations and called their days with the groups among the “best” of their lives.

“To this day, my best friends are those from grade school and high school,” Israel said. “They’ve stood by me through a divorce, many heart attacks, remarriage, and are still my friends today. How can you better describe someone like that other than to call them a friend?”

For Barokas, who felt more pressured to marry than to attend college, membership in youth organizations provided opportunities to meet potential suitors. She was a member of the Junior Sephardic League, which included boys and girls from high school to young adulthood. But she met her husband, Morgan, at a “fireside chat” sponsored by a Jewish fraternity. They married in 1951 and moved to Mercer Island, where they raised two daughters.

The JSL disbanded when Jewish veterans of World War II returned and focused their energy on careers and marriage, rather than socializing.
Young Jews also fraternized at Sunday night mixers held at local temples. Boys wore corduroy pants called suntans, which resemble today’s khakis, and girls wore skirts that fell below the knee. Cashmere sweaters, if teens could afford them, were also very popular. They had baggy sleeves that were pushed up to the elbow — the kids called them Sloppy Joes.

According to a presentation developed by Dickhaut, “Girls were expected to wear girdles on dates, whether they needed them or not. Jiggling was not permitted.”

Barokas and her friend and singing partner, Jeanne Mayo, often entertained at youth events such as the annual Fundfest at Temple Auditorium. Over the years, Fundfest began attracting popular non-Jewish entertainers, such as African American-songwriter and musician Quincy Jones, who appeared in the early ’50s. Proceeds of the annual event supported Jewish philanthropic efforts.
There also were periodic theme parties and tolos, or dances that required girls to invite boys. And a girls’ organization called the Councilettes, which was sponsored by the Seattle Council of Jewish Women, sent blankets, diapers and clothing to needy Jewish families in Europe who had survived the Holocaust. Members of Junior Hadassah, which was affiliated with the Women’s Zionist Organization of America, focused on supporting the struggle for a Jewish homeland.

But the most successful organizations of the times were the high school groups B’nai B’rith Girls and Aleph Zadik Aleph for boys. Each year, they met at regional conventions in Seattle, Portland or Vancouver, British Columbia. The kids stayed in the homes of local families, Israel said, which provided the opportunity to develop Judaic bonds and friendships outside their local communities.

Today’s Jewish teens are not joiners, according to Matt Lemchen, the 28-year-old director of the B’nai B’rith Youth Organization’s Evergreen region, which includes the Seattle chapter. Its combined dues-paying membership includes 106 Seattle-area teens and 300 regional members. Another 233 teens have participated in BBG and AKA activities at the Stroum Jewish Community Center on Mercer Island, but have not joined.
There are an estimated 4,000 Jewish teens in greater Seattle today, Lemchen said. But fewer than 70 percent are affiliated with any Judaic organization.

Those figures have prompted the BBYO to re-evaluate programs and develop tools, such as a new interactive Web site that launches in August, in hopes of attracting this generation's more academically-focused, tech-savvy teens. The Web site will include interactive features such as teen blogs, an online travel service that caters to Jewish youth, educational resources and other tools.

The national BBYO in Washington, D.C., has also given the Seattle chapter and others that have high rates of unaffiliated Jewish teens monetary grants and additional resources to assist with program development and recruitment, according to Abby Strunk of the BBYO.

“We are currently connecting to 18,000 Jewish teens in North America,” Strunk said. “Our goal is to connect with 80,000 Jewish teens by 2010.”

It’s not that anti-Semitism no longer exists to drive teens to Jewish-only groups such as the BBYO, Lemchen said, it’s just less overt than it was in their grandparents, day.
Israel was first exposed to anti-Jewish hatred when his family moved from the racially integrated Central Area neighborhood to the more affluent Mount Baker community.

That’s when the predominantly gentile Franklin High School student body made its feelings known, he said.

“I’d come home from school and find (racial slurs) burned into the grass in the front yard. Sometimes it happened a couple of times a week.”

Dickhaut said the anti-Semitic pressures in early Seattle were “more on a micro level” than what Jews worldwide were facing. In Seattle, Jewish teens were precluded from participating in gentile-based organizations, and the parents of Jewish teens didn’t want them marrying gentiles. As a result, no Jewish girl in her right mind would have dated a gentile, she added.

“But the youth today have to deal with the fact that so many segments of the world would like to kill us — to drive (Jews) into the Mediterranean.” she said. “It was a simpler time back then.”