
In the Driver's Seat

Rabbinic Authority in Postwar America

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The coming of the car changed America. Transforming virtually every aspect of daily life from dress to social relations, the mass-produced motorcar gave rise to the suburbs, furthered the emancipation of women, and, it was said, even increased attendance at church, especially among the nation's farmers. In many parts of the country, reported *Life* magazine, an "automobile is almost as necessary as a pair of legs."¹ Whether "solid and dependable," or "effervescent and iridescent," like the shiny new Buicks on display at New York's Waldorf Astoria in 1954, the American automobile was widely heralded as an "essential of normal living."²

Not everyone, though, celebrated the car. For America's rabbis, particularly those affiliated with what was then the nation's fastest-growing Jewish denomination, the Conservative movement, the automotive life produced more consternation than celebration. It forced the clergy to choose between freedom and discipline, between the benefits of space and the constraints of time, placing them in a double bind. On the one hand, the car made possible the collective decision of an estimated three million American Jews to build a life for themselves and their children in the suburbs, a phenomenon that led directly to a surge in the Conservative synagogue's popularity. At

1. "Motoring: Californians Spend Much of Their Time in Their Cars," *Life*, 22 October 1945, 116.

2. "It's Big – It's Beautiful – It's Buick," *Life*, 22 October 1945, 82–83; "Effervescent, Iridescent," *New Yorker*, 16 January 1954, 17–18; Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture* (1929), quoted in Joseph Interrante, "The Road to Autopia: The Automobile and the Spatial Transformation of American Culture," in *The Automobile and American Culture*, ed. David Lewis and Lawrence Goldstein (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), 89.

the same time, the car made possible a brand new valuation of time, one whose effects were far from salutary. Taking prospective congregants away from the sanctuary and toward the golf course, the movies, and the shopping center, the sedan and the station wagon all but ensured that newfangled American notions of leisure would supersede traditional Jewish ones.

The Conservative rabbinate, equally mindful of both the "problems and [the] promises" of Jewish suburban life, sought diligently to acknowledge the first and to effect the second.³ Alternating between despair and optimism, between detailed recitations of gloomy statistics and equally impassioned discussions of possible solutions, session after session of the Rabbinical Assembly's annual conferences in the years following World War II took up the challenge of accommodating the rhythms of tradition to the realities of postwar America. At stake was not just the primacy of the Sabbath and the viability of halacha but the limits and possibilities of rabbinic authority.

On any given Shabbos, the suburban rabbi, looking out at his brand-new sanctuary with its carefully recessed lighting, wall-to-wall carpeting, and specially commissioned artwork, could see acres of empty seats. His congregants were nowhere to be found; their attentions elsewhere, they simply did not attend services.⁴ "Synagogue attendance today is limited to two or three times a year. Sabbath observance is almost non-existent," ruefully observed one eyewitness in 1946.⁵ "The Sabbath has become more a day of recreation than a day of prayer and rest," added Rabbi Albert I. Gordon a few years later as he catalogued its expanded functions. "Children use the day for parties, movie-going, shopping, dancing, music and other special lessons, eating out and in general having a good time. Mothers in ever-increasing numbers do their shopping, attend theaters and parties and the like. Fathers go out to the golf clubs, attend

3. Rabbi Albert I. Gordon, "The Problems and Promises of Suburban Life," *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly* [hereafter PRA] 24 (1960): 49–55.

4. This phenomenon was by no means a new one. Earlier generations of Conservative Jews had absented themselves from the synagogue as well. See, for example, Jack Wertheimer, "The Conservative Synagogue," in *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 120–21.

5. "Whither American Jewry," PRA 10 (1946): 255.

football games, indulge in a friendly game of cards, or take the family on an outing."⁶ The one thing they don't do is go to shul. Saturday had supplanted Shabbos, reducing the synagogue, in turn, to little more than a "glorified *minyan* ... overwhelmed by the Catering Establishment."⁷

Clearly in danger of imminent dissolution, the traditional Sabbath needed shoring up. No longer able to take it on faith that American Jews would honor the Sabbath day and keep it holy, its champions discussed the possibility of a "Back to the Sabbath" movement designed to convince those at the grass roots of its merits. "We must work out an observance of the Sabbath which of necessity cannot be like the Sabbath of our grandparents but a Sabbath that is feasible here in America and is at the same time identifiably and recognizedly faithful to Jewish tradition," explained Rabbi David Goldstein, urging his colleagues to come up with an appropriate synthesis of the two.⁸ Toward that end, the movement's leaders contemplated issuing a series of do's and don'ts in which Conservative Jews would be encouraged to light candles, to recite kiddush, and to make every effort to attend services at least once in the course of the Sabbath. They would also be encouraged not to shop, do their laundry, mow their lawns, or head for the golf course during that twenty-five-hour period.

Refraining from household chores, though, was not really what the movement had in mind when it spoke of revitalizing the Sabbath. Instead, it preferred to emphasize the importance of getting the entire family to attend services and, with it, restoring both the Sabbath, the "irreplaceable heart of Judaism," and the synagogue, its most representative institution, to their rightful place.⁹ "We are not going to teach our people about the Sabbath most effectively merely by talking or writing about it. We have to get them to experience the Sabbath," insisted Rabbi Simon Greenberg.¹⁰ But how? Knowing full well that most of their congregants would probably

6. Albert I. Gordon, *Jews in Transition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1949), 97.

7. Gordon, "Problems and Promises," 54.

8. Rabbi David A. Goldstein, "The Revitalization of the Sabbath," PRA 15 (1951): 119.

9. "Suggestions for Sabbath Sub-Committee," 1949, p. 3, Law Committee Archives of the Rabbinical Assembly, Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

10. Quoted in Goldstein, "Revitalization," 116.

get in their Chevrolets and drive to the synagogue, what were Conservative rabbis to do? Turn a blind eye to this flagrant violation of the Sabbath, or redefine the rules? Make a virtue of necessity and harness the car to higher sacred ends by legitimating driving to shul, or hold fast to halacha and refuse to countenance change? "You want them to come to the synagogue and you want them to observe the Shabbat in the sense of not riding on the Shabbat. Which is it going to be?" Rabbi Ira Eisenstein demanded to know, challenging his colleagues to throw the collective weight of their authority behind one position or another lest "evasion and insincerity" blacken their reputation.¹¹

No sooner did Eisenstein throw down the gauntlet than charges and counter-charges thickened the air. To some Conservative rabbis, any talk of welcoming the car and its passengers into the synagogue's parking lot on Shabbat morning was tantamount to revolution ("What I heard yesterday afternoon has shaken my belief"), while others applauded the idea as a reflection of the rabbinate's maturity ("We are capable of making change").¹² Some witheringly described the proposition as ridiculous, others hailed it as sober and realistic. It will turn Conservative Judaism into a "religion of convenience," breed "lawlessness," and sow "irreligion," said its opponents. "Already, in the eyes of the laymen, Conservative Judaism stands for the right to be *m'challel Shabbat* and to eat *trefot*," glumly reported Rabbi Samuel Rosenblatt, counselling caution. "When I tell [my congregants] that Conservative Judaism believes in *shemirat Shabbat* and in *kashrut*, they think that I am talking out of my hat." Rabbi Emil Schorsch was quick to agree. "Too many of our people do not want to observe the Sabbath, whatever excuse or reason you may give them. Why should we play ball with this insincerity?" But their more liberal counterparts did not see things quite that way. "Irreligion is [already] running rampant ... through the ranks of Judaism today," they conceded, but revising the law would only redound to the movement's credit, underscoring its sensitivity to the needs of contemporary Jewry.¹³ For in the long run, getting the Jews to go to synagogue was far more important than holding

11. Quoted in "Towards a Philosophy of Conservative Judaism," *PRA* 12 (1948): 140.

12. Samuel Rosenblatt and Mordecai Waxman quoted in "Discussion: Responsum on the Sabbath," *PRA* 14 (1950): 175, 182.

13. Rosenblatt, *ibid.*, 175; Schorsch, quoted *ibid.*, 180; Rosenblatt, *ibid.*, 175; Isaac Klein, *ibid.*, 177; Jack Cohen, *ibid.*, 180.

fast to halacha. "Our central position," said Rabbi Jacob Agus, "is not to save the Halachah." It is to "save Jews."¹⁴

Pitting sociology against the *shulhan arukh*, the hotly argued debate over whether to permit driving to shul on Shabbos not only splintered the rabbinate into sharply opposing factions, but raised profoundly disturbing questions about the Conservative movement's fidelity to halacha, the relationship between rabbi and congregant, and, above all perhaps, the "personal integrity" of the rabbinate.¹⁵

More to the point, it gave rise in 1950 to the "Responsum on the Sabbath" which sanctioned driving to the synagogue on Shabbos. Issued by the Rabbinical Assembly's most authoritative body, the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, the *teshuvah* reflected the pressing need for the movement as a whole to "reckon with the facts as they are."¹⁶ We would be "remiss in our calling, were we content to leave the Sabbath to its fate, to be further buffeted about by the compelling pressures of the changed outer world in which we live," its members acknowledged, drawing on close to twenty years apiece of experience in the field. The time has come for "doing something constructive towards the revitalization of Sabbath observance."¹⁷ No easy task, reckoning with the Jewish realities of postwar America generated months of halachic research, the writing and rewriting of position papers, animated discussion, and detailed correspondence among the committee's members, each of whom was given a specific assignment. In what were essentially internal exercises in self-scrutiny, some mined the sources, hoping they could be made relevant to twentieth-century America, especially when it came to using electricity and driving a car on the Sabbath; others explored the roles that Shabbos might play in the lives of contemporary Jewry, and still others cast a searching eye on its centrality within traditional Jewish culture.

Despite the committee's concerted efforts, consensus was hard to come by, revealing deep-seated fissures even within the rabbinate's highest-ranking body. Unable to agree on the basics, from the ongoing relevance of Jewish law to the autonomy of the rabbinate, the

14. Jacob Agus, "Discussion: Towards A Philosophy of Conservative Judaism," *PRA* 12 (1948): 154.

15. William Greenfeld quoted in "Discussion: The Revitalization of the Sabbath," *PRA* 15 (1951): 112.

16. "Suggestions for Sabbath Sub-Committee," p. 2.

17. "Responsum on the Sabbath," *PRA* 14 (1950): 114, 120.

Committee on Jewish Law and Standards found that dissension rather than unanimity characterized its deliberations. For every rabbi who put his faith in halacha or history, an opposing voice was heard insisting that "we will never get anywhere" by looking to Jewish law for answers.¹⁸ The "past," it was said, "offers no parallel." For every member of the committee who argued for the need to involve the laity in the proceedings, an opposing voice was heard insisting that any attempt to square Jewish ritual practice with "popular usage" would result in its "virtual elimination."¹⁹ Little wonder, then, that the Law Committee's deliberations resulted in a majority and a minority report, in a series of recommendations rather than a formal declaration of policy.

Those of a more elastic cast of mind could take comfort from the findings of the majority report, whose members, standing on the shoulders of Maimonides and the Tosafists, ruled in favor of driving to shul on Shabbos. Their argument went something like this: As the Sabbath continued its downward spiral and "violations became the rule rather than the exception," Conservative Judaism had little choice but to overturn the age-old prohibition against driving. "To continue unmodified the traditional interdiction of riding on the Sabbath," Rabbis Morris Adler, Jacob Agus, and Theodore Friedman explained, "is tantamount to rendering attendance at the synagogue on the Sabbath physically impossible for an increasing number of our people." And that, in turn, would completely undermine the foundations of the faith and give rise to the unthinkable: a "Sabbath-less Judaism." Clearly, then, Jewish law had to bow to the exigencies of modernity and to change, as it had so often done in the past. For halacha, the majority report declared, drawing on what it took to be a series of legal precedents, is not only inherently flexible but also an "instrument of the people," rather than an end in itself. Accordingly, they felt it behooved the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards to lift the age-old prohibition against driving but with the proviso that the car head only in the direction of the synagogue. "It is our considered opinion," the committee members optimistically concluded, "that the positive values involved in the participation in the public worship on the Sabbath outweigh the negative values of refraining from riding in an automobile."²⁰

18. Minutes of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, 13 September 1949, p. 4.

19. "Comments by Max Arzt," May 1949, p. 4, p. 1, Law Committee Archives.

20. "Responsum on the Sabbath," 119, 130, 121, 113, 132.

Those of a more conservative cast of mind were not quite so sanguine. Fearful lest the prospect of allowing their congregants to drive to shul would not only set a bad precedent but open the floodgates to even greater and more frequent violations of halacha, they urged restraint. "To modify Jewish law in order to bring it into conformity with [the modern] way of life is tantamount to amending the Constitution of the United States so as to harmonize it with the viewpoint of an anarchist," charged Rabbi Robert Gordis in his minority opinion. No dead letter, Jewish law is a "living" and "ennobling" construct whose perspective is as relevant today as it was a century or two ago.²¹ Leave it alone. Like Gordis, Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser also opposed lifting the ban on travel but for different reasons. What troubled him was not so much the legal as the psychological consequences of change. Instead of enhancing the spirit of the Sabbath, whose special rhythms and "mood" helped to emancipate the modern Jewish family from the workaday world and its troubles, the use of a car, he argued in his minority report, only added to them. "Anyone driving an automobile is painfully aware of the possibility of a flat tire or other failures in the vehicle, and of the distractions and the anxieties which are incidental to them ... the tension of driving in traffic, of pressing against crowds, of being subject to noise, of waiting in line." Under these circumstances, driving was hardly conducive to experiencing a "genuine Sabbath." Better that American Jews try to live close to a synagogue or, if that's not possible, to cultivate the "art of walking," the Queens rabbi concluded, but not before reminding both his colleagues and his constituents that Jewish life required sacrifice rather than release. "If we want the Sabbath values for our lives then we must be prepared to surrender a certain measure of freedom, to accept discipline."²²

Where one camp spoke of discipline and the other of flexibility, both placed great stock in getting Conservative Jews to keep as much of the Sabbath as possible. It is only within that larger context that driving to shul received its rabbinic imprimatur. Part and parcel of a concerted effort to revitalize the Sabbath, the use of a car on Shabbos was seen as a means to an end, never as an end in and of itself. Hoping therefore that the "Responsum on the Sabbath"

21. Rabbi Robert Gordis, "A Modern Approach to a Living Halachah: Responsum on the Sabbath," *PRA* 14 (1950): 154, 155.

22. Ben Zion Bokser, "The Sabbath Halachah: Travel and the Use of Electricity: Responsum on the Sabbath," *PRA* 14 (1950): 161, 163, 164.

would spark renewed interest in the Sabbath, the Committee on Law and Standards issued a "call to action" in which members of the Conservative rabbinate were actively exhorted to make Sabbath observance a priority within their congregations. "We must by every means at our disposal and through all the influence and energy we command, bring a heightening consciousness of the sanctity of the Sabbath," ringingly declared its architects. "We must rally about us the most loyal and understanding members of our congregations and prepare a concerted attack upon Jewish indifference, neglect and ignorance. ... [We] must make of the renewal of Sabbath observance the main object of our efforts."²³

Women, custodians of the calendar and priestesses of the home, were key to the success of the National Sabbath Observance Effort, as the campaign was called. Without their wholehearted support, the Sabbath stood little chance of survival. If, however, they could be made to fall in line, to desist en masse from doing laundry on Saturday or forgo shopping in favor of shul, to pledge to light candles and spend time with their families, the hallowed institution of the Sabbath, it was hoped, might well enjoy a period of renewal. Toward that end, the Rabbinical Assembly actively enlisted the participation of the National Women's League, whose network of sisterhoods enthusiastically made the cause its own. Drawing on the "militant faith of the matriarchs," members at both the national level and the grass roots generated an ambitious array of lectures, workshops, conferences, Friday evening dinners, and "typical Sabbath lunches" designed to transform the Sabbath from a burden into a "day of delight."²⁴ They learned how to sing *zmilos* and how to make gefilte fish; how to understand the meaning of the prayers and the consequences of their devotions. "When women go into action, things happen. And things are happening throughout the National Women's League," reported *Outlook*, its house publication, in May 1952. "Women are seeking new ways of enriching their lives with the revival of the traditional Sabbath spirit, knowing that such revival helps them to live well, not only as Jews but as human beings." The Sabbath, Conservative women now insisted, could be a "day of freedom" as well as a day of rest.²⁵

23. "Responsum on the Sabbath," 134.

24. "The President's Page," *Outlook*, December 1951, 3; "Our Branches," *Outlook*, December 1952, 20; Mrs. Saul Margolis, "Sabbath Peace," *Outlook*, May 1952, 15.

25. "Sabbath Peace."

But even their wholehearted embrace of the Sabbath did little to staunch the tide of indifference which grew rather than abated over the course of the 1950s. Neither the *teshuvah* per se nor the National Sabbath Observance Effort as a whole seemed to affect the lives of most Conservative Jews; the synagogue parking lot and the pews of the sanctuary remained just as empty at the end of the decade as they had been ten years earlier. Disappointed, even taken aback, by the laity's lackluster response to what it believed to have been quite an imaginative and bold initiative, the Conservative rabbinate decided in 1960 and again in 1961 to revisit the issue of driving. Perhaps the original ruling was not entirely clear, some rabbis reasoned; perhaps it didn't go nearly far enough, reasoned others. Perhaps the laity misunderstood its purpose altogether, suggested still others.

In search of answers, the Rabbinical Assembly sent out a questionnaire to the entire membership: "Do you believe that the traditional prohibition against travel on the Sabbath or Holydays should be continued: Yes or No? Should such travel be permitted in order to attend Services? Should travel be permitted in order to attend a Bar Mitzvah Service at a distant Synagogue even though one's own Synagogue is easily within walking distance? Do you tell your members that travel to attend services is permitted?"²⁶

A striking number of Conservative rabbis—over three hundred of them—took the time to fill out the survey; and many, eager to make known their opinion, accompanied their answers with a detailed statement. When combined, both statistics and anecdotal information reveal the extent to which the issue of driving on Shabbos remained as vexing as ever. Although close to 90 percent of respondents affirmed that it was, in fact, permissible to drive to synagogue on the Sabbath (nearly the same percentage claimed to have informed their members accordingly), more than half also believed that the traditional prohibition against driving should remain in force. To complicate matters still further, when asked if driving to a shul not one's own to attend a bar mitzvah was acceptable to them, those surveyed split almost down the middle. Slightly more than half thought there was nothing wrong with it; slightly under half thought there was.

With so many different options from which to choose, many of those in the field, not surprisingly, gave voice to frustration. "I am

26. "Questionnaire: Travel on the Sabbath," Correspondence on the Shabbat, Law Committee Archives. What follows below is culled from a sample of responses.

not clear on the underlying principle permitting riding, though I make use of the ruling," one rabbi admitted. "I can use some guidance." He wasn't alone. "We accept" the ruling, wrote another rabbi; "Must we condone it?" Others made clear how little choice they had in the matter. "In suburban life—and in communities free of ghettos—traditional adherence to Sabbath prohibitions is suicidal for the synagogue," wrote one clergyman who favored removing all barriers to ritual practice. Others, in turn, thought the ruling had been a terrible mistake and urged its revocation. We should return to the "Conservative Judaism of Frankel and Schechter and ... stop looking for comfort," wrote one Chicago rabbi. "We have to begin to adjust our life to our religion rather than adjust our religion to the comforts of life." And still others—quite a large number, in fact—threw up their hands in despair and characterized the whole thing as "academic" and "irrelevant." For 99 percent of American Jews, whether or not to drive to shul is hardly a burning issue, observed several respondents. "They have already made their decision and suffer no qualms of conscience." In fact, "they don't even ask."

After tabulating the results of the survey and making their way through their colleagues' correspondence, the members of the Committee on Jewish Law turned to the men who had authored the 1950 responsum in the first place, eliciting their opinion as to whether additional modifications to the law might be warranted such as driving to someone else's synagogue in order to attend a bar mitzvah celebration.²⁷ In response, Rabbis Adler and Friedman not only made unequivocally clear their opposition to any change whatsoever but also took great pains to reiterate their original position: that driving to the synagogue in no way constituted a general endorsement of driving on Shabbos. Rabbi Agus took a slightly different position. In contrast to his coauthors, he supported the idea of slightly emending the *teshuvah* to make room for attendance at bar mitzvahs. "Should we now disdain social courtesies as things unholy? When people come to a Synagogue, they take part in a *mitzvah gedolah* without reference to their motivation."

In the end, after considerable to-ing and fro-ing, the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards decided to let the 1950 responsum

27. The quotations in this paragraph are drawn from a "Dear Colleague" letter sent by Rabbi Max J. Routtenberg, 28 February 1961, R541-2, and Minutes, Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, 31 January–1 February 1961, Law Committee Archives.

stand while also making it crystal clear that the ruling was to be construed not as a blanket endorsement of driving on the Sabbath but rather as a grudging concession to a difficult situation, one "where the alternative would lead to a total neglect of Sabbath worship through inability to reach the synagogue." Even driving to someone else's synagogue to attend a bar mitzvah, the committee emphasized, was out of bounds. And that wasn't all. Once again, the members of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards called on their fellow clergy to promote Sabbath observance. "Do not limit it to attendance at synagogue worship," they admonished. "Extend it to a total program of Jewish living." Make the Sabbath a "meaningful reality in Jewish life."²⁸

After more than a decade of trying to do just that, the Conservative rabbinate was forced to confront the limits of its authority. Attempting to speak with one voice—and a sympathetic one, at that—it discovered that hardly anyone was listening. The Conservative rabbinate had entered the postwar era confident that its members were well equipped to lead the "new, different kind" of Jew who inhabited that rapidly changing world.²⁹ Where its predecessors had preached ideals, it "dared to fashion a pattern of living," as one contemporary observer put it. Under no illusions about their congregants' attenuated concern for the sancta of Jewish life, the postwar generation of Conservative rabbis sought nevertheless to meet them more than halfway, to "recognize the legitimacy of their demands" and to "integrate their point of view."³⁰

At no point, though, did the rabbinate of the 1950s consult the laity directly. Much like the kind of parenting characteristic of *Father Knows Best* and other reassuring television programs of the era, Conservative clergymen assumed they knew what was best. Certain that they were acting in everyone's interests and confident in their ability to "build up the rationale of our authority," as Morris Adler put it in a 1949 letter to his colleague, Jacob Agus, they generated proposals and programs by the handful. The strength of their office and the persuasiveness of their person, they believed, would be able to convince, educate, and inspire their *balabatim* with the plenitude of Jewish ritual; to win them over, they were even willing to

28. "Dear Colleague," R542.

29. Gordon, "Problems and Promises," 50.

30. PRA (1951): 110; PRA (1950): 180; PRA (1948): 156.

adjust the law.³¹

But their efforts fell wide of the mark, giving rise to mounting frustration and what Max Routtenberg, the executive vice-president of the Rabbinical Assembly, called "helplessness and depression." "We minister to people most of whom fully believe that they are wiser than we, better than we, certainly richer than we," he bitterly related in 1952.³² Disparity in social status between the rabbi and his congregants certainly played a part in widening the divide between the two, but so too did the lack of a common identity. When it came to both the process of halachic change and attentiveness to ritual, the rabbi and his congregant were not on the same wavelength. "If you will tell them now that they may eat fish in an un-Kosher restaurant, they will say they are already eating lobster and shrimp. ... You will permit the man to go to the golf course. He is already there," observed Rabbi Meyer Kripke, adding that under the circumstances it was "almost pointless" to expect those at the grass roots to adhere to a code of Jewish law.³³

Spinning its wheels, the Conservative rabbinate was ultimately forced to temper (or, at the very least, to modulate) its fidelity to Jewish law and to seek out an alternative, more American source of moral authority: public speaking, say, or institution-building, scholarship or pastoral skill. In the end, these qualities would do far more to bind the Conservative rabbi to his congregants and to make for success than sensitivity to halacha. As the public's response to the Responsum on the Sabbath made painfully clear, while there certainly were lots of rabbis who were halachically committed Conservative Jews, there were simply not enough American Jews who were too.

VIII. IN NORTH AFRICA AND ISRAEL

31. Morris Adler to Jacob Agus, 19 December 1949, Law Committee Archives/Correspondence.

32. "President's Message, 23 June 1952," PRA 16 (1952): 111.

33. PRA (1948): 164.