Southern New Jersey SYNAGOGUES

A SOCIAL HISTORY
HIGHLIGHTED
BY
STORIES
OF JEWISH LIFE
FROM THE
1880'S - 1980'S

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The era of the Jewish farmer and his synagogue tracing back over 100 years ago. Jewish farm colonies were settled in the wilderness and swamps of Southern New Jersey for a purpose. The adaptation of the Russian Jew as a tiller of the soil was met with many struggles as they fled Russia in the early 1800s. Initially, the soil failed but the Jewish soul flourished in the swamps. This was home and industry was tried as an alternative to the oft-seen farming. The advantage of the industry was not brought to this region to supplement the Jewish Farmer's livelihood but in most cases was the only means of survival. In these colonies, the synagogue served many functions and was similar in ritual to the ones they left behind in Russia. Organizations lent a hand in starting these farm colonies and synagogues. Other settlements started in the late 1860s and 1890s were created as land schemes. Some areas were developed as a way to gather cheap labor with farming as a side job. The age of the Industrial Revolution would affect Jews. New Jewish settlements and colonies would begin in the early 1890s with the help of World Jewish Philanthropists as the benefactor. New settlements would mean new synagogues.

By the late 1890s, a history of success and failure in the wilderness in the swamps of Southern New Jersey would be recorded. A new agenda for the immigrant settlements was about to occur. Group settlements were tried but at a high cost of money and materials. Individual settlements for various reasons were also initiated but not failed. To support the community in its farming endeavors was to support and maintain the center of Jewish life in terms of work and religious affairs. A new agency developed here in America in the year 1900. The establishment of this agency was a prime helper in fostering this idea of Jewish farm settlement. This agency was known as the Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Aid Society. This agency succeeded the Baron De Hirsch Fund. Within the years, the organization remained the Jewish Agricultural Society or J.A.S. Donations and mortgages plus loans were provided as a good basis for a firm foundation of Jewish life in the countryside. Settlement communities were founded with the help of the J.A.S. in the first decade of the 20th Century. Synagogues were built in part with aid and donations of the J.A.S. and Jewish farms sprung up nearby as a result.

Commercialization of the farm set in during the early 1910s. Families that went to live in the big cities would return to the farm for pleasure and relaxation in a Jewish setting. This idea caught on with relatives. Meals and lodgings were offered for extended periods of time. This trend of return helped to new business. Communities grew and new business and buildings on the farm were built. The stay on the farm in various seasons. This was the start of the Pleasure Farming Era. This period of time was especially prolific during the early 1910s, 1920s and 1930s. Jewish congregations were formed where Jewish families set up Pleasure Farm havens. Throughout the Greater Delaware Valley this phenomenon was being spelled out in ever greater numbers especially after the First World War ended.

Introduction to the Jewish Farmer's Congregations

The Jewish Farmer did not always settle in an established Jewish community. Jews bought farms and started this trade where Jews were not even heard of at least the native population seen one. Resorts and hotels even materialized at the height of this expansion into the countryside. Jewish people came to the farms as families, elderly couples or singles. The Jews not only came to the farms for vacations but also to spend Jewish holidays and Yom Kippur with their loved ones. Sunday drives into the countryside gained in popularity as the new American learned that automobiles meant freedom! Sunday dinners were a traditional feast for these new immigrants. Of course the food was all served in a Kosher manner.

This era gave way to the newly arriving immigrant of the late 1920s and 1930s. Before World War Two, German immigrants who were Jews would come to America as over 100 years earlier but for different reasons. The German Jews who arrived a century earlier in the 1830s did so to express freedom outside of a Jewish society such as America had to offer. Whereas German Jews of the 20th Century left Europe because their freedom to be a Jew was being severely limited. In the 1930s, many Religious German Jews came to Southern New Jersey to breathe its free air and practice being a Jew without fear or reprisal. These Jews joined the general Jewish institutions, such as the synagogues in use at the time. During the war and as more Jews joined their ranks, religious minyans in houses were started and services were conducted into the 1950s or until a suitable building could be built.

After the War ended, Southern New Jersey received many Displaced Jewish families. This was the late 1940s and soon the Polish Jews began arriving to settle in the countryside. This area blossomed as a new center of Yiddishkeit. This included Jewish culture and Religious life. The Jewish Poultry Belt of Cumberland County spilled into Atlantic, Salem, Cape May and Gloucester Counties. The Holocaust survivor by the 1950s would create new communities in Southern New Jersey. Poultry farming was their livelihoods. Only one generation ago, there was limited success in the raising of poultry on Jewish farms. The Agricultural School in Woodbine, New Jersey was instrumental in developing poultry husbandry on a commercial basis. Science added a new dimension to farming and the next generation of Jewish immigrants would benefit with great success.

These immigrants would become the new Jewish Farmer and the center of their life revolved around the synagogue.
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In the late 1950's, more Jewish immigration took place due to Communist clamp down on religious and political freedom. This event added still another round of Jewish immigration out of Europe. Another chapter of Jewish religious life which involved the Jewish farmer's congregations in Southern New Jersey would be written. With the rise and fall of the poultry business spilled a changing religious scene in many Jewish farming communities. Jewish history in this region mirrored the growth and decline of the 1890's to the 1910's. At that time many Jewish settlers left for the cities.

One more immigration wave would occur in America with Russian overtones within the one hundred years that spanned 1890 until 1980. In the 1970's, Jews were granted permission to emigrate out of Russia after enduring many obstacles and hardships. This new form of persecution upon the Jews evoked many memories of the Czar's era. There was a difference.

The number of Jews leaving the modern day Russia was reduced to a mere 7,000 Jews annually not one of thousands! Still two to four million Jews are held captive in the land that feeds, clothes, and shelters these people without allowing Jews to be Jews.

Jews leaving Russia in the last part of the 19th Century opts to go major ports of destinations. The choices were familiar, America and Palestine now Israel are very important in the minds of Russian Jews as they were over 100 years ago. More Russian Jews come to America as in decades past but few settle in the countryside as their ancestors did three generations ago. Times and technical skills have changed the occupation of the newly arriving Russian Jewish immigrant.

Recent developments in the state of political affairs have meant that the Russian Government has loosened Jewish immigration of the country in the late 1980's. For the first time in recent history, American receptance of Russian Jews have been limited. To come to America for economic refuge is not accepted any longer. The need of the Russian engineer and scientist in the 1970's has waned. Now in 1989, the Russian Jew must truly emigrate to the Jewish homeland in the State of Israel. The Russian Jew who yearns to be free to practice his religion in a free country now is shifted to Israel.

The thoughts of Jewish immigration around the world is unbearable but a constant reminder of what it means to be a Jew! Immigration from the modern state of Israel has occurred in the last part of the 20th Century in America. But again, it is not the Israeli who has conquered the desert on an agricultural footing that comes to America!