

Southern New Jersey
SYNAGOGUES

A SOCIAL HISTORY

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

Written By
ALLEN MEYERS

HISTORIAN
of the
Jewish Community
Greater Delaware Valley
Philadelphia, PA.

Monroeville Crown of Israelites Congregation

By 1900, the Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Aid Society was founded as an arm of the Baron De Hirsch Fund. Pamphlets were printed in Yiddish for the newly arriving Jewish immigrants to glean. The newly formed society's main thrust was interest in assisting individual Jewish settlers onto farms.

The experiment of the preceding decade evolved from collective farm settlements into individual attempts at independent Jewish farmsteads. By the 1890's, industrialization was added in many colonies and settlements to supplement work and income in the off season so that a community could exist. This idea would evolve and bore fruit. Jewish settlements sprung up and around one or two factories isolated in the wildernesses of Southern New Jersey. Most were not backed fully as in the case of the Woodbine Colony. These individual Jewish settlements were left to meet their own payrolls by themselves. Whereas the benefactor or Jewish investor's limited funds ran out. Then the settlement usually failed.

But severe weather, declining economic activity in America and the lack of funds to help keep Jewish settlements from failing in the 1890's did not stop the attachment of the Jewish immigrant to the soil in Southern New Jersey

By the late 1890's, Malaga was a repository of Jewish farmers and their hard work was noticed by the local people. This activity was spurned by the failure of Zionsville in the mid 1890's.

Moving a few miles West from Malaga and past the Malaga Lake along what is now U.S. Route 40 came the town of Elmer. Jews went through this area in the 1890's on their way to Salem and Wilmington Delaware via the ferries.

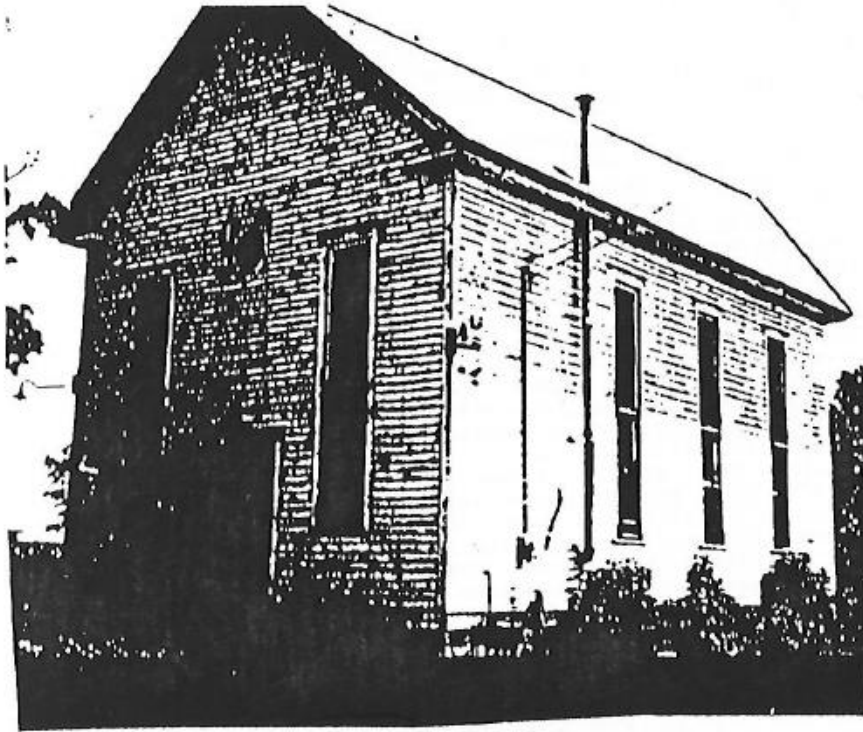
Movement of Jewish settlers North of Alliance and Protmanville was traced to this area by the early 1900. Not too far away from this area was the settlement of Centerton. In the 1890's, Moses Herder, an Am Olam leader settled North of Elmer in Mullica Hill. He established an Am Olam settlement.

This was a time of individual Jewish settlers to an area where little if any Jews were seen less heard of living!

Monroeville would become home to thirty five Jewish immigrant families before the 1910's arrived. Some came from Russia directly. Others came by way of Philadelphia in their quest to adjust and adopt to their new homeland. Urban living was strange to most and they did not stay long in Philadelphia.

Monroeville became a crossroads area. A Jewish settlement would soon follow. The group of Jewish families in the 1890's called Monroeville home. They survived the times and created a Jewish congregation. This is the staying power that brought them into the 20th Century as a united community.

Monroeville Crown of Israelites Congregation



Monroeville Synagogue

Woodbine's Agricultural School helped to prepare Jewish immigrants for a life of animal husbandry. Dairy farming and later the raising of cattle was a main reason for the Jews in Monroeville to congregate. Jews raised cattle because the cattle auctions that were held nearby did not include Jews! Jews raised cattle in Russia and knew how to be successful. This practice existed into the 1930's.

The Jewish Agricultural Society helped to settle people into this community. The objective of the JAS changed with the times even in the 20th century. The benefactors of the Jewish self help organizations promoted individual farm settlement and not collective ones such as Alliance or Woodbine. Economic aid was costly. But it was philosophy that changed, too. Help the Jewish people to help themselves was revealed as a new direction for immigrants and their adjustment in America. If you support enough Jewish farmers with mortgages, you could create a Jewish farming community! A Jewish congregation could develop under these circumstances and expand into the future. Fortunately, religious institutions were deemed part and parcel of this scheme to resettle newly arriving Jews to America.

After the pogroms in Kishneff, Russia of 1905 and 1906 there was a dramatic increase in Jewish immigrants to America. This increase added to the settlement where Samuel Feldman lived. The worse pogroms in Russia occurred in 1906 and 1907. Still more Jews fled for their lives.

The JAS assisted these Jews in acquiring farms with loans and mortgages. The JAS issued 300 loans in 1900 across America and by 1910 more than 5,000 loans were processed.

This was a time when a new focus would be implemented by the JAS. Six Points was a similar settlement that received help directly from the JAS in 1907. Both settlements were completely agricultural ones.

The idea of the experiment worked for the Monroeville Jewish settlement program. In 1902, Samuel Feldman purchased land from Rose and Elmer Dunham on Dutch Town Road. Sam deeded one third of an acre to the Trustees of the Jewish congregation that had formed in the 1890's in this community. They would meet in people's homes for Sabbath services and the High Holidays. A deed for this congregation officially recognized it as a Jewish Congregation. The synagogue was built in that same year of 1902. This wood frame synagogue would stand in the middle of a corn field for a long time.

The Congregation was known as the Crown of the Israelites. It would be many years before the congregation would incorporate this place of public Jewish worship.

Mr. Feldman issued this deed as a symbol to the community in making what had been a fact a solid reality. Outside of Elmer in Monroeville, Jews now had a congregation and a synagogue. The Jewish community was proud of this accomplishment.

The deed for this congregation recognized it as a place or Jewish worship until the congregation decided to incorporate itself in 1915. This congregation was growing with the times and would seek the 1920's with vigor. At the conclusion of the 1910's, the American Jewish Year Book listed this congregation as having 25 members. They were open for public Jewish worship on the Sabbath and Jewish festivals. A Religious school existed within this community and consisted of 25 students and 2 teachers. Rabbi Jacob Feinstein conducted services and led the children in six daily lessons. At this time, Sam Bolnick served as President and Joseph Bolnick as Secretary.

The Bolnicks were long time members of this Jewish community. Most communities have people who may or may not be religious. But by virtue of their staying power in the community this family became the guardians of the synagogue. The Bolnick's were not only the guardians of the shul but the real " Shul Keepers ."

In Monroeville, this was certainly true of the Bolnick clan. Abraham Bolnick was born in Lithuvania and arrived in America at age 19. He selected to go to Mizpah which was a new farming community in Southern New Jersey in the mid 1890's. The cloak factory owner that financed Mizpah recruited him in New York City. Abraham Bolnick was all set to become a pioneer in this new Jewish town. But the area was too swampy to farm and factories were started to supplement these Jewish pioneers income.

Abraham lived through this era and survived it with his wife. They had a small family to consider, too. Abraham peddled for sometime in the countryside before arriving in Monroeville about the turn of the century. There he settled with his family. Abraham came to Monroeville to become the shochet for the Jewish community. His father was a man who dealt in cattle in the old country as Abraham was a child. This is what Abraham knew how to do best. But he really wanted to farm.

Abraham was a pious man and he kept the Sabbath in a strict manner. He helped to supply the Jews in this community with freshly slaughtered meats according to Jewish Law. He settled on the land and farmed it. But he soon opened a butcher shop on this farm for the entire community.

The Jewish community of Monroeville was built on close knit ties to one another. These Jews were related to each other in the old country. They came from the same Shetle or village. Abraham helped to arrange passage for his wife's Anna family to America. He certainly was a good man and son-in-law! He would bring two of our three brothers on the wife's side to America. They were from Gubernia Volkin.

They all came to live nearby in Monroeville and helped to make up the quorum of the 10 men needed for public Jewish worship services at the Monroeville synagogue.

The synagogue was an attraction for Abraham to come to the area. Abraham came to Monroeville because there was a Jewish congregation. This was a central location for the shul on Dutch Town Road. By the end of the first decade of the 20th century there were forty to fifty families who came here for High Holiday services.

Finally in 1915, the synagogue was incorporated by the state of New Jersey. Families such as Feldman, Mozenter and Weinstein helped to maintain the synagogue.

Si Bolnick was born in 1917 and as a child went to the synagogue for religious lessons. This included history of the Jewish people. Most of his instruction was in learning how to daven or pray. Mostly all the Jews were farmers in Monroeville. Then some went into the cattle business. The cattle people later went into the feed business.

The Jews of Monroeville combined their agricultural life with the celebration of the Jewish Holidays and festivals. This was because many of the Jewish Holidays were agricultural in origin.

Si was taught by Rabbi Polack in the 1920's. This was a daily routine after school. These lessons lasted for two to three hours. This activity went on until Si was 15 years old. There were ten to twelve children receiving their Jewish education for life in this manner at this time in Monroeville. They would learn Bible or chumash and were taught in Yiddish . They studied prayers or Maftirs for different Jewish Holidays.

Later, Rabbi Frumker arrived from Europe in the late 1920's. Rabbi Frumker would stay in Monroeville until the outbreak of the Second World War. Many religious leaders escaped to America in the late 1920's. But not many came to the countryside as did Rabbi Frumker. Rabbi Frumker was one of the longest lasting rabbis that the Crown of Israelites Congregation would ever see.

During the Depression of the 1930's, the rabbi would stay and live in Elmer. The congregation rented houses nearby for him to be part of the community. Houses near the synagogue was rented for in later years so he could be closer. This was done especially at the time of Jewish festivals. One year, the congregation did not have the money to do this gesture. So Rabbi Frumker slept in a hayloft. This was an era when all the congregants walked an average of three to four miles from their farms to the synagogue. No one would disobey the tradition and violate the sanctity of the day by riding to synagogue.

This tradition was adhered to strictly in this community out of respect for themselves as Jews and their commitment to their beliefs in their religion. These people came from Elmer, Franklinville and Woodstown. People who lived too far to walk to shul would stay at friends or congregants homes in Monroeville.

Monroeville Crown of Israelites Congregation

Si Bolnick became a Bar Mitzvah or son of the commandments at the age of 13 in 1930. His parents had a large farm house. They set up tables outside in the orchard and rejoiced on this Simha or happy occasion.

Jack Rosenstein of Philadelphia met a girl from Monroeville in the late 1920's. The young woman was Molly Goldstein. She was one of seven children in her family. Her father, William Goldstein was a prosperous farmer before the outset of the Great Depression.

A large wedding took place in Monroeville in 1928. Rabbi Frumker performed the wedding service. There were 25 to 30 Jewish families living in Monroeville at this time. They included the Feldmans, Weinstains, Mozeneters and the Roseman family.

Members of the shul got together and cooked food for this joyous union. The Jewish people of the countryside were the caterers of this reception. They cooked and cooked as Jack recalls vividly! One hundred and fifty people came down to the farm to witness this wedding.

The cooking was extensive. Members of the congregation cooked fresh chicken and fish. They baked Challah that was two feet long and made delicious strudel. They also served the meal and made their own wine. The farmers made their own special beer which they called Mead. This a special brew made from grain.

The Mozenter family lived behind the shul and acted as witnesses to this marriage. A large porch acted as a Chuppah or tent under which Jewish people are traditionally married according to Jewish tradition.

Jack and Molly Rosenblatt were married for many years. They lived together as husband and wife for over sixty years. Molly recently passed away in the 1980's

Many of the Jewish children who were born in the 1910's and 1920's on the farms did not stay in the community after they grew up. Si Bolnick did! The synagogue was built at its location so it would be centrally located. For many years this synagogue would be handy and useful due to its location.

Rabbis were part of this wooden frame synagogue for over two generations in Monroeville. The Great Depression put an end to this tradition. Si father was not a chazzon. A chazzon was brought in for the High Holidays to chant the prayers. During this time, Mr. Levitsky of Salem would be the honored Chazzon. But when the synagogue in Clayton was opened it was a joyous time and a sad time. Another synagogue nearby was important and showed the stability in the total Jewish community in the area. But it did take away some people from the Monroeville Synagogue.

The Weinstain's felt that it was too far to walk to synagogue and thus began their own one. At this time, Mr. Levitsky stopped his services in Monroeville. For Mr. Levitsky was related to the Weinstains.

While the reader of the congregation would conduct services, certain honors were given to the members of the congregation. During the reading of the Torah service, aliyahs were bidden on in a most friendly style.

Monroeville Crown of Israelites Congregation

In the 1930's this honor meant that you would have to read that portion of the Torah service in Hebrew and gladly pay \$ 50 to \$ 100 for that honor. The synagogue was maintained in this fashion. The highest honor was granted to the person who read the Maftir Yonin or the prayer between Rosh Ha Shannah and Yom Kippur. This honor went to Abraham Bolnick and he paid \$ 250 annually to receive this honor.

Abraham was a great benefactor in this congregation. The young boys would learn here in America what their fathers learned in Europe as they prepared for when they would become adult and responsible men in a Jewish community. The fact of the matter was that it didn't matter what community you would grow up in to live but everyone had to have proper Hebrew education!

The women sat up stairs in the balcony and they could see the top of the corn or its dried out tassles in the Fall. The women sat in the balcony as Jewish tradition dictated. The women were led by Anna Bolnick in following the prayers as they were recited by the men downstairs

There was a hand pump for water outside the synagogue. This well was known for its cold and refreshing water. The men would have to remove their tallis or prayer shawl before they pumped the water. The bathroom was outside, too. An out house was behind the synagogue. These were the days when there was no electricity in the 1920's and early 1930's. Gas was used for light and coal was used to fire up the stove that heated the synagogue when it became cold outside.

The Rabbi would teach as well as conduct the services. He would make speeches and sermons all in Yiddish for all the people to understand.

This was an orthodox synagogue in the middle of a corn field. It was always here to give hope to all the Jews who came to live by the land nearby Monroeville. The Spring would give rise to new hope for a prosperous year in the fields. The Fall was the start of the real year for the Jews in Monroeville who aspired to be inscribed in the Book of Life for another year.

As the Shofar or Ram's horn was sounded on Rosh Ha Shannah and Yom Kippur, the Jewish farmers held their heads up with pride in a new land called America in the early 1900's!

By the 1930's, change was taking place on the land. One of the balabittim, Sam Adelson who was a grain dealer sold feed on credit to the newly arriving German Jews in Monroeville. Another family who lived nearby the shul and only 500 feet away would hold Kiddush on the Jewish festivals for the entire congregation. Mr. Mozenter, who lived behind the shul would extend his gratitude to the community in this fashion. This would include herring, boiled potatoes in newspapers, schnapps and hot tea!

To paint the synagogue was an honor. This Kovad was auctioned and went to the highest bidder. These men took to their religion with zeal between the First and Second World Wars. But farms life was changing and many Jews left the countryside for the big cities of Camden and Philadelphia after World War Two.

Si laid Teflin each morning as a child according to Biblical ritual. This was associated with the morning prayers until he turned 18 years old. The shul continued to exist as did the farmers. During the Second World War, the farmers received all the gasoline that they could use. Young men were being deferred as " farm help". The Jewish farmers all kept Kosher farm houses and observed the Jewish dietary laws of their parents. This in itself was unusual and stood out from many Southern New Jersey communities that had Jewish farmers. A person to insure a fresh supply of Kosher meats in the area was only one reason for this phenomena.

Si Bolnick married Helen after World War Two. They had three sons. This included Allan, Jay and Harold. They all grew up and became Bar Mitzvah boys in the truest sense of the expression. Their first son was sent to the Jewish Day School which was formed in Norma in the late 1950's. By the 1950's, newly arriving Jewish refugees from the Holocaust came to Southern New Jersey to start a new life. Some settled in Monroeville.

These immigrants numbered ten to twelve families and they helped to continue the tradition of the Crown of Israelites. Mr. Hirsch Nadel was one such family who came to farm the land. These refugees went into the poultry business. These Jews sent their children to the all day Jewish school in Norma, too. The kids would go in car pools. Rabbi Baruch Schwartz ran this Jewish Day School.

The area near Norma was changing, also. Landis Township was now incorporated into Vineland in the early 1950's. Rabbi Schwartz met his wife as a teacher in the nearby Glassboro Teachers College.

After the egg business went bust in the late 1950's, this community left for New York City. Rabbi Baruch Schwartz left, too. He invested in apartment houses in New York City in the early 1960's.

The 1960's brought change to Monroeville but not the end! Seventy to 100 people were attending the Monroeville Synagogue for High Holiday services. By the late 1960's, the old Jewish farmers died off but the shul survived!

Tradition continued into the 1960's and 1970's. Rubenstein, Greensberg, Mozenter, Moishe Weinstein, Izzy Hall and the Nadels helped to maintain a Sabbath minyan. The Bolnicks were still a strong force in the community. Hirsch's three sons, Ray, Paul and Marshall would learn to blow the Shofar for the High Holidays. Hirsch Nadel now settled as a poultry farms survived the Holocaust for a reason. He made it out of Vilna Poland to see his father's traditions continued. The nachas he received from his sons was immeasurable.

Into the 1970's and 1980's, this tradition continued. The Jewish people of the community walked to the synagogue to keep the longevity of the wood frame shul going. The local people in the area knew very little about the Jewish religion but respected these Jews who they would see walking to their house of worship. This synagogue has not changed one bit since its inception almost 100 years ago.

This was a matter of tradition and pride that was passed onto the next generation. Si Bolnick sums up this history of the Jews in Monroeville by saying " traditions are based on habits." You don't have to be fanatical to be religious. His three sons are all doctors and are grown up now. They live across the country. His three sons have always made plans to be back in Monroeville for the High Holidays in the late 1970's and 1980's. They do this because of home training and they are not forced, either! They just enjoy taking that walk to the synagogue in the middle of a corn field!

The community has neared its conclusion for little if any Jews remain in Monroeville today. But that could all change in the near future with the opening a new super road. Route 55 connecting Philadelphia with Southern New Jersey is an ambitious endeavor. This road mirrors the road that people once had to travel via stage coach or even Railroads some 100 years earlier. This development could lure Jews back into the area with new housing developments where Jews have coexisted with the land and their neighbors for almost 100 years

Reference Source Credits

Taped interview with Si Bolnick # 259 7/15/86

Telephone interview with Jack Rosenblatt 12/16/87
courtesy of Les Fayer

Interview with Ray Nadel at Congregation
B'nai Tikvah, Washington Township
First day of Chanukah December 4th, 1988

Articles in Elmer Times Newspaper
researched in May 1988
Salem County Clerk's Office
Department of Deeds

American Jewish Year Book of 1919

History of the Baron De Hirsch Fund
By Joseph Samuel in 1935

Article in the South Jersey Magazine
Spring of 1985 By Dr. Harry Gersonowitz
" The Forgotten Synagogue"