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.
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 sprang 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 spurred by the failure of Ziontown 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 Brotmanville 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 adapt 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.
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 Kishinev, 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 worst 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 1906 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 1900'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 the 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.
Monroeville Crown of Israelites Congregation

The deed for this congregation recognized it as a place for Jewish worship until the congregation decided to incorporate itself in 1915. This congregation was growing in the 1910s with vigor. At the 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 1 teacher. Rabbi Jacob Feinberg conducted services and taught the children in six daily lessons. At this time, Sam Bohnick served as President and Joseph Bohnick as Secretary.

The Bohnicks were long time members of this Jewish community. Most communities have people who may or may not be members of the congregation but as members of this community became the guardians of the Synagogue. The Bohnicks were not only the guardians of the Synagogue but the real "Shul Keepers." In Monroeville, this was certainly true of the Bohnick clan. Abraham Bohnick was born in Lithuania and arrived in America at age 19. He selected to go to Mitzpah which was a new farming community in Southern New Jersey in the mid 1850s. The coal company owner that financed Mitzpah recruited him in New York City. Abraham Bohnick was set up 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 Monroeville about the turn of the century. There he settled with his family. He came to Monroeville to become the shoemaker for the Jewish community. His father was a man who dealt in cattle in the old country and Abraham was a child. This is what Abraham knew how to do best. But he really wanted to go to school. Abraham was a pious man and he kept the Sabbath in a strict manner. He helped to supply the Jews in this community with fresh 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. The Jews were related to each other in the old country. They came from the same Shelte or village. Abraham helped to arrange passage for his wife's son-in-law! He would bring two out of the three brothers on the wife's side to America. They were from Gubernia Volokin.

Monroeville Crown of Israelites Congregation

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 shoal on Dutch Town Road. By the end of the first decade of the 20th century there were 40 to 50 families who came here for High Holiday services.

Finally in 1913, the synagogue was incorporated by the state of New Jersey. Families such as Feldman, Mosen and Weinstein helped to maintain the synagogue.

Mr. Bohnick 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 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.

Mr. Bohnick was taught by Rabbi Polnick in the 1920s. This was a daily routine after school. These lessons lasted for two to three hours. This activity went on until Mr. Bohnick 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 Haftirs for different Jewish Holidays.

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

During the Depression of the 1930s, the rabbis would stay and live in Elmer. The congregation rented houses nearby for him to be a 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. So Rabbi Simkhovitch slept in a hayloft. This was an era when all the congregants walked 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 the 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 town would stay at friends or congregants homes.
S.L. Bollnick became a Bar Mitzvah or son of the commandments at the age of 13 in 1928. 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 people were the Goldsteins. Mollie Goldstein was one of seven children in her family. Her father, William Goldstein, was a prosperous farmer before the rise of the Great Depression.

A large wedding took place in Monroeville in 1928. Rabbi Frankel performed the wedding service. There were 25 to 30 Jewish families living in Monroeville at that time. They included the Feldmans, Weinstins, Noszentens and the Rosen family.

Members of the show got together and cooked food for this joyous union. The Jewish people of the countryside were the caterers for this reception. They cooked and cooked as Jack recalls vividly.

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

Jack and Mollie Rosenblatt were married for many years. They lived together as husband and wife for over sixty years. Mollie 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. S.L. Bollnick did! The Synagogue was built at its location so it was centrally located. For many years this Synagogue would be handy and useful due to its location.

Rabbi was part of this wooden frame Synagogue for over two generations in Monroeville. The Great Depression put an end to this tradition. S.L. Bollnick was not a Chazzan. A Chazzan was brought in for the High Holidays to chant the prayers. During this time, Mr. Levitsky of Salem would be honored or please. But when the Synagogue in Clayton was opened it was a joyous time and a sad time. Another place was taken place in the land. The Synagogue was Synagogue nearby was important and showed the stability in the total Jewish community in the area. But it took away some people from the Synagogue.

The Synagogue’s feel that it was too far to walk to synagogue and thus began their own. At this time, Mr. Levitsky stopped his services in Monroeville. For Mr. Levitsky was related to the Weinstins.

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

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 this honor. The Synagogue was maintained in this fashion. The highest honor was granted to the person who read the Haftorah for the prayer between Rosh Ha Shannah and Yom Kippur. This honor went to Abraham Bollnick and he paid $150 annually to receive this honor.

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

The women sat up stairs on 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 Bollnick 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 used to remove their tallis or prayer shawls 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 have to speak in Yiddish for all the people to understand.

There was an Orthodox Synagogue in the middle of a corn field. It was always easy 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 had 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 for the land called America in the early 1900's!

By the 1930’s the change was taking place in the land. One of the balabim, Sam Frisich who was a grain dealer sold food on credit to the newly arriving German Jews in Monroeville. Another family who lived nearby the shul and only 300 feet away would hold Rosh Hashanah on the Jewish festivals for the entire congregation. Mr. Noszenten, who lived behind the shul would extend his gratitude to the community in this fashion.

This would include baking, 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. This was associated with the morning prayers until he turned 19 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 is 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 phenomenon.

Si Bolenick married Helen after World War Two. They had three sons. This included Alan, 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, especially 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 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.

Rabenstein, Greensberg, Nuzenzet, Molshe Weinstein, Izzy Hall and the Nadeles helped to maintain a Sabbath minyan. The Bolinicks were still a strong force in the community.

Hirsch’s three sons: Ray, Paul and Marshall, all learned to blow the Shofar for the High Holidays. Hirsch Nadel now settled as a poultry farm 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 those 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 Bolenick sums up this history of the Jews in Monroeville by saying “traditions are based on habits. You don’t have to be fanatical 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 needed it 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.

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