Southern New Jersey SYNAGOGUES

A SOCIAL HISTORY

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

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The center of the Alliance Colony was its first synagogue which was built on Isaac Avenue near Henry Avenue. From this focal point, newly arriving immigrants and their families made their homes around the shul. Later in the 1880’s, new Jewish settlers found land nearby.

The first leap in this expansion from the center of the colony helped to bolster and contribute to the growth of the second synagogue in the Alliance Colony. The Tifereth Israel synagogue located on Garfield Avenue was supported in this fashion by Israel Eskin. Mr. Eskin set up a clothing factory and built some homes nearby about a mile from the Tifereth Israel Shul. Jewish settlement then fanned out in this direction towards the Broadway Railroad station.

Expansion from the center of the Alliance Colony was spurred northeast of the original settlement with the Eber Ezer Shul as its center. This development occurred in the 1890’s. Too, Abraham Brodman bought ground and started his clothing factory on nearby Gersham Avenue in 1892. Later in that same year, streets were laid out and the town of Broomsville was incorporated. By 1893, the town of Broomsville was incorporated.

In 1893, the incorporation of the Alliance Hebrew Cemetery was official. The recession of 1893 stopped the flow of Jewish settlers here for a period of time. As a result, growth of organizations took place and internal development began to take place.

By the mid 1890’s, a new wave of immigration took place to America. New immigrants came to the Jewish Colonies with Romanian roots. This included the Speigel’s, Chonomsky’s, Lindenberg’s and the Lastel’s.

Chuna Chonomsky settled in this area of what was soon to become Norma. Broadway Station was only a stop on the Railroad line that went from Bridgeport to Vineland. Later Broadway Station would be named Norma for the post office master’s grand daughter. Norma would become a village in the late 1890’s and attract many Jewish settlers here as a result.

Chuna was an organizer of the growing Jewish community in Norma. He was a Tzedik or a religious leader. He helped to form the Norma shul and the B’nai Jacob congregation. His neighbors included the other Romanian families that had come to America for an opportunity to practice their religion from persecution.

Norma encompassed an area beyond Eskinton on Almond Road. Four years after Eskinton was founded and following the 1893 recession meant a new chapter would be written in the development of the Jewish settlements. Chuna arrived from Roumania. Born originally in Bialystock and later lived in the countryside was the background for a man destined to come to America as a Jewish settler. Chuna would leave his family in Roumania until he could secure his future in America.
Once Chuna arrived in America he would send for his family. Before the end of the 19th century, Chuna and his wife were blessed with a son. Life on the farm in Norma was very hard. The couple moved to New York City where they worked in the sweat factories for a while. The city was not easy, but they were able to support their family. On the Sabbath, the Chunas would travel to their farm. 

Sam Spiegel was a long-time resident of the area. He was a furniture salesman in another Jewish Colony. He helped build several homes in Woodbine from 1893 until 1905. Sam would then return to Norma in the early years of the 20th century to help Norma grow.

The development of Norma into a Jewish settlement was by no means accidental. Many Jewish settlers arrived in the mid-1890s and made the area an attractive spot for farmers and others.

The Jewish Agricultural School in Woodbine assisted many new Jewish farmers to become successful in a short period of time. One of the men who was founded in Woodbine was Mr. Lipman. He attended the school in the 1890s and later became an important part of the institution. Mr. Lipman settled his dream in the town and was later financed by the Jewish Educational Alliance in Philadelphia. A model farm on Allivin Brook was developed into a commercial success. Mr. Lipman appointed himself the superintendent of the property.

The distance between Norma and the Tifereth Israel Synagogue on Gershon Avenue necessitated the development of a new congregation in Norma. In addition, the Romanian minyan or way in which the Norma congregation davened was different from the Polish minyan of the Gershon Avenue Synagogue. In the year 1907, the congregation in Norma was in operation and incorporated itself with Rabbi Spiegel as its president. Sam Rothman was elected the Treasurer and Max Gass was the Secretary. The community blossomed and by 1901, boasted 30 members in its new formed congregation.

The congregation named itself B'nai Jacob. At the turn of the century, its new shul and place of prayer was ready. The shul adapted its name as Ahavas Achis or the Norma Synagogue. This new name was incorporated with the return of Rabbi Spiegel from Woodbine. The Woodbine Synagogue was already in operation and doing very well. By now the community in Norma would see some real dramatic growth.

The Lipman model farm helped bolster growth in this community. The countryside was now producing more produce than was ready for market at the time. Their hard work would not go to waste. For in 1901, the Lipman farm converted this surplus into a market by opening a canning factory. The road on which the factory was located continued as Can House Road.

Jewish life was not affected by the Blue Laws in use in the State of New Jersey. In Vineland, only three miles away was another community. The stores there were all closed on Sunday in the late 1900s. But in Norma, Saturday was a day of rest for most of the people and thus their stores were closed on Saturday. In the early 1900s, mobility in the area meant that roads would be better organized and the Jews would not escape the collision with the Blue laws.

Gentile customers were now coming to Jewish-owned stores on Sunday and desiring the Christian Sabbath. These places of business were open on Sunday due to being closed on Shabbat or Saturday. For over the next generation this became a family business. The Blue Laws being enforced would exist for Jewish shop owners. Thus, Norma was open on Sundays if only for the sake of their livelihood and not for their Jewish clientele. The case of the Blue Laws were finally laid to rest in this community by the neighboring community of Shiloh which also celebrated the Sabbath on Saturday due to being a Seventh Day Adventist Community.

Jake Spiegel was the organizer of the Norma Jewish Community in all of its aspects. Rev. Isaac Krasnoff was the rabbinical and teacher in the community. This was done in his house on Allivin Road. By 1901, not only did B'nai Jacob have 30 members but it boasted a high number of children in the Cheder. This was the future of the community. Seven young children were taught their Judaism in this community.

This was a time of creativity in Norma. New organizations sprouted up in Norma during this period of time. Mrs. L. Lewisohn Beneficent Society was organized in April 1909. Over seventy-five members maintained this important organization. The next one to be born was B'nai Jacob in Norma during the first decade of the 20th century. Two hundred Jewish people were now living in Norma during this period. In 1902, a free night school was initiated to acquaint the new immigrants with English and the introduction to modern trade.

Other institutions grew along side the shul in the early 1900s. Community bath houses in the countryside were few but not so in these Jewish Colonies. Not one but two bath houses were constructed in 1903 in Norma. Jacob Spiegel opened his bath house in Norma in 1903. In 1904, Mendel Goldstein opened his bath house. Ritual was observed in doors with the creation of mikvah by Mendel Goldstein in his enterprise.

Americanization of the Jews in this village setting was realized earlier with the inception of the Norma Athletic Association by Jake Spiegel in 1904. Baseball was the main activity of this organization. The interest was immense in the Jewish Colonies for this American sport. Participation was drawn from near Alliance and Brotmanville. Teams would band together as they would compete with one another. Other Jewish Colonies would join in and have fun.
Nick names still held true during this time period. These names had real meaning. Reba’s father was called “Dross” by his friends. He was known as the “White Rooster” and there was no word on how to spell his name.

Yiddishkeit was alive on Garshai Avenue. Many cheder students lived in this community. Reba’s parents had one and he was attached to the Tifereth Israel of Alliance. Her father was the cantor for Tifereth Israel Congregation. The boys in his class were taught Yiddishkeit in Chalovia style at these places. All the children were taught Yiddish. Six or seven boys would come to Cantor Levin’s house for their lessons. The time of change in the ‘20’s meant that Jewish families were moving to Vineyard and Bridgeton. Religion was being taught with services in English for the first time so that all native born American Jews could understand this. In the ‘20’s, Beth Israel Congregation in Vineyard was founded on this precedent and participation was brisk. Beth Israel was born in this era as a result of this need for Americanization within Judaism. The Chalovia Society helped to prepare the way to the future for this community by its method of instruction of Judaism in English.

The Jews in Norma were adjusting to this incursion upon their traditions inspite of a great resistance by the previous generation and the older men of the community. As in other places in the Greater Delaware Valley such as Wilmington Delaware Congregation Beth Shalom it was the women who lead the Jewish religious life into the future. They now gained the right to vote for the first time. In the 1920’s, six out of ten houses had no such book but after the High Holidays Jewish families ate and slept in them as the festival dictates but with joy and laughter. On Simchas Torah, the women would gather in the woods in America and have a joyous celebration from the balcony in the shul upon the children down below. Purim was a noisy festival. The hammer and old pipes in the shul rattled as the children almost broke the floor in by having such a good time. This was done on cue when the King’s name was mentioned.

Ritual in the home had to be modified and to honor the Norma Shul. Mr. Feinberg had faded away into the past. The women of the neighborhood Auxiliary Norma Shul included Forest Shrosky (Reva’s Mom), Hattie Shrosky, Esther Eidelstein and Mrs. Barish. These ladies then went onto to establish the Norma Hebrew School within the Norma Shul. An addition was built in 1920 and the building was expanded. The extension was made into a large room and an annex was built in the early 1930’s. There was a bathroom added and the large room was heated. Mrs. Leon Greenberg, who lived in Norma and was engaged as a Hebrew School teacher, belonged to the Grape Street Shul at the time. The women would fire up the pot belly stove on cold days in anticipation of the youngsters coming after public school in the afternoon.

Fifteen children were taught in a long narrow table and learn about their Yiddishkeit. This was done mostly in English. If you could pay okay, it was _______ paid $0.0 per week. Chanukah and Purim celebrations were conducted in this room and helped to enliven the spirit of the shul and enhance the Hebrew School experiences for the children. In the 1930’s and 1940’s, Bar Mitzvah celebrations were centered in the Bar Mitzvah boy’s home. The mothers and relatives would bake and cook for this joyous occasion. All members of the community came to celebrate the affair and to enjoy the various tasty foods in honor of the boy in the community becoming a Bar Mitzvah or son of the commandments. This then took on a community festival in the celebration of this Simcha.

Reva Chonofsky was born to Fannie and Israel Chonofsky in Norma. As a little girl, Reva was steeped in her Yiddishkeit in a fun and loving manner. For her Jewish life was not only exciting but a great deal of fun. Ten to twelve pails included Sylvia Moskovitz, Roselle Eidelstein, Edith Gross, Peggy Kravitz and Jennie Applebaum. The shul was a fun place where Reva felt at home. The neighborhood lent itself to this feeling. On Friday nights alone in the 1920’s, six out of ten houses had a shush brush after the High Holidays.

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For a girl in the countryside it was a wonderful experience to prepare for the Sabbath. This was a big treat. Reba would help her mother clean the upstairs while her brother Joseph was at Mr. Feinberg's learning about Yiddishkeit. Meanwhile little Reba was at home, "doing Yiddishkeit!" That was the difference between the boys and the girls. Reba would nibble fruit and vegetables with a truck. He would bring the fruit to her. When she returned home she would bring fruit and vegetables, and Reba would eat them.

The Chonofsky's were poor but the Italian family was envious. Poor Reba. She was the only child in the family and was very intelligent. She had many friends, but she never had a pet. Her father was a poor farmer and he had no money to buy her a pet. Reba's mother was very kind and she would often bring Reba a little toy. Reba loved her mother and she often thought about her when she was away from home. She never left her mother's side.

Reba's mother was a very kind and caring woman. She loved her children and would do anything to make them happy. She would often bring Reba a little toy or a new dress. Reba loved her mother and she often thought about her when she was away from home. She never left her mother's side. She was a good daughter and she always listened to her mother's words. She was a good daughter and she always listened to her mother's words. She was a good daughter and she always listened to her mother's words. She was a good daughter and she always listened to her mother's words. She was a good daughter and she always listened to her mother's words.
The Belsig's came from South Germany and were sponsored by an uncle in New York City. The Depression was still in effect and attacking the quality of life in America by the late 1930's and early 1940's. The family moved to Jersey City and then to Noma, New Jersey. Many Jewish families were having a hard time of it and they looked for work. Many Jewish families moved to New Jersey to make a living.

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When we look at the American Jewish calendar of today, we see a broadening of this tradition. Today, every day is a special Jewish day. Jews in America have it good, but Jewish life over the centuries has not been so protective. Sometimes American Jews just block out of their minds the bad things! The bible tells us that we are God's chosen people, and the Jews of all generations. Where does Yiddishkeit begin? The refugees who came yesterday to America were shunned and accepted by the general Jewish community during the initial period before 1940. This was evident in Norma, too! Some things never change, although the language is forgotten and not used. Today's children of Norma are more American than German. They do not speak Yiddish, but they still have a connection to their roots. The Norma Jewish community is a mix of old and new. The Synagogue is the center of the community. It is a place of worship, but also a place for social gatherings. The community has a strong sense of identity and pride. The Norma Jewish community has been a part of the Norma community for many years, and it continues to thrive today.