

**A BRIEF HISTORY OF
CONGREGATION BETH DAVID AND
THE JEWS OF AMENIA AND SHARON**

by David A. Grossman

The towns in New York and Connecticut within a ten-mile radius of where the Beth David synagogue is located were first settled by Europeans early in the 18th century. German and Dutch settlements are recorded in the New York hamlets of Wassaic, South Amenia and Amenia Union, although the Township of Amenia itself was not formally organized until 1823 (1). The Town of Sharon, Connecticut was part of a group of Litchfield County towns incorporated in 1738 (2). No Jews are recorded as having been among the early settlers of the bi-state New York-New England border region; however, it seems entirely likely that itinerant Jewish merchants, carrying household goods in packs on their backs, circulated through the area soon after the first pioneers braved the hills and forests of the frontier.

Jewish Farmers and the Ellsworth Community

The earliest recorded Jewish settlers in the area were farmers who moved into the Dutchess-Litchfield County region early in the 20th century. One of the first to arrive was Nathan Osofsky, an immigrant from Russia. He moved in 1910 from New York City to the Ellsworth community located in the eastern part of Sharon. With the aid of a loan of \$300 from the Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Society, founded by Baron de Hirsh, Nathan bought 23 acres of land and a house. Later, he added another 32 acres. Together with his fellow early Jewish farmers, Nathan faced difficult conditions due to the thin soil of New England. They persevered, nevertheless, and soon the Ellsworth community (located to the south of the current Ellsworth farm on Route 4) saw more Jewish families move in. They included Max Paley, progenitor of the Paley family that still farms and sells produce in Sharon and Amenia, together with families named Cohen, Shulman and Rothstein (3).

The Jewish farmers in Ellsworth were a long way from Sharon center on the poor mountain roads of the era. Some brought their milk and other farm products to the nearer Cornwall Bridge area, where there was a railroad station and Breen's general store. One survivor of this early period of the Jewish settlement in Sharon, the Gorkofsky Dairy Farm, still carries on the tradition of Jewish farming (3). So, too, do other Jewish farms scattered throughout the Dutchess and Northwest Litchfield County region. (4).

Today, few people employed on a full-time basis in farming in this region. "Gentleman farming" is more characteristic of the area, especially in the rolling hills to the north and west of Amenia and in Millbrook, and in the towns of Ancram and Gallatin in southwestern Columbia County. These farms breed specialized cows and horses on well-kept, well-fenced greenswards. Among the owners of these establishments are a number of Jews, including members of Congregation Beth David.

The Iron And Steel Economy

While farming has long characterized the Dutchess-Litchfield area, it has by no means been the sole base of the local economy. In the years just before the American Revolution, rich iron ore deposits were discovered in Salisbury, Connecticut, only a few miles northeast of Amenia. The presence of ample deposits of limestone, plus charcoal that could be produced by burning the dense forests that covered the area, led to the establishment of the earliest American metal foundries. Iron kilns in Amesville and Lime Rock within the Town of Salisbury and others nearby produced high quality metal for cannon and other essential items for George Washington's army. The American navy relied on Salisbury cannons to arm the Constitution and other sailing ships (5). Eastern European immigrants were attracted to the area

around Salisbury to work in the mines and in the wood-burning, charcoal-producing furnaces and metal-making kilns. It seems likely that Jews were among their number, although no records to this effect have been found.

By around 1900, the ore mines of the area were largely exhausted. The local iron and steel industries gave way to the larger scale mills of Pittsburgh and the West. Photos of the hills of Sharon and Cornwall at around the turn of the century show bare ground where there were once dense forests, the result of decades of charcoal production. Dairy farming and associated agricultural activities could now extend into the open fields but they could not substitute for the lost manufacturing economy. Population declined, as did the region's prosperity (4).

The Railroad Era

As manufacturing industry declined, commercial opportunities and tourism grew. The years from the Civil War to 1900 witnessed the extension of rail and tram lines from cities like New York and Albany into the hinterland of the Hudson and Housatonic River Valleys. The railroad lines that reached Amenia, Sharon and the other New York and Connecticut towns to their south and north sparked new commercial activity. Part of this activity was in the building of the railroads themselves. A small piece of the history of Cornwall Bridge is the memory of "Jerusalem", a site below the modern concrete bridge that carries Routes 4 and 7 over the Housatonic River. The locale was named after Jewish workers who stayed here, at least on a temporary basis (4).

The Move From Ellsworth To Amenia

Around 1920, some of the Jewish settlers in the Ellsworth community apparently came to the conclusion that it was just too far to commute to the village center of Sharon in the often difficult weather of New England's winter. And while there were elementary schools in Ellsworth, it was a long distance for their children to go to high school in the center of Sharon (although the photo of Sharon High School's Class of 1933 includes Florence, Edith and Ben Rothstein). Many of the Ellsworth Jewish group moved to Amenia where the railroad station was already drawing other Jewish settlers and boarders seeking the country air and other amenities of the Amenia area (6).

Jewish Merchants In The Area

Among the area's Jewish merchants in the early 20th century was Barnet Shoifet, who moved his family to the Ellsworth community in Sharon in answer to an advertisement in a Jewish newspaper for a *shochet* (a ritual slaughterer). At least nine other Jewish men are recorded as having moved to Ellsworth at about the same time (Louis Gorkofsky, Harry Weinstein, Philip, Harry and Sam Rothstein, Harry and Jacob Rosenson, Nathan Osofsky, Max Paley, Isidore Lubansky and Wolff Saperstein) (6).

Some of these men became shopkeepers in Amenia and Millerton in the late 19th and early 20th century. Saperstein's department store in Millerton is one of the modern survivors of this era. So, too, is Paley's fruit and vegetable store located in Sharon near the Connecticut border with New York. In Amenia, there was a Jewish pharmacist named Max Rubin, whose son, Ed Rubin, still lives in town. Alfred Dube operated a dry goods store in Amenia for many years. (7).

The Boarding House Era

The railroad brought new activities to the Dutchess-Litchfield County region in the early decades of the 20th century. Among the railroad-induced activities was the attraction of "boarders".from New York City and other urban centers. During the summer, New Yorkers found that they could escape city heat and enjoy fresh country breezes by taking a reasonably short train ride to northeast Dutchess or northwest Litchfield County. "Boarders" (who would today probably be called "weekenders") came to many towns in the region around Amenia. At first, these early weekenders stayed in rooms in the houses of local people. Later, boarding houses were built specifically to provide quarters for seasonal visitors. Many of the boarders were Jewish – as were the proprietors of the establishments in which they vacationed (6).

Nathan Osofsky and his wife Rebecca moved from Ellsworth to open The Grand House Hotel in the center of Amenia. The family of Muriel Rothstein, who still lives in Sharon, owned another boarding house in Amenia (7).

By the later years of the 1920's, Amenia had become noted as a resort community centered around the major amenity of Lake Amenia. Unfortunately, the once-grand manmade lake no longer exists. The wooden dam that created the lake was destroyed by hurricane-driven flooding in 1955 and the lake drained out, flooding the valley to the south (8). Even before the lake's demise, however, the boarding house epoch in Amenia's history had begun to end, due at least partly to the severe economic pressures of the Great Depression and also because of competition from vacation resorts in the Catskills (8).

The Founding of Beth David

Among the "boarders" and their landlords were many religious Jews. At first, they gathered in private houses to hold religious services. Then, in the late 1920's, they decided to build a synagogue of their own. A small plot of land on East Main Street in Amenia was donated by Bessie and Harry Rosenson (6). The 12 founding members of the new synagogue were recorded as:

Alfred M. and Freda Dube

Harry Goldman

Louis Kaplan

? Klees

Morris Login

Joseph Lubansky

Nathan Osofsky

Harry and Bessie Rosenson

Philip and Jennie Rothstein

Wolff Saperstein

Jacon Shoifet

? Weinstein

The cornerstone for the building was laid on Sunday, May 14, 1929 at a ceremony that brought together members of the local Jewish community, visiting Rabbis and other Jewish leaders, together with religious and civic leaders from the Amenia area. In all, several hundred people attended. The day was a joyous one, despite threatening weather that fortunately held off long enough for the ceremony to be almost wholly completed before heavy rain fell (9).

Alfred Dube chaired the cornerstone-laying program. Speakers included Supervisor Joseph McEnroe of Amenia, Reverend S.W. Steele of the Amenia Presbyterian Church, Rabbi Schwartz of Vassar Temple in Poughkeepsie and Paul Belowitz, President of the Hunts Point Hebrew Association. Rabbi Schwartz gave the invocation and congratulated the small Jewish community on the building of their temple. Supervisor McEnroe spoke of his honor at being part of the dedication of the temple. Reverend Dr. Steele expressed his pride in his Jewish neighbors and assured the audience that intolerance did not exist in Amenia

Funds for construction of the temple were donated by members of the congregation and also by local residents -- including Christians (History of Beth David). At the cornerstone-laying ceremony, a total of \$240 was contributed by those in attendance (9).

Beth David Today

The nearly 75 years that Beth David has operated have seen many changes in the congregation. Membership has waxed and waned over the years, from the founding twelve to the current membership of nearly sixty families and individuals. The religious affiliation of the synagogue changed from Orthodox to Conservative to Reform. Beth David is currently unaffiliated with any of the national Jewish religious organizations although it largely follows Reform practices. As the congregation celebrates its anniversary, it looks forward to many coming years of service to the community served by the little Beth David synagogue.

Amenia, January, 2004

Citations

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4. Gannett, Michael, Cornwall Historian (telephone conversation)
5. National Iron Bank
6. Shoifet, Shirley A. , History of Beth David Synagogue, 1929-1989, June 3, 1989 (mimeo)
7. Ross, Larry (telephone conversation, August, 2003).
8. Amenia Historical Society
9. Harlem Valley Times, May 16, 1929