

JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF CENTRAL JERSEY



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NEWSLETTER

Nisan-Iyar

A History of Congregation Poile Zedek

by Deborah Cohn

Congregation Poile Zedek, the second orthodox congregation in New Brunswick, began on November 18, 1901, when a group of friends met at the home of Benjamin and Sophie Elfant on Hiram Street to celebrate the birth of their daughter Bess. They named themselves the Independent Sick and Death Benefit Association of New Brunswick, purchased a cemetery lot on Codwise Avenue, and formed committees for a *chevra kadisha*.

The early congregants were largely immigrants from Poland and Russia. They met for several years in various storefronts before purchasing a small building located at 145 Neilson Street in 1905. At that time they adopted the name Poile Zedek, meaning "Doers of Righteousness."

In 1908, the congregation hired the Rev. Eli Dobin to be their reader, shofar blower, *mohel*, and ritual slaughterer. The exclusive employment of a rabbi was evidently too expensive, because in 1918, Rabbi Samuel Baskin arrived in New Brunswick to be the leader of both Poile Zedek and Congregation Ahavas Achim. Both shuls also cooperated in the establishment of a religious school in 1910, which became the A.S. Marcus Hebrew School and served the entire New Brunswick area. Around 1921, Poile Zedek shared the services of Rabbi Anton Klein with Congregation Ohav Emeth. Rev. Dobin remained in New Brunswick, however, and was apparently associated with Poile Zedek until 1936, when he mysteriously disappeared. He was last seen on the steps of the synagogue. A group of Jewish citizens organized a search party to aid the official investigation, but Dobin's body was never found, and the mystery was never solved.

On September 6, 1919, the local newspapers reported that plans for a new synagogue had been finalized, to be built in the same location at 145 Neilson Street. The building project had

been planned earlier but was delayed by the war. It was expected to cost \$75,000 and to be "one of the prettiest structures of its kind in the city." Fundraising activities began, spearheaded by the newly formed Ladies Auxiliary, and the cornerstone ceremony was held on August 19, 1923. The building, featuring hand-painted stained glass windows, huge chandeliers, and wooden benches

imported from Italy, was completed the following year. The congregation continued to grow, and by 1943 numbered 191 families.

The orthodox congregations of New Brunswick shared the services of Rabbi Philip Raymon from 1938-1955. During those years, Poile Zedek affiliated with the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, and re-established its own religious school. By the mid-1950s, however, membership had dropped to only about 150 families. The congregation, hoping to increase its numbers

and provide a direction for the future, hired their own spiritual leader in 1955, Rabbi Gerald Green, whose ordination in 1953 was from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

Rabbi Green proved to be a popular and charismatic leader. The religious school grew under his stewardship from 19 students at the time of his hiring to 65 by September of 1961. He instigated the formation of a synagogue choir, which sang at the newly-introduced Friday family services program. The number of members, which was estimated at 150 in 1953, reached 500 by 1959. Donations to UJA Israel drives increased steadily from 1956 through 1960, and remained at elevated levels throughout Rabbi Green's tenure. Rabbi Green also taught

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PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

I want to take this opportunity to thank the members of our Society for your financial support -- primarily dues and donations. I'd like to remind you that, as much as we rely on monetary sustenance, we also very much need your talents. Here are some areas in which you might be able to exercise your abilities, while at the same time playing an important role in the Society:

- | | |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Help to improve our Web site or our Facebook page. * Be a speaker in our Lecture Series. * Be active in our new Genealogy Club. * Serve as a Board Member of our Society. * Help to maintain our archives. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Conduct oral histories. * Volunteer yourself to be interviewed. * Suggest other persons who might wish to be interviewed. * Recruit new members. * Help to suggest and/or plan trips. |
|--|---|

Speaking for myself, I've found my membership in the JHSCJ to be very rewarding, and I've enjoyed being able to put my various talents to good use. I'm confident that you would feel the same way if you gave it a try! If you think that you might be interested in participating in any of the above activities, call or email our office. We look forward to discussing possibilities with you.

Nathan Reiss

THANK YOU

TO ALL THOSE WHO CONTRIBUTED TO THE JHSCJ ARCHIVES FUND

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EDITORIAL STAFF

Contributors:

Nathan Reiss
Deborah Cohn

Graphic Artist Deborah Cohn

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(Poile Zedek, continued from Page 1)

several classes at the adult education program of the Jewish Community Center in New Brunswick. In 1957, the congregation purchased a home on nearby Welton Street for the rabbi and his family.

Through its history, Poile Zedek had always been affiliated with the Orthodox movement and had always had a mostly Orthodox constituency. The fact that Rabbi Green's ordination came from the Conservative movement's seminary, however, seems to have influenced some of the religious and social practices of the congregation. Poile Zedek began to hold dinner dances, square dances, and hired female singers to entertain at a formal dinner. The synagogue library increased its holdings of works by liberal scholars such as Solomon Schechter and H.L. Ginzberg. Rabbi Green's contractual obligations specifically included teaching a consecration class for girls, which evolved into a bat mitzvah program. And in at least one case, Rabbi Green recommended the acceptance of membership from an applicant whose wife was not Jewish.

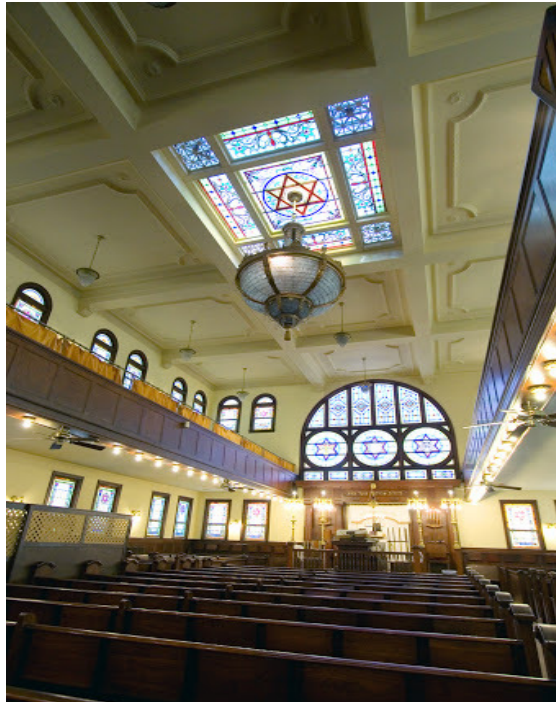
In its own advertisements and publications, Poile Zedek described itself as a "traditional" or "religious" congregation, without specific reference to either the Orthodox or Conservative movements. By the time of Rabbi Green's departure in 1967, the board members considered that the congregation had become half Orthodox and half Conservative in its theology. A vote was taken by the general congregation in order to determine the direction of the new rabbinic search, and they voted in favor of hiring a new Conservative rabbi.

The mid-1960s, however, intensified a change in the Jewish community's demographics which affected Poile Zedek significantly, and the fortunes of the congregation declined. Jewish population in the city of New Brunswick was decreasing, in a trend seen throughout the United States as the children of urban Jewish families moved to suburbs and created new suburban congregations. Many long-time members of Poile Zedek moved across the river to Highland Park, where younger families, inclined to favor a Conservative practice, joined the Highland Park Conservative Temple. Poile Zedek's difficulty in attracting new members was also exacerbated by the decline of the neighborhood, as much of New Brunswick's older areas deteriorated in the 1960s and 1970s, and old businesses moved out. Many long-term members were intensely loyal to Poile Zedek and maintained their memberships, but sustaining programs such as an independent religious school was no longer financially feasible, especially with the abundance of other Jewish organizations and synagogues in the area. In the mid-1980s, the congregation even discussed the possibility of merging

with Ahavas Achim, but in 1989 they voted to maintain their policy of mixed seating for men and women.

At the same time, New Brunswick began major redevelopment. This brought a new threat to Poile Zedek—the suggestion by developers to alter the façade of the beautiful building, or even to tear it down to make room for new construction. In 1985, the synagogue stood alone amid the rubble of the demolition of the surrounding Hiram Market district. The congregation decided to make an application to place the synagogue on the National Register of Historic Places in order to protect the building. The historic designation was completed in 1995.

Poile Zedek's survival from the mid-1980s onward was also due to the dedication and devotion of Rabbi Abraham Mykoff. Arriving to serve a synagogue surrounded by run-down businesses and dilapidated buildings, he went on to become, as he described himself, the congregation's "ombudsman." He dealt with legal challenges and obstacles as well as leading daily services and study groups. In 1993, the congregation voted to return to its orthodox roots by reinstating separate seating for men and women. In 1996, Rabbi Mykoff began efforts to extend the eruv from Highland Park to New Brunswick. Upon its completion, Poile Zedek's many members who lived across the river were able to attend Shabbat services in their historic sanctuary once again. The eruv also extended to the two New Brunswick hospitals, allowing orthodox Jews staying in town with ill family members to attend Shabbat services.



As the Hiram Market district was revitalized by new townhouses and trendy restaurants, Poile Zedek began outreach to visitors in need of a conveniently-located Shabbat destination. Students came from nearby Rutgers on Shabbat and holidays. The greatest impact came from a large number of Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Many of them, aided by Rabbi Mykoff, moved into a nearby high-rise apartment building for senior citizens, located only a block from the synagogue. Their presence enabled a daily minyan once again, and they also attended basic Hebrew and Judaism classes at the *shul*.

These changes, along with the tireless dedication of Rabbi Mykoff and the devotion of its many long-time members, contributed to the survival of Poile Zedek. But it was the devastating fire on October 23, 2015, which brought the attention of the entire Jewish world to New Brunswick. Local residents watched in horror as flames leapt from the roof and destroyed the interior of the historic synagogue. The fire was reported in newspapers across the entire country, and far away as Israel. Rabbi

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Denver Jewry Builds a Hospital: 1899

The arrival of masses of Eastern European Jewish Immigrants during the 1880s and beyond corresponded with a rapid increase in the number of tuberculosis cases in the United States. Known as the “white plague,” physicians at the time knew of only one treatment for TB: clean air and sunshine. Denver, with its mountain air and crisp climate, became a preferred destination for infected Jewish immigrants from places such as New York’s Lower East Side. Yet, Denver was ill prepared for the arrival of these poor Jews and their families.

It was the vision of Frances Wisebart Jacobs that made Denver a center for the organized treatment of Tuberculosis in the United States. The daughter of immigrants from Bavaria, Frances Wisebart was born in Harrodsburg, Kentucky in 1843. At age 20, she married Abraham Jacobs and the couple moved to Colorado. In 1872, Jacobs launched her first foray into organized Jewish charitable relief by forming the Denver Hebrew Ladies’ Relief Society, which assisted Denver’s small population of needy Jewish residents.

According to historian Marjorie Hornbein, writing in the American Jewish Historical Society’s Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia, Jacobs “realized that the problems of poverty, sickness, malnutrition and unsanitary living conditions were not limited to the Jewish community.” In 1874, she helped organize the Denver Ladies’ Relief Society, and in 1887, she joined with the city’s Congregational minister and the Catholic archdiocese to form the Charity Organization Society, forerunner of Denver’s community chest. Her efforts would later earn her the name, “Denver’s mother of charities.”

Jacobs left her most enduring mark in the area of tuberculosis relief. According to Hornbein, hundreds of TB victims from the industrial Northeast, Jewish and non-Jewish, who made their way to Denver in search of a cure found that “no facilities existed to give them treatment or even shelter.” Even worse, “Most of the Denver community ignored those who roamed the city coughing or hemorrhaging.” But not Jacobs. Unafraid to touch the ill, she would help them when they fell on the street, get them to a physician and pay for treatment. However, as there was no place for tubercular individuals to stay during treatment, many were transported to the local jail.

Jacobs insisted that the Denver community face the reality that the city was attracting needy tuberculosis victims. According to a Denver journalist at the time, “Everyone put down his pencil to hear her tell of the crucial need for a hospital. Although she could move any hardboiled editor, the response was always the same—“What you say is true, but this is the Queen City of the Plains, and we can’t blacken the name of the city” by making it a TB refuge.

Jacobs found an ally in the newly appointed rabbi of Denver’s Temple Emanu-el, William S. Friedman. In 1889, Friedman ar-

gued from his pulpit in favor of Jacob’s plan to build a Jewish-Sponsored tuberculosis hospital. In April of 1890, Denver’s Jewish Hospital Association was incorporated and, in October, a hospital cornerstone was laid. A month later, Frances Jacobs contracted pneumonia while visiting among the city’s poor. In early November, she died at the age of 49. The hospital’s trustees voted to name the hospital for her, and construction was completed in 1893.

A precipitous drop in silver prices that year caused a depression in the western mining states, and the Frances Jacobs Hospital stood empty for lack of operating funds. In 1895, Louis Anfenger of Denver, the district president of national B’nai B’rith, asked that organization to adopt the Denver tuberculosis hospital as a national project. According to Hornbein, “In 1899 the B’nai B’rith decided that the hospital in Denver was the responsibility of all American Jews and that the [Denver] lodge would supervise it.” On December 10, 1899, six years after Frances Jacob’s death, the hospital opened its doors.

The “National” remains one of America’s great research hospitals for respiratory diseases.

While a project of B’nai B’rith and the Denver Jewish community, the renamed National Jewish Hospital was non-denominational. Its first patient was a Swedish woman from Minnesota. To reflect its openness to the impoverished of every background, the hospital adopted the motto, “None may enter who can pay, and none can pay who enter.”

Another aspect of the hospital’s philosophy was more controversial. The trustees limited admissions to those who had incipient (early stage), rather than advanced, cases of TB. However, a large number of Orthodox Jews with advanced cases traveled to Denver in search of a cure. The National Hospital would not admit them. Further, the National Hospital, organized primarily by Reform German Jews, did not have a kosher kitchen. The Orthodox would not eat there even when admitted.

After a debate in which some members of the city’s German Jewish elite argued that Denver must not be swamped with “dying consumptives,” Dr. Charles Spivak, a physician sympathetic to the Eastern European faction, organized the Jewish Consumptives’ Relief Society, which built a new hospital for those in advanced stages of the disease. The new hospital served kosher food.

Today, tuberculosis is no longer epidemic—in part because of research done at the National Jewish Hospital. The “National” remains, however, after several evolutionary transformations, one of America’s great research hospitals for respiratory diseases.

In Colorado’s state capitol, there are 16 stained glass windows depicting important state pioneers. The only woman represented there is Frances Wisebart Jacobs.

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American Jewish Experience Lecture Series 2016

The American Jewish Experience Lecture Series will begin its 19th consecutive year in April. A complete schedule is given below. All lectures are open to the public. A donation of \$2.00 is requested at the door to help defray the cost of the series.

Series #1	
Jewish Family Services 52 Concordia Shopping Center (intersection Perrineville and Prospect Plains Rds) Monroe Township Lectures are held on the 2nd Monday of the month 10:00-11:30 a.m.	
April 12	Ronald Becker <i>Jewish New Jersey During the 1930s on the Brink of World War II</i>
May 10	Annette Wexler <i>A Nice Jewish Girl from the Bronx and New Jersey</i>
June 14	Judith Rosenthal <i>Our Jewish Past in Vintage Post Cards</i>
July 12	Stephen Eisdorfer <i>Terrorism, Immigration Restriction, and the Jews</i>
August 9	Howard Jacobs <i>The Catskills: An Insider's Perspective</i>
Sept. 13	Dr. Marcia Midler <i>"Notorious R.G.B.": Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg's Impact on American Culture</i>
Oct. 11	Dr. Joe Cohn <i>The Columbia Country Club: The Harry's Farm Experience</i>
Nov. 8	Fred Kaimann <i>How the Jews Invented the Internet</i>

**THANK YOU to Mr. and Mrs. Alex Banks
for rejoining the JHSCJ as PATRONS.**

Series #2	
Highland Park Conservative Temple/ Congregation Anshe Emeth 201 South 3rd Avenue, Highland Park Lectures are held on the 3rd Wednesday of the month 10:30 a.m. - 12:00 noon	
April 20	Ronald Becker <i>Jewish New Jersey During the 1930s on the Brink of World War II</i>
May 18	Annette Wexler <i>A Nice Jewish Girl from the Bronx and New Jersey</i>
June 15	Judith Rosenthal <i>Our Jewish Past in Vintage Post Cards</i>
July 20	Stephen Eisdorfer <i>Terrorism, Immigration Restriction, and the Jews</i>
August 17	Howard Jacobs <i>The Catskills: An Insider's Perspective</i>
Sept. 21	Dr. Marcia Midler <i>"Notorious R.G.B.": Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg's Impact on American Culture</i>
Oct. 19	Dr. Joe Cohn <i>The Columbia Country Club: The Harry's Farm Experience</i>
Nov. 16	Fred Kaimann <i>How the Jews Invented the Internet</i>

Jewish Family Services invites you to join in a glatt kosher lunch immediately following the HP lecture. Please call 732-777-1940 if you would like to stay for lunch.

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Mykoff was praised for his courage in rescuing one of the Torahs from the burning building, but nine other scrolls were destroyed, along with over 1,000 holy books and ritual objects. The cause of the fire was determined to be accidental. Although the shell of the building survived, the interior was gutted, and remains closed indefinitely five months later. As of this writing, the congregation is still hoping to someday rebuild the synagogue which was so instrumental in the growth of New Brunswick, and which is still so precious in the hearts of so many.

Sources for this article were found in the archives of the JHSCJ and the New Brunswick Daily Home News. Access to historical New Brunswick newspapers may be found at the online archives of the New Brunswick Free Public Library at <http://newbrunswick.archivalweb.com/reelSelector.php>.

Jewish Historical Society of Central Jersey
222 Livingston Avenue
New Brunswick, NJ 08901

(732) 249-4894
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