

# **THE JEWS IN LYNN: A RETROSPECTIVE**

**by Nathan Gass**

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2023

***In honor of the 350th Anniversary  
of the founding of the  
City of Lynn, Massachusetts***

Founded during the 1976 American Bicentennial, the North Shore Jewish Historical Society is a nonprofit voluntary organization. Its purposes are:

To promote increased public awareness of Jewish history and accomplishments on Massachusetts' North Shore.

To encourage scholarly study and collect and preserve primary evidence of this history.

To sponsor meetings, publications and other forms of information about North Shore Jewish history.

*"A story is the essential unit of our life, offering the magical imperatives of 'so it began' and 'so it came to an end.' A story encompasses us, justifies our stay, prepares our leaving."*

—Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers*

## THE JEWS IN LYNN: A RETROSPECTIVE

By Nathan Gass

### "The City of Lynn"

The North Shore Jewish community, home to more than 35,000 Jews, is one of the most accomplished and successful in the United States. Though little more than one hundred years old, it spans twenty-two cities and towns, supports a Hebrew day school, a Jewish Historical Society, numerous synagogues and temples, community organizations and charitable institutions. The center of Jewish population is now concentrated in Peabody, Swampscott and Marblehead. Thus, many people do not know that this dynamic young community found its roots in the City of Lynn.

A rural, Yankee town in the early nineteenth century, Lynn had little fertile farmland. Its coastal waters, unlike those of neighboring Salem, provided a poor harbor for trade. As a result, Lynn had a small population and an industry limited to local handicrafts and cottage industries.

But in 1838, the Eastern Railroad put Lynn on the map, linking it to Boston on the railroad's northward route to Maine. Transportation gave Lynn an outlet for expansion. It offered fledgling shoe production, heretofore a cottage industry, a growth path. As machinery replaced handicraft, and shoes were capable of manufacture at a faster pace, Lynn began to develop as an industrial center.

With the growth of its industry and population, Lynn also began to develop as a political and cultural center. The small shops of "cordwainers", -- or shoe workers, as they were known in the 1850's-- would

often appoint a reader, someone who would entertain them with readings from newspapers and books as they worked. Sharp debates often followed such readings, particularly on current events.

In the 1850's, people were especially agitated over the issue of slavery. Led by then resident Frederick Douglass, the fiery anti-slavery advocate, citizens met in the Lyceum Hall (then at the corner of Market and Summer Streets) to debate the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law. They passed a resolution that slaves who had breathed Massachusetts air and touched her soil "would never be dragged back to bondage."

It was this political activism which led The Boston Times to take note of Lynn. "The beautiful town of Lynn," the author wrote in 1855, "now made by railroad enterprise, a suburb of Boston, a famous place in New England and a favorite resort for people of an eccentric turn in mind. Perhaps there is in its limits more radicalism, more genuine red republicanism than could be found in any other place of the same size in our Commonwealth, and it is right to add intelligence can be found there also."

Lynn became known as an abolitionist center, an active political and cultural spot, and started attracting attention. The city also became known as a good place to make a living. Its 15,000 residents in 1850 (the year of Lynn's charter) were mostly native Americans of Protestant ancestry. But as Lynn moved from a simple artisan economy to a burgeoning industrial one, it began to swell with a population of semi-skilled workers. By the turn of the century, that population quadrupled--Lynn counted 65,000 residents in 1889--and triple deckers and massive brick factories transformed the landscape.

## "The First Jews"

The first Jewish name to appear in the Lynn City Directory occurs in 1856. Simon J. Weinberg was born in Poland, thirty years earlier, and came to Lynn in 1855. He lived at 209 Washington Street, with his wife, Hannah, and his children, Ezekiel, Fannie and Bertha, and operated a dry goods store at 6 Market Street.

In addition to being perhaps the first Jewish resident, Weinberg proved to be among the most active. He was a kindly and gentle man, with little formal education, but a keen and intuitive mind. He was also a born leader who took charge of community activities for the then twenty-five Jewish families who lived in the city. This creative care-taking made communal Jewish life possible for those who came after, and for it he later became known as the founder of the Lynn Jewish community.

Weinberg saw the need for basic institutions to ensure the survival of Jewish life in Lynn. Thus, in 1886, he helped to organize the first Jewish communal organization, The Lynn Hebrew Benevolent Society, whose charter directed some of the basic traditions of a Jewish community: attending to the sick and burying the dead. Weinberg also founded the "Litvishe Shule,"--still in existence today as Ahabat Sholom--and became its first president.

Other early Jewish settlers in Lynn lent a hand in the development of institutions. Solomon Wyzanski (arrived in 1858), Lewis Wolf (1867), Ezekiel Borofsky (1877), Aaron Slater (1878), Solomon Weinberg (1880), Maurice S. Ebersson (1880), Jacob Rachesky (1885), Reuben Basker (1884), and Morris Mossessohn (1883) were among the founding

settlers who participated in the growth of the community.

Lewis Wolf owned a delicatessen and Solomon Wyzanski, a general store. Another Jewish businessman went into the installment sales business. As a result of their success, we can assume that they found a warm welcome in Lynn. Bankers from old Yankee families were surprisingly accommodating to the foreign accents and broken English which accompanied their new clients. And the local citizenry, in the form of neighbors and customers to the stores, seems to have been friendly and helpful. Despite their inexperience and the language barrier, Jewish businessmen prospered in this new American enclave.

### "The Melting Pot"

Between 1880 and 1920, the City of Lynn became home to large numbers of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, then streaming out of Russia and Poland, seeking refuge in the United States. In the 1880s, Lynn's shoe factories required more than 10,000 workers. And many Jews, having learned a trade in "der heim," were perfect for the semi-skilled employment opportunities available. They arrived from the port of Boston, and even from New York, directed by relatives and friends who had heard of Lynn's prosperity.

Meanwhile, the institutions of the Jewish community were serving the new immigrants. The Benevolent Society went on to found a synagogue and to buy a burial ground in Wakefield. The members' wives got together and, in 1896, founded The Ladies' Hebrew Circle, a club devoted to helping the needy, tending the sick, and lending support to worthy community undertakings. The Benevolent Association also spawned several other chari-

table and social organizations over the years, such as the Hebrew Helping Hand Society (1906) and The Menorah Society (1912).

In but a few decades, the energetic young men and women who were first to arrive in Lynn created a rich Jewish life for their community. Moreover, many of the institutions they created are still functioning today. The Jewish Social Service Agency which they founded at the turn of the century is now the Jewish Family Service Agency, headquartered in Salem. The Lynn Hebrew School, the institution perhaps most responsible for the continuity of Jewish life through its education of thousands of Jewish children over the years, is today Cohen-Hillel Academy, a vibrant Jewish day school in Marblehead.

The Lynn Young Men's Hebrew Association, chartered in 1911, survives as the North Shore Jewish Community Center, the social center for countless Jews from babyhood through the senior years. Founded in 1904 as the Lynn Jewish Associated Charities, today's Jewish Federation of the North Shore is the life line to all the North Shore Jewish agencies and institutions. It is the Federation which collects and disburses charitable contributions, intertwining and building the essential links of Jewish life in this country and abroad.

Around the turn of the century, Lynn was ready to accommodate the large influx of Jews that was now streaming into "the goldene medina" (the United States was then known as "The Golden Land") at such a steady pace. Its Jewish institutions were in place, and its industry was advancing sufficiently to warrant sharp increases in the labor force.

This new wave of immigration came mostly

from Poland and Russia. Many fled to escape a wave of pogroms, some to better their economic conditions, and others came as a result of the abortive 1905 revolution in Russia. Whatever their motivation, they were sure to find employment in the shoe factories, where many jobs were available and language was no barrier. Friends and relatives already working there were only too glad to teach.

Though Jews were traditionally observant in "The Old Country", many saw religious life fall away. A new kind of Jew was being bred in America, and Lynn was no exception. This new type of immigrant was often non-religious, perhaps even a politically affiliated activist.

In the American melting pot, the new Jewish immigrant found fertile ground for his liberalism and plenty of freedom to express himself. He also found friendship in like-minded fellow-Jews with whom he had a political affinity. Jewish immigrants founded the Lynn Jewish Social Branch No. 2, a socialist club that held its meetings every Friday evening at 19 Blossom Street. With an excellent library and reading room, and a chairmanship which rotated--appropriately--at every meeting, this socialist club found a home in Lynn, a city long rooted in political liberalism.

Other socialist groups followed, including men's and women's branches of the "Arbeiter Ring" (starting with No. 6 in 1907, No. 48 in 1908, No. 68 in 1910 and No. 77 in 1911). Tied with these was the founding of the Labor Circle Credit Union in 1912.

### "The Jewish Ghetto"

Not every Jew in Lynn was a socialist. And not all took advantage of the rich cultural life that emerged from socialism, orthodoxy,

and the hybrid new forms of Jewish life which each spawned. Still most Jews chose to live together in a community which came to be known affectionately as "the Jewish Ghetto." Bounded by Commercial Street in the West and Market Street in the East, Jewish Lynn was a vigorous concentration of people united by a common bond.

Thursday night and Friday mornings were especially busy in the shopping district (at Summer and Blossom Streets), as Yiddishe Mamas purchased halvah and black bread, herring and challah at Jake Appel's grocery store. Some paused at Bluestein's, to have him slaughter a fresh chicken for the Sabbath, or at Slobodkin and Weinshel's kosher butcheries, where they would acquire both fine kosher meats and the uniquely Jewish gossip which made their Jewish world such a colorful place.

From sundown Friday until sundown Saturday, all the Jewish stores closed in observance of the Sabbath. But on Saturday nights, they were packed with shoppers, half of whom socialized on the sidewalks, while the other half bought the family supplies for the week. Reynold's Yard Good Store and Shultz Bros. Barber Shop attracted patrons and kibbitzers alike. The Co-operative Baker, established by a group of idealists to make sure there was bread for the workers, and other such Lynn Jewish institutions were the hub of a lively American Jewish universe.

Like other upwardly mobile ethnic groups, the Jews worked hard at their crafts and professions so that their children's generation would have an easier life. After the war, many college educated, American born Jews sought to abandon the three deckers and the urban Jewish ghetto for the comforts of suburbia. Many settled in Marblehead,

Swampscott, Peabody, Lynnfield, and assorted other North Shore locales, where they continued to build and support the institutions of the Jewish community. Few were shoe workers or Socialists. In increasing numbers, they and their children became acculturated white-collar capitalists.

And Lynn? The urban flavor of the Jewish neighborhood, its streets, synagogues, and institutions is now gone. Urban renewal has bulldozed most of it away. Other immigrant groups have come to claim Lynn as their haven. And fewer than 1,000 Jews, mostly the elderly, now live in the city.

Still, the memory of Jewish Lynn continues in the hearts and minds of those who remember it. And for those who do not, the thriving community institutions founded there will serve as reminders. The Jewish North Shore is rich in history and culture. All of it, we can be sure, began in Lynn.

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## **North Shore Jewish Historical Society**

### *Membership Application*

*I wish to become a member of the North Shore Jewish Historical Society*

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone No. \_\_\_\_\_

This history is being distributed in conjunction with an Historical Exhibit of photos portraying the development of the lives of the Jews of Lynn.

Partial funding for the exhibit was provided by the Lynn Arts Council/Massachusetts Arts Lottery.

The North Shore Jewish Historical is celebrating its 10th Anniversary. For information about membership, write or call the:

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