

Introduction

In the late nineteenth century, Jewish immigrants escaping persecution and miserable poverty in Eastern Europe and Russia began to arrive in Chelsea, Massachusetts. These newcomers transformed this small community on the Boston harbor. From a Protestant, pastoral suburb, Chelsea became a vibrant, working-class center of Jewish cultural, economic, social, and religious life.

By the 1930s, almost half of Chelsea's population was Jewish, earning the city the nickname "Little Jerusalem," rivaled only by New York City as the most populous Jewish city per capita in the United States. Most Jewish homes and persons on the streets spoke Yiddish. Rag and metal salvage businesses offered jobs and business opportunities to newly arrived immigrants. Small, family-owned stores provided a ladder for those aspiring to the middle class. The smells of deli foods, pickles, and freshly baked challah filled the air. Theatres, social clubs, schools, and synagogues (shuls) were essential community centers, strengthening ties and defining Chelsea's neighborhoods.

After World War II, upward socio-economic mobility and expanding American highways led to Jewish migrations from Chelsea. These second and third-generation immigrant families moved to surrounding suburban communities like Brookline, Marblehead, Swampscott, and other parts of the country. By the 1990s, Chelsea's Jewish community mainly existed in memories.

Jewish Chelsea Places

Photo 1. Dillon's Russian Steam Bath. Affectionately known as "the Shvitz" (Yiddish for "sweat"), Russian Jewish immigrant Israel Dillon opened Dillon's Russian Steam Bath on Chestnut Street in 1885. The longest-running Russian Steam Bath in the United States, Dillon's still boasts wet and dry steam rooms and offers a "platza" massage. A "platza" is a rigorous brushing with oak leaves soaked in oil, guaranteed to remove bodily toxins. Today, Dillon's remains a place to relax, refresh, and catch up with friends.

Photo 2. Chestnut Street Synagogue. Founded in 1907 as Congregation Paoli Zedek by Jewish Lithuanian immigrants, the synagogue was more popularly known as the Chestnut Street Litvak Shul. Vilna, Lithuania, was a significant Jewish cultural and educational center, so "Litvaks" were regarded as a "higher" class of Jewish immigrants. The Kangaroo Pouch Pre-School bought the synagogue in 1973, pleasing the few remaining congregants that their building would

Photo 3. Carpenters' Shul. Congregation Linas Zedek was founded in 1928 by Russian Ukrainian immigrants who were members of the local carpenters' union and became known as the Carpenters' Shul or the Chestnut Street Russhisha Shul, differentiating itself from its Litvak neighbor down the street. The Shul formed a Ladies Auxiliary in 1928 "to help the synagogue and every good cause." A church bought the synagogue in the 1980s.

Photo 4. YMHA-YWHA. The Young Men's Hebrew Association/Young Women's Hebrew Association (YMHA-YWHA) was founded in New York City in 1874 to serve Jewish immigrants' social, physical, intellectual, and cultural needs. Chelsea launched its chapter in 1903. Louis Brandeis came to address members at the Y's tenth anniversary in 1913 and to garner support for the growing American Zionist Federation.

By the 1930s, the YMHA/YWHA had grown and moved to a large building on Crescent Ave. The organization offered employment, housing, benevolent services, and educational and cultural classes there. The YMHA/YWHA youth programs were part of the American Zionist Association (AZA). The Y served meals for seniors, ran Bingo nights, and was the beloved social and cultural hub for generations of Chelsea's Jewish community, young and old, until the building's demolition in 1998.

Photo 5. Katz Bagel Bakery. Katz Bagel Bakery opened in 1938 when Harry Katz took over a failing bakery. Harry learned the bakery trade from his uncle, moved his family into the apartment over the bakery, and quickly grew a successful business. He supplied Chelsea with the iconic Jewish bagel, hand-rolled and hot from his ovens. In the 1970s, Harry created the "pizza bagel" to appeal to his Jewish and non-Jewish customers' American tastes. Today, still in the original location, Harry's son Richard continues the tradition with a wide selection of bagels, pizza bagels, desserts, and Richard's "hot dog bagel."

Photo 6. Murray & Eddie's Delicatessen. Returning home after World War II, brothers Murray, Eddy, and Sam Rosenberg opened a small deli. Store-brined corned beef, half-sour pickles, and homemade potato salad attracted a steady stream of "fressers" (Yiddish for hearty eaters). In the early 1960s, the brothers moved to a more prominent location at 339 Broadway. They expanded the menu to include more "American" dishes and began catering. The deli remained a political and social meeting place for Chelsea's leaders until closing in 1979.

Photo 7. Gordon's Theater. Gordon's Theater (later renamed Olympia) opened in 1910 on Broadway, Chelsea, offering early movies and "High-Class Vaudeville." With the Chelsea and the Strand Theaters, it was one of at least three cinemas in Chelsea's 20th-century

downtown. Owner Nathan Gordon later partnered with Louis B. Mayer, a young Russian-Jewish immigrant peddler in Chelsea, to open theaters across New England. The Chelsea Theater was across the street at 376 Broadway, and the Strand was in Chelsea Square, in the same block as Bloomberg's Furniture. By the 1960's, they were gone.

Photo 8. Chelsea Yiddish Theater. The Chelsea Theater housed a Yiddish Theater from 1916 to 1946 and provided Jewish audiences with a steady stream of singers, vaudeville troupes, comedians, plays, and movies, all in Yiddish. The Yiddish Theater's entertainment offered Chelsea's Jewish immigrants artistic vehicles to reflect on their tribulations, tensions, losses, and joys in a new country.

Photo 9. Chelsea Labor Lyceum. "Dedicated to the Workers' interests," the Chelsea Labor Lyceum was an arm of the Boston Workmen's Circle, a Jewish labor and political organization. In 1927, the Chelsea Labor Lyceum supported workers' rights in Chelsea and beyond. Sam Levin, an active member of the Boston Workmen's Circle, described the scene in Chelsea:

"Chelsea was loaded with shoe workers ... and you had leather workers in Peabody. The Workmen's Circle Center, the Chelsea Labor Lyceum, was the source of the activity in organizing unions. The workers were Italian, Armenian, Irish, Jewish -- we had many people who did picketing. We gave tons of food for the big national strikes -- we were famous for that. We also had a social hall where they could play cards. And we had a beautiful library run by some members."

Photo 10. Yeshiva Academy. Prominent Chelsea and Boston Orthodox Jews, fearing too many young people were defecting from Orthodoxy and not getting adequately educated in religion, opened Chelsea's Yeshiva, or Talmudical Academy, in 1941. Mayor Bernard L. Sullivan cut the ribbon at the dedication and encouraged the community to support the new School.

Photo 11. Onichty Society. The Onichty Society was formed in 1905 by Jewish immigrants from a town in Lithuania whose name, Anyksciai, translates in English as "Onichty." Initially, the Society offered sick and death benefits, a credit union, and a cemetery for its members. It may also have hosted social events and occasional religious services. Eventually, its services were available to all Jewish people in Chelsea and elsewhere.

For Society members who left Chelsea, banking trips to Onichty's credit union were a time to catch up on the latest Chelsea news, visit friends, and patronize area businesses to stock

up on favorite foods. Errands were not a chore if they included visiting Murray and Eddy's Deli for a corned beef sandwich. The Onichty Society closed in 1984. Today, the Jewish Cemetery Association of Massachusetts (JCAM) manages its Melrose cemetery.

The vacant lot next door (now used as a parking lot) was the former YMHA/YWHA home. The Society's wood frame building, now lost, might also have been the original Congregation Beth-El, organized in 1927. Its members disbanded after the stock market crash. Later, some of them reorganized as a prayer group and established Chelsea's Temple Emmanuel.

Photo 12. Chelsea Hebrew School. The Chelsea Hebrew School was founded in 1896 with 25 students by Moses and Gootie Berlin at their home on 23 Medford St. The School moved to a free-standing, impressive brick building across from City Hall in 1925 to accommodate the large influx of Jewish immigrants to Chelsea.

At its peak in the 1940s, The Hebrew School graduated over 400 young persons yearly. The Jewish presence in Chelsea remained strong after World War II but began to decline. The Hebrew School hosted a speech by Senator John F. Kennedy in 1958 on the occasion of a large parade and celebration of the State of Israel's 10th Anniversary held in Chelsea.

The Chelsea Hebrew School closed in 1979. Condominium developers bought the School's building in 1981.

Photo 13. Walnut Street Synagogue (Sanctuary). The first synagogue founded in Chelsea was Congregation Ohab Shalom on Winnisimmet Street in 1894. Its growing Jewish community became Congregation Agudath Sholom, moving into its grand building in 1909 after the Great Chelsea Fire of 1908 destroyed an earlier construction. The building, designed by Chelsea architect Harry Dustin Joll, is known as the "Queen of Synagogues" because of its spectacular, majestic sanctuary and elaborate hand-painted decorative ceilings and walls. It is one of the most intact synagogue interiors of its time in the Boston area. The Walnut Street Synagogue, home to one of the renowned early 20th-century ark and cabinet maker Sam Katz's magnificent Torah arks, is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Photo 14. Temple Emmanuel (Tudor Street Entrance). Known as Congregation Beth-El, when founded in 1927 on Crescent Avenue, Temple Emmanuel was established on Cary Avenue and Tudor Street in 1935 as a "modern" American Conservative synagogue. Making a home in a former Methodist and Baptist Church in Chelsea's quieter Cary Square-

Powderhorn Hill area, the new synagogue spoke to the needs of a younger, American-born generation. Temple Emmanuel broke with tradition, having men and women sit together to pray, including English in the liturgy, and celebrating Bat Mitzvahs for young girls.

Other religious groups used the 60 Tudor Street property where Temple Emmanuel continues to worship today. Between the mid-1850s and early 1870s, Chelsea's Second Baptist Church built the two-wing Cary Square structure. In 1904, a Methodist Episcopal congregation in Chelsea purchased the property. In 1935, they sold the property to the Jewish community's Congregation Beth El prayer group, which founded Temple Emmanuel.

Photo 15. Society for Visiting the Sick. Charity and good deeds are central tenets of Judaism. In 1919, Mrs. Lena Goldberg began Chevra Bikur Cholim, Society for Visiting the Sick, and started taking elders into her home on Lafayette Avenue.

Over the 20th century, the organization grew into several senior care homes. Today, under the united name of Chelsea Jewish Lifecare, it is one of the foremost healthcare organizations in the region. Its operations include the Katzman Center for Living on the original Lafayette Avenue site, facilities on Admiral's Hill in Chelsea, and others in Peabody and Winthrop. The organization's mission has expanded to include rehabilitation, skilled nursing services, and residences for older people and people with disabilities.

Photo 16. Shefshick's Kosher Meat Market. This butcher shop was at 35 Central Avenue in Chelsea. Gittel Shefshick took over the store in the 1920s when the owner was planning to close. A widow with four children, Gittel needed to buy the store or be out of work. Gittel came from Russia with her husband Besha, who died in Chelsea during the flu epidemic of 1916. Three of her children – Alec, Israel, and Minnie worked in the store. They opened a summer store in Old Orchard Beach in the 1940s to serve the Jewish community and hotels with kosher dining rooms. The original store, sold in the 1970s, eventually became a Chinese Restaurant. (Source: Walnut Street Synagogue, Courtesy of Bernard Blotner).

Source: [Jewish Chelsea Tour & Map | Chelsea Prospers](#) Ellen Rovner