

Jewish Chelsea / Jewish America: Dreams and Realities

Norman H. Finkelstein

*A speech delivered at the Temple Emmanuel Jewish Chelsea History Exhibit
on April 19, 2009*

© Norman H. Finkelstein, 2009, All Rights Reserved

Let's face it. There are two kinds of people in the world: those who grew up in Chelsea and those deprived souls who did not. We really believe that the Chelsea experiences and connections that bond us are so special they could not be duplicated anywhere else. And you know what? We are right. Chelsea is not just a defined geographic space, but a state of mind. Yet if we step back a minute to examine the history of Jews in America, our Chelsea story is but a microcosm of the larger American Jewish experience, but with our own distinctive differences.

Jews have been part of the American fabric since 1654, but the first known Jew in Chelsea, Nathan Morse, doesn't appear until 1864. By 1890, there were 82 Jews, the vanguard of the "great wave" of immigrants from Eastern Europe. Between 1881 and the outbreak of World War I in 1914, nearly two million Jews freely abandoned the grinding poverty, anti-Semitism, and pogroms of Russia and Eastern Europe to seek new lives in America. By 1910, the number of Jews in Chelsea had grown to slightly more than 11,000, or one-third of the total population. The numbers would probably have been larger had it not been for the Great Chelsea Fire of 1908, which dispersed many Jewish residents to other localities while destroying the recently opened Elm Street and nearly completed Walnut Street shuls. Even so, by the 1930s, Jews constituted nearly one-half of the city's population.

The majority of Jews in America until the twentieth century were Reform, but the newcomers to places like Chelsea were Orthodox, if not in actual practice, then in self-identification. Not that every new immigrant was pious: economic demands often trumped piety by forcing them to work on the Sabbath. The Reform establishment was mostly anti-Zionist, but the newcomers were not.

In 1915, the Federation of American Zionists held its annual convention in Boston. In a break with tradition, the entire convention moved to Chelsea for a day where an open-air session was held to allow the mass of Chelsea Jews to participate. Addressing the throng, Louis D. Brandeis, who that same year would become the first Jew appointed to the United States Supreme Court, said:

"We have come to Chelsea. We have come because, in Chelsea, Jews constitute a larger percentage of the population than in any other city of the United States: because the Jews of Chelsea have, by their conduct, given to the Jewish name a good reputation here and throughout the Commonwealth: because one of our great leaders has told us that nowhere in the wide world had he been given more sympathetic and intelligent

attention than by your city.”

From the beginning, the Jews of Chelsea established religious and cultural institutions to support their community. In that same speech, Brandeis spoke about a visit he made to Chelsea two years earlier to attend a banquet given by the Young Men’s Hebrew Association, which, he recalled, had a membership then of about 300. Chelsea, in its 1.8 square miles, once housed eighteen synagogues. Just like the old joke where a shipwrecked Jew is found alone on a desert island with two shuls. “The other one I would never step into.”

The shuls had official Hebrew titles, of course, but everyone knew them by special names: the “litvische” shul, the carpenter’s shul, the “Russische” shul — *Litvaks*, *Russische*, *Polyakin* and *Galitzianer* thought of “the other” as being beneath them, intellectually and culturally. Even those in the real *shmatte* business — before the term became synonymous with Ralph Lauren, Donna Karan, and *Vogue* — had their own place of worship, the *shmitterske* shul. Temple Emmanuel was founded by Americanized children of immigrants as an alternative to “old-fashioned” Orthodoxy. Yet, it was the Yiddish language, with local permutations, that united them all. In the 1920s and 1930s, the language of Broadway was Yiddish, or for those who considered themselves “real Americans,” English with a thick Yiddish accent. Wherever you went, there was an undefined Jewish “feel” about the city.

Per square mile, there were more Jews living in Chelsea in the 1920s than almost any other place in America except for New York City. That meant Jewish food stores, kosher butchers, bakers and delis. Yet, like other American Jews, by the second and third generations, it was time to move up and out. In this, Chelsea was no different than New York’s Lower East Side. Yet, unlike other urban American Jews, Chelsea Jews did not live in a self-proscribed ghetto. Their neighbors were Polish, Italian, and Irish families who all shared the same economic and assimilationist problems. They understood and respected one another. By and large, the children of Jewish immigrants went to college, became professionals, or opened businesses. They wanted better lives for their children and gravitated to the suburbs. There, based on their own experiences, they set up their versions of Jewish life, more integrated into the American mainstream. The children of those who founded the Orthodox shuls of Chelsea were now the “machers” in suburban Conservative and Reform temples.

In the minds of immigrant Jewish parents, from the beginning, the path to success for their children led through schoolhouse doors. They embraced the opportunity of free public education with a vengeance. From the classrooms of Shurtleff, Carter, and Williams, through the halls of Chelsea High School, the children of Yiddish-speaking immigrants went on to universities -with not an insignificant number to Harvard — to become successful professionals.

Mary Antin, who lived with her family first on Arlington Street and later on Bellingham Street, became one of America’s best-known writers. In her classic 1912 book, *The*

Promised Land, she tells lovingly of her Williams School education.

“It is not worthwhile to refer to voluminous school statistics to see just how many “green” pupils entered school last September, not knowing the days of the week in English, who next February will be declaiming patriotic verses in honor of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, with a foreign accent, indeed, but with plenty of enthusiasm. It is enough to know that this hundred-fold miracle is common to the schools in every part of the United States where immigrants are received. And if I was one of Chelsea’s hundred in 1894, it was only to be expected since I was one of the older of the “green” children, and had had a start in my irregular schooling in Russia, and was carried along by a tremendous desire to learn, and had my family to cheer me on.

There were about half a dozen of us beginners in English, in age from six to fifteen. Miss Nixon made a special class of us and aided us so skillfully and earnestly in our endeavors to “see-a-cat,” and “hear-a-dog-bark,” and “look-at-the-hen,” that we turned over page after page of the ravishing history, eager to find out how the common world looked, smelled, and tasted in the strange speech. The teacher knew just when to let us help each other out with a word in our own tongue — it happened that we were all Jews — and so, working all together, we actually covered more ground in a lesson than the native classes, composed entirely of the little tots.”

In Europe, a young Jewish child’s religious education was a normal part of growing up. It usually revolved around the one-room school — the *heder*, where the *melamed*, the teacher, taught the basics of the prayer book and the Bible by rote and by threat. The *heder* was not successfully transplanted to America. The focus of American Jews was on the public school education of their children. Since the majority lived in communities with high Jewish populations, reminders of their religious and ethnic culture constantly surrounded them. Chelsea was no different. We got our hallah on Central Avenue from the Chelsea Home or Revere Bakeries, our vegetables and fish from Nataupsky’s or Goldstein’s, pickled herring and lox from Podrachik’s or later at the smokehouse, kosher meat from Shefshicks or Keimachs, bagels from Katz’s, groceries from Slaine’s or Promisel’s, and toiletries from Allen’s Cut-Rate. At Pressman’s Deli or Shapiro’s Bel-Del, you could *fress* the day away.

Afterward, as you developed heart-attack symptoms, you could turn to Drs. Clayman, Kornetsky, and Karp for prescriptions you filled at Margolis’s, Turkanis’s, or Turk’s. I got my hair cut by Mr. Pincus, my boy’s husky size suit from Wolper’s, and my shoes at Katzman’s or Harry’s shoe stores. And in the days before the Massachusetts Lottery, you could even place illegal numbers bets with Louie the Bookie. Everyone was familiar by osmosis with religious practices and customs — even the most nonobservant and even the non-Jewish. Formal Jewish education was available at The Chelsea Hebrew School and at smaller religious schools at Temple Emmanuel and the Shurtleff Street Shul. Private bar mitzvah tutors sometimes mirrored the European *heder* model with rapped knuckles included. Religious education generally ended at bar mitzvah, with a handful of students continuing on at the Prozdor High School at Hebrew College. Who needed a formal Jewish education when you were surrounded by Jews, Jewish

symbols, and Jewish life? Despite devalued Jewish education with a focus on secular education, a number of Chelsea-ites went on to become Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform rabbis.

Like other American Jews, Chelsea Jews were early and active participants in political and military life. They were elected to local government, and, as early as the 1920s, served on the Board of Aldermen and the School Committee. Ironically, at a time when Jews comprised a majority of the city's population, there never was a Jewish mayor. It took until the early 1960s, by which time the Jewish population had markedly decreased, to elect the first Jewish mayor. Also, like other American Jews, Chelsea Jews fought and died beyond their percentage of the total population in America's wars- in Chelsea's case, beginning with World War I.

Chelsea Jews have been involved in all aspects of American life, from entertainment and sports to academia, from science to politics. In the 1920s, Americans followed the boxing exploits of Chelsea-ite Red Chapman (real name Morris Kaplan). In the 1960s we laughed at the humor of Arnold Stang. We can at least partially claim ownership of Louis B. Mayer before he headed off to Hollywood. We reveled in the accomplishments of other Jews who went on to make significant contributions in almost any field you can imagine, from law and medicine to business and science. To mention even a fraction of Chelsea success stories would take more time than we have. We can be proud of our accomplishments. Like other American Jews, Chelsea Jews began the twentieth century as learners of American culture and ended the century as its creators. Today, we look back upon our Chelsea experience with fondness and nostalgia. It shaped who we are and, through us, serves as the foundation for future generations of proud Americans whose religious and cultural legacy begins right here.

What a country!

Two-time National Jewish Book Award winner, the late Norman H. Finkelstein, was the author of eighteen non-fiction books. His latest releases were the *JPS Guide to American Jewish History* (Jewish Publication Society), *Plastics* (Benchmark/Marshall Cavendish), and *Three Across: The Great Transatlantic Air Race of 1927* (Boyds Mills). He held undergraduate and graduate degrees from both Boston University and Hebrew College. He was a retired Brookline Public Schools librarian. He continued as a long-time faculty member in the Prozdor Department of Hebrew College, where he received the Louis Hilson Memorial Award for the Advancement of Jewish Education. We are grateful that Mr. Finkelstein allowed us to publish this piece.