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Some scenes from life in the Jewish agricultural colonies

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Our Place—The Blue Hill Avenue Area

by Deanna Mirsky

They were really a single neighborhood—the Jewish areas of Dorchester, Mattapan, and Roxbury—strung along the spine of Blue Hill Avenue. The district was small enough that its residents regularly walked from one end to the other to see movies, visit *shuls* or friends, attend meetings, shop, play ball. At its peak, the Jewish population of this district was some seventy thousand, very dense when you consider that most lived in a strip only a few blocks wide and less than two miles long. Boston has never had a more totally Jewish neighborhood, with every variety of organization, business, school, and synagogue, and with a rich political, secular, and club life as well. It was a neighborhood with many workers, but also wholesale and retail businessmen and professionals, both “old” Americans and new immigrants.

Jewish Institutions and Businesses



Scan of illustration in *The Synagogues of Dorchester* by Richard Heath, Sept. 2004, showing Home for Destitute Jewish Children, 150 American Legion Highway, photo by Richard 1990s.

The Hecht House community center, originally an orphanage, served the whole community, and so did the YMHA (Young Men’s Hebrew Association) on Seaver Street in Roxbury. [Ed. For a “Guide to the Records of Boston YMHA-Hecht House” see tinyurl.com/Hecht-House-Records.] Dentists, credit unions, *landsmanschaften* (fraternal organizations of immigrant Jews from the same region), etc. were often strategically located in the middle of the area, as was the G&G delicatessen, whose street frontage held platforms where political figures had held forth at least from the time of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Ward 14, the political district that covered the greatest part of the area, had tens of thousands of voters by 1948 and was overwhelmingly Jewish. Roxbury’s Ward 12, east of Grove Hall, remained heavily Jewish in the early 1950s and had a Jewish state representative. Ward 18, which ran roughly from Almont Street to Mattapan Square and the Milton line, had some Jewish population, and the holder of the state senate seat that included it and Ward 14 was often Jewish, but on its own the Jewish population was never big

enough to hold a state rep seat there.

I don’t know exactly how many *shuls* (synagogues) there were in the area. *Shuls* moved in, moved out, merged, split, took over space, rented space. In the fifties, there were a



Beth El Synagogue on Fowler Street

few big *shuls*: Blue Hill Avenue, Mishkan Tefila, and Crawford Street in Roxbury; Beth El (Fowler Street), Nightingale Street, Agudath Israel, and Hadrath Israel in Dorchester; Beth Hillel (an add-on to the Dorchester-Mattapan Hebrew School) and Kehillath Jacob in Mattapan. There were actually lots more, in houses or small buildings or shared spaces, at different times. Carol Clin-gan’s chart on the JGSGB website (jgs.gb.org/pdfs/MassSynagogues.pdf) is definitely helpful in untangling their history. Many Roxbury *shuls* had already merged or left by the 1950s as the population slid southward or took off for Brookline, Brighton, and Newton.

Three community Hebrew Schools served the neighborhood, all teaching the Bureau of Jewish Education’s Hebrew-in-Hebrew curriculum, notably strong in both Hebrew and Jewish history. The Workmen’s Circle had its own school, and there were others, such as Fessenden Street. Almost every child attended some sort of Jewish school for at least a few years, and every child, even the most secular (with the possible exception of the few communist families) stayed out of school for every single day of all the Jewish holidays.

The Woodrow Avenue area, a couple of blocks behind the G&G, was almost like a reservation for *shuls*. At least three synagogues—Russian, Lithuanian, and just *frum*—looked at each other across Woodrow Avenue, which was closed to traffic on the holidays, full of dressed-up boys playing nut games and sometimes throwing nuts.

Leaving aside the many retail businesses, most people worked in town, often in the garment industries and wholesale businesses that were located in the South End or near North Station. Family doctors and dentists had neighborhood offices, but specialists were located in town or in the Back Bay or Brookline. Lower Roxbury had some manufacturing also, for example the Kasanoff’s bakery, but unless you count the Erie Street bagel bakery or Franklin Field Lumber, there was no industry here.

The wonderful Bromley Atlas of insurance maps of Dorchester and Mattapan from 1918 and 1933, available at the Boston Public Library (BPL), shows clearly what areas were developed by then and who owned both the undeveloped land and the built-up areas. You can consult these online, but it may be easier to look at the actual books. You might find your old friends or relatives on the lots; you’ll definitely gain an appreciation for how the area changed as it became more Jewish. [Ed. There is a helpful file entitled “Finding Historic Maps online” at tinyurl.com/Finding-Boston-Maps, or you can go directly to mapjunction.com/bra to view maps.]

The Dorchester Historical Society (dorchesterhistoricalsociety.org) also has lots of interesting material, and the Dorchester Atheneum (dorchesteratheneum.org) has pictures of a number of synagogues. The Atheneum site also has pictures and historical materials on area schools, including very interesting reader contributions on the schools and their neighborhoods, and it is also well supplied with maps, often easier to use than the BPL versions.

Franklin Park and Franklin Field

The Park and the Field were breathing spaces and escape hatches, since most residents lived in apartments with tiny or nonexistent yards. Franklin Park—Boston’s biggest green space and the last big city park project of New York Central Park’s designer Frederick Law Olmsted—was built in the 1880s, just before Jews began flooding into Roxbury. It attracted fashionable development along its borders. Seaver Street, Temple Mishkan Tefila, and the YMHA commanded the park’s

northern edge, directly across from the rose gardens. The Jamaica Plain end featured a golf course and originally a pond. By 1913, a zoo had opened, its animal houses dispersed along a promenade; eventually a children's zoo was added. The more commercial Blue Hill Avenue side featured a grand entrance, refectory, and lion house, across from the Franklin Park Theater, a car showroom, and restaurants.

The park was a welcome escape from home, and often from *shul*. Small children might be taken to visit the lions after services. Teenagers and friends would visit the *shul* that this one's grandmother, or that one's uncle, frequented; they would exchange greetings and sit and listen for a while until someone came along and demanded their seat. Then they went out and moved on, to the park, the field, or both.

On the High Holidays, teenagers would invariably wind up at the celebrated stone wall that ran in front of Franklin Field's tennis courts. The holiday teenage hangout for the neighborhood was frequented even by young people whose families had moved to the suburbs, and a Franklin Field Association (franklinfieldassociation.org) still exists, with many of its members now living in Florida and Arizona.

Originally a colonial muster field, the Franklin Field predates even Ben Franklin himself. Outside of holiday times, the field was filled with tennis and baseball players and was flooded for winter ice skating of a rough sort (little if any effort was made to keep the ice smooth). The original area shrunk somewhat as a veterans' housing project was built after World War II, and the field grew scruffier as one moved towards the railroad tracks and Codman Square. Other, smaller parks were also enjoyed by those who lived near them. Mattapan had the Almont Street Playground, also flooded for skating, and with a nice wooded hill. A longish park with ball fields ran between Norfolk Street and the tracks. But neither defined the neighborhood in the way Franklin Field and Franklin Park did.

Up and Down the Avenue

Almost the whole of Blue Hill Avenue, from Grove Hall to Mattapan Square, was a big shopping district from north to south. Everything you needed could be bought here and all types of professional services procured, though for the most part residents shopped in town as well. Furniture stores and clothing stores mingled with kosher stores, cafeterias, doctors, dentists, and cleaners. Herring and pickle barrels sat outside grocers. Credit unions and savings banks and *landsmanschaften* had offices.

The psychic center of the avenue was somewhere around the large G&G Deli, in front of which every politician, starting with FDR, had to speak. The deli was the prime neighborhood hangout, headquarters



The G&G Delicatessen

of political and criminal activity alike. The all-night New Yorker cafeteria sold very traditional food—such as roast tongue and heavy latkes with piles of rye bread—to a combination of old men, cops, taxi drivers, and always a table full of deaf people signing.

Rogers Drugs and Mickey’s poolroom attracted teenage boys, loitering on corners trying to look like Elvis. Brown’s Jewelers, a mezuzah and mogen-david mecca, jostled the Morton Bakery, home of sponge cake with an amazing crust. Across the “Avenue” (Blue Hill Avenue), the Misses Karabel’s ballet school and elocution studio shared space with the Young Israel synagogue, all of whose members seemed, as if sharing the premises was not incongruous enough, ancient. The Workmen’s Circle, which ran a Yiddish school, was nearby. Near the Morton Theater was the Grove Hall Savings Bank, above it the Hebrew Bakers’ Union, and just down Morton Street the Chez Vous roller rink.

Moving south, but still above Morton Street, Mattapan offered a kosher deli, the American Kosher (which sold whole spit-roasted turkeys), Mr. Glickman’s butcher shop (noted for the gigantic orange cat in its sunny window), the Wellington bakery, a grocery with herring barrels, a fruit store, a fish market, a hairdresser, a Chinese laundry, Hi’s (Wellington) drug-store (which sold ice cream), and another pharmacy near Walk Hill Street (which purveyed hot roasted nuts). The Cape Kosher, forerunner of Brookline’s Butcherie, featured marvelous knishes, as did the Morton Plaza wedding hall on Wellington Hill.

The remaining stretch of Blue Hill Avenue, running down to Mattapan Square and the Neponset River, where Boston meets Milton, was essentially part of the neighborhood. The amazing Oriental Theater featured clouds, Buddhas, and stars. Mattapan Square had many Jewish businesses, including Yale Electric (which has survived and prospered elsewhere in Dorchester) and some dress shops, but not the ethnic stores that existed further north.



The Oriental Theater, with streetcar



This article will continue in the next issue with details about each of the three neighborhoods: Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan.

Editors’ Note:

The historic Vilna Shul on Beacon Hill offers on its lower level an exhibit on the life of Jews in Boston. Among the many very interesting panels, there are three highlighting the communities of Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan. Well worth a visit.

THE VILNA SHUL
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