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משפחת א.ל. מכנס
ברקע צילום של ר' אשר-זליג בלום

The Family of Aron Leib Machnes, founders of Petach Tikvah, in Ottoman Palestine, circa 1890. The photo in the photo shows Rav Asher-Zelig Blum, who was living in Chicago at the time.

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Chelsea, Massachusetts (Part One)

by Deanna Mirsky

Chelsea is unique: a small (less than two square miles), intense, tightly packed industrial city just north of Boston. It borders Everett, Revere, and the Charlestown and East Boston sections of Boston. The Jewish population and life of all these towns has been tied closely together. After nearly a hundred and fifty years, it is barely hanging on as a Jewish place.

Spurred on by city crackdowns on overcrowding in Boston's North End, just as immigration from Eastern Europe was accelerating, Chelsea's Jewish settlement grew quickly from the 1890s on. Its Jewish population peaked just before World War I, despite the impact of the terrible 1908 fire, and remained high through the 1950s, when movement to the suburbs became a flood. At one point the percentage of Jews in Chelsea—nearly half the city's population—was said to be the highest in America.

Close to downtown Boston, and a stone's throw from East Boston (where Boston's immigration station was located) and Charlestown, Chelsea enjoyed good transportation, while its many industries also provided local employment.

By 1890, Chelsea's industries included shoes, stoves, furnaces, hoses, art tiles, furniture, printing, wire, rubber, blacking (shoe polish), and shipbuilding. Income from food preparation industries amounted to \$600,000; iron goods, \$400,000; leather, \$300,000; wooden goods, \$250,000, and the aggregate income from manufacturing, \$4.5 million. In addition to working in many of those industries, Jews were also butchers, bakers, carpenters, teachers, and junk dealers, and they ran many stores and small businesses within the city and elsewhere.

Chelsea's Jewish community was widely mixed economically and socially. There were rabbis (even a Hasidic *rebbe*), doctors, pharmacists, jewelers, sorters of textile waste (like Norman Finklestein's father), ragmen (like the Garmils and Gasses), small grocers and jacks-of-all-trades (like the father of

the famous author Mary Antin, who ran a lemonade stand at Revere Beach, then a string of failed grocery stores). All lived cheek-to-jowl, although there were definitely richer and poorer sections of the city.

Chelsea native Adena Geller remembers that it was no problem to walk from one end of Chelsea to another on a holiday, even on to Revere, dropping in on the *shuls* of aunts and grandparents and your friends' aunts and uncles and cousins. Reva Newton Fishlyn, principal emeritus of Newton's Temple Emanuel Hebrew School, recalls that some areas of the city fea-



tured—as they do now—tightly packed apartments and three deckers (three-story wooden housing with one or two apartments per floor), while other houses stood in yards full of fruit trees left over from old orchards.

Reva's parents and other relatives—her father was a jeweler who designed and executed custom work for the clients of exclusive Boston firms—moved in 1917 from East Boston to Chelsea's Orange Street. They considered Chelsea a step up in the world, with better air than East Boston could offer. It was certainly an advance from conditions in Boston's West End and North End, offering roomier housing, good transportation into Boston, and a fast trolley ride to Revere Beach, where Chelseaites hung out in their own preferred section. At the time they moved to Chelsea, it felt like a Yankee city. As years passed, it took on a more Irish, Italian, Jewish, and Polish—and eventually Black and Hispanic—flavor.

The Magic Ragmen

Chelsea's Jewish industry above all was the rag trade. Although Jews dealt in waste textiles in many places, Chelsea was the prime address of the rag business in New England, and the collection and repurposing of rags utilized connections among New England Jews, linking those who collected, sorted, redistributed, remanufactured, and re-used rags. It didn't require much capital to get started; a horse and a wagon was all it took. The website at www.paulgassfamily.com describes the Gass family, which engaged in the rag business before moving on to the shoe business. For more information about the rag business itself, see tinyurl.com/5t22uqw

Some of the Chelsea dealers—always known as rag men—prospered (in the imagination of other Boston Jews they were all fabulously wealthy), and the area of two- and three-story buildings where Chelsea's two major fires were touched off was known ironically as “Millionaire's Row.” The rag dealers even had their own synagogue, the so-called “Shmatarske Shul” (*shmate* means rag in Yiddish) on Third Street. Curiously, though all my informants knew about this synagogue, none quite knew which of the many Chelsea *shuls* it was. Eugene Gadon identified it for me after consultation with Rabbi Nohum Cywiak, who was rabbi of the nearby Elm Street Shul. Both *shuls* burned down in the 1973 fire (after which Rabbi Cywiak became rabbi at the Walnut Street Shul).

Louis B. Mayer dealt in scrap metal in Chelsea for a time, but his business failed, and he turned to running movie theaters, then producing movies instead. World War II was a boon to the rag and other junk industries. Large accumulations of junk remained stored for years after the War as a slow decline set in.

Julian Garmil described to me how his father's rag business worked. Collectors would bring in piles of rags from all over. Sorting the old clothes into piles of different materials and qualities and baling



The Walnut Street Shul, Hagudath Sholom, home of the oldest congregation in Chelsea. Erected after the previous shul was destroyed in the 1908 fire



them up provided work for many sorters. Chelsea's rag dealers had regular relationships with a variety of businesses throughout New England, many of them Jewish, that bought their sorted rags. Some old clothes could be sold "as is" for second-hand use, but most were destined for reprocessing. Paper money, made by Crane Paper in Dalton, Massachusetts, was one use. Rewoven textiles for cleaning was another product. Factories made yarn from reprocessed woolens and wove it into cloth again after removing threads and other non-woolen materials via a carbonization process. However,

after synthetics began to be incorporated into cloth, carbonization could no longer be used.

The Chelsea Fires

Not surprisingly, Chelsea's signature events are fires. The Chelsea Historical Society website has a timeline of Chelsea's many fires (www.olgp.net/chs/firedepartment/firetimeline.htm), and the home page (www.olgp.net/chs) has links to extensive information about and pictures of the two major conflagrations of 1908 and 1973.

The Great Chelsea Fire of 1908 was started by rags drying on Second Street, near the Everett line. Those burning rags started a blaze at a nearby wax and blacking factory and then spread to a tar factory. Meanwhile, another blaze started 100 yards away at a rag business on Third Street between Elm and Maple. The blazes spread across the city. Almost 500 acres and about half the city's buildings were burned, and 18,000 people were made homeless. Nineteen people lost their lives.

In the 1930s there were about 20,000 Jewish residents in Chelsea out of a total population of almost 46,000. Given the area of the city, Chelsea may well have had the most Jews per square mile of any city outside of New York.

Though many Chelsea residents left for other towns after the fire, the population grew back quickly, and the rag shops returned to their old places. By the time of the 1973 blaze, the rag business was on its way out. The dangerous rag-storage shacks were being purchased by redevelopment agencies, but demolition and redevelopment of the shops had not yet begun. The Garmil's building was still in use, and Julian remembers that it could barely bear the weight of the textiles stored within. (It actually survived the '73 fire but was demolished shortly afterward.)

(Part 2 of the Jewish history of Chelsea will appear in the next issue.)



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