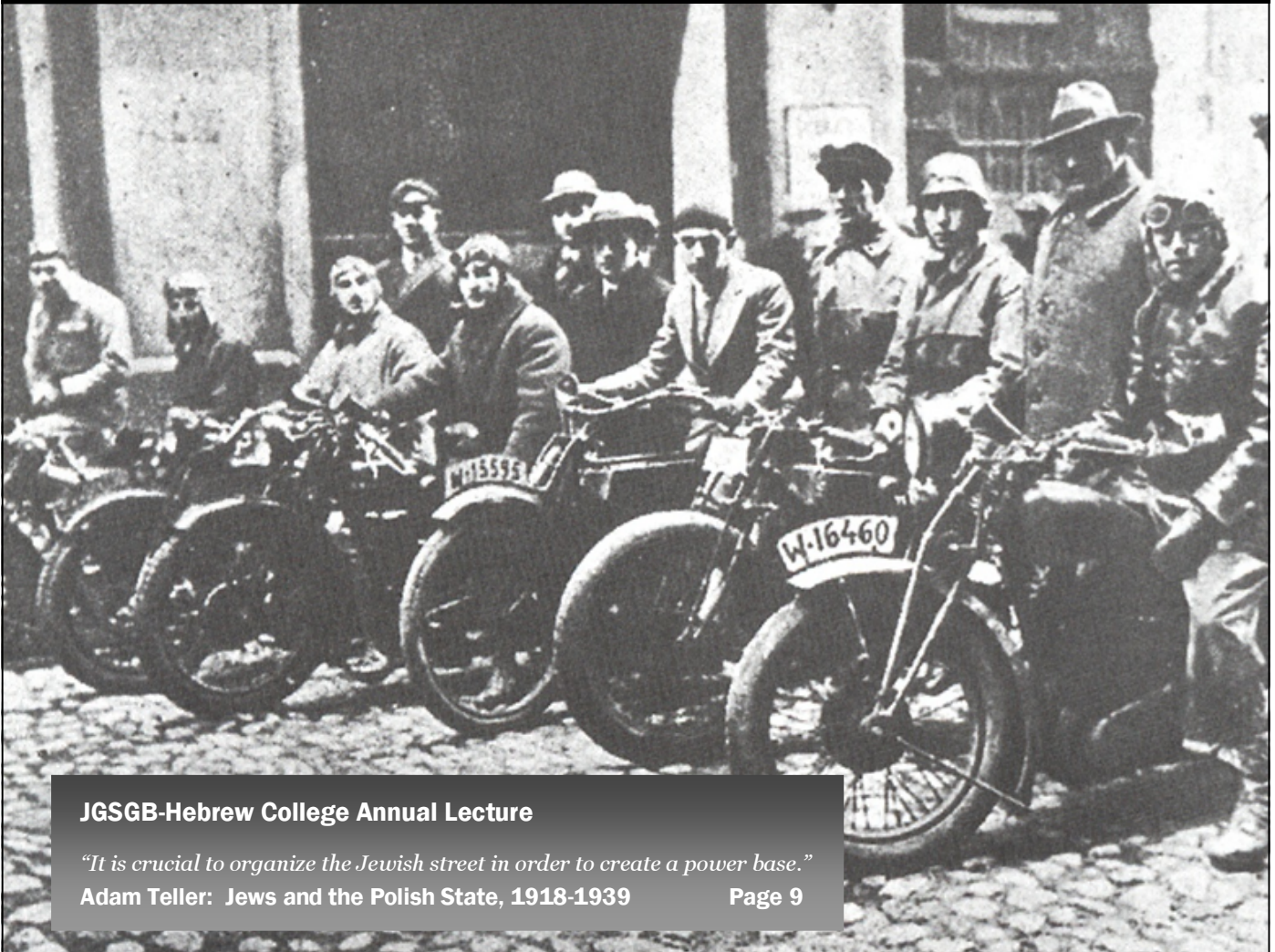


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JGSGB-Hebrew College Annual Lecture

"It is crucial to organize the Jewish street in order to create a power base."

Adam Teller: Jews and the Polish State, 1918-1939

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Chelsea, Massachusetts (Part Two)

by Deanna Mirsky

This is the second and final installment on Jewish life in Chelsea, a city immediately north of Boston. In the first part, Deanna Mirsky described the Jewish population, at one point said to be the highest percentage of any American city (almost half the city's population in 1930), the rag business that many were involved in, and the impact of the many fires, especially the conflagrations of 1908 and 1973.

Chelsea had everything a traditional Jewish community needed: many synagogues, transportation to town, kosher food stores, smoked fish, delis, a beach a short ride away.

Many synagogues to choose from



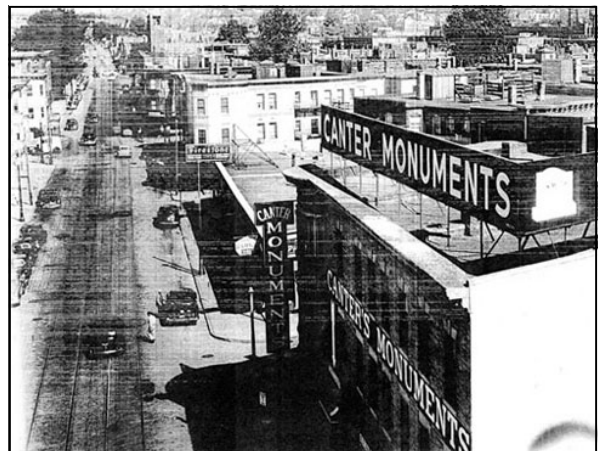
The Third Street Shul, Beit Hamidrash Hagodol, built in 1912 in Chelsea

The number of shuls in Chelsea at its heyday, though debated, was probably in the teens. I have the impression that they were more numerous than in the Dorchester-Roxbury-Mattapan area. [On the other hand, someone recently told me they had attended a little shul just six blocks from where I used to live that I had never heard of.] Some of the shuls boasted arks with incredible carvings by Jacob Katz, who lived in Chelsea for some time and who was also a noted carver of carousel animals.

The shuls were all varieties of Orthodox—Russian, Lithuanian, Hasidic, and so on—with the exception of one Conservative temple that was established later. Of course, there were many mergers, splits, removals, and rebuildings—the fires didn't help—to

complicate the picture. One can find photographs and histories of many of the synagogues on the website of the Chelsea Historical Society—tinyurl.com/Chelsea-Shul

As elsewhere, Jewish education was provided initially by private instruction, but during the 1920s the Bureau of Jewish Education in Boston promoted the founding of the Chelsea Hebrew School, which taught Hebrew—in Hebrew—until 1973 and fed some of its graduates into the high school of Hebrew College and the college itself (located, at that time, south of the heart of Boston in Roxbury, later in Brookline, and now in Newton). However, the private schools didn't entirely disappear, and a boys-only school, which fostered Yiddish, survived at



This family-owned business was famous for its billboard facing the Mystic Bridge that read, "Drive carefully, we can wait."

least through the 1950s. A yeshiva was also founded in Chelsea in 1941 by Rabbi Avigdor Miller, an American-born rabbi who was a graduate of the Slobodka Yeshiva. Drawing its students from Chelsea and surrounding communities north of Boston, the Chelsea Yeshiva survived into the 1960s as an Orthodox day school for elementary school children.

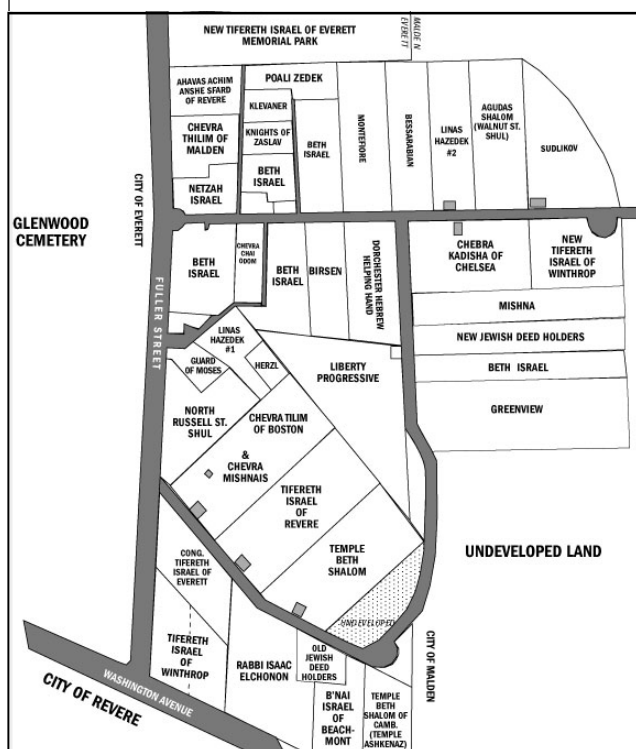


www.jcam.org

Cemeteries

Burials of Chelsea residents took place, by and large, in the adjoining town of Everett to the west, the one town with which it shares a land border. Those cemeteries include the graves of noted Rebbes, including Rav Menachem Nochum Twersky zt"l (the Makover Rebbe and

scion of the Trisker dynasty, who arrived here in 1924 but died a year later and is buried at the Netzach Yisroel Cemetery). There are reports of bus tours of Hasidim from New York arriving to visit his grave, as well as those of Rav Yehuda Yehoshua Falk Israelite (a cofounder of Agudas Horabbonim, the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada, and who served as a rabbi in Chelsea for many years), and of Rabbi Yaakov Yisroel Korff.



The website of the Jewish Cemetery Association of Massachusetts (JCAM) includes a map of the Everett cemeteries and driving directions:

tinyurl.com/Everett-Cemetery

The JCAM website also includes a genealogy search (under the “Services” tab on the home page); though not exhaustive, it is worth a try.

The Jewish Street

People who grew up in Chelsea remark on how the streets were essentially free of traffic on the High Holidays. Schools were closed and everyone was out, strolling from place to place, shul to shul. On Saturday nights, Broadway would be filled with people of all ages, strolling up and down, buying ice cream, looking in store windows. In the summer, everyone went to the beach, and Chelsea virtually had its own section at Revere Beach, with many Chelseaites congregating in a few areas, such as “Punks Corner” near the bandstand. The towns of Revere and Winthrop had both formerly been part of Chelsea, and the boundary lines between the towns always felt artificial.

For years Chelsea continued to be the best Boston place to go, not only for Katz’s bagels but also for the finest smoked fish and delicatessen. Katz’s survives, but in recent years the herring and smoked fish business has been bought out by a West Coast company, and its hummus division by an Israeli one.

Despite its large Jewish population, the city did not have a Jewish mayor until long after the Jewish

The Way We Were



population had peaked (though Jews had served as aldermen and school committee members).

Today

Jews and Jewish institutions still exist in Chelsea. The Walnut Street Shul (Agudat Shalom) is active, and the Conservative Temple Emmanuel is in the process of rebuilding itself. Chelsea has a Jewish old-age and nursing home and Jewish housing/assisted living, while nearby Revere has

an oceanfront Jewish housing project, many of whose residents are Chelseaites. Loyal former residents of Chelsea who have moved on to the towns of Marblehead, Peabody, and Gloucester, as well as to Brookline and Newton, have continued to support the institutions of *their* city, and, they continue to host reunions and to get together wherever they live.

More Information

The website of the Mystic River Jewish Communities Project of the Jewish Cemetery Association of Massachusetts is a rich source of information about the eight Jewish communities of the Mystic River basin, including Chelsea. Among the recorded interviews is one with Norman Finkelstein, historian, JGSGB member, and Chelsea native.

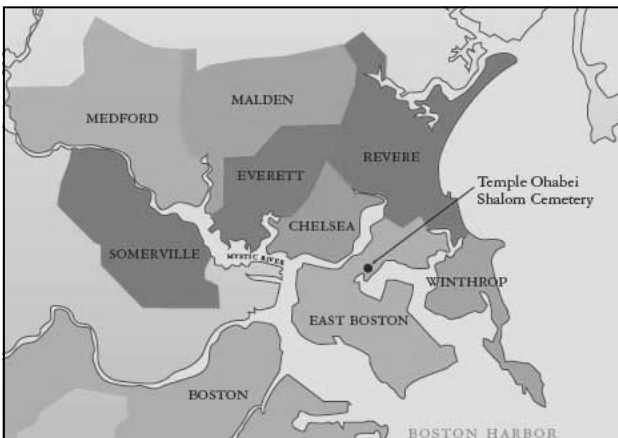


Yiddish flyer advertising Cantor Yosele Ginzberg at Congregation Linas Hazedek Beit Yisrael in Chelsea, 1924



Deanna Mirsky is a writer and editor whose family, on the Mirsky side, comes from Pinsk and before that Slonim (now in Belarus) and supposedly, way way back, from Germany. She is forever looking for the "missing link" among the Mirsky families along the Russian-Polish border, and knows less about her mother's families, KURLAND and LESSER, who came to New York around 1880.

Deanna Mirsky
 family history help
 editing · indexing · transcription
 DEANNA_MIRSKY@VERIZON.NET
 617-965-4475



MysticRiverJews.jcam.org

Click on a town name on the interactive map to experience Jewish life in the early days of the Mystic River Jewish communities. Why not volunteer to do an oral history?

