

## City of Graveyards: The Demise of Jewish Newark

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**Published:** March 24th, 2010

**Latest update:** November 14th, 2011

It is a story that should serve as the ultimate cautionary tale for any Jewish community tempted to mistake a period of vibrancy for a guarantee of immortality.

The story is that of the Jews of Newark, New Jersey, who at the midpoint mark of the 20th century had on their side numbers and history and carefully nurtured social, religious and cultural institutions – but for whom communal desolation awaited and whose legions of rabbis, businessmen, philanthropists and activists could not, in the end, stave off the deluge.

Curiously, to date there has been just one comprehensive account of the rise and demise of Newark Jewry – sociologist William Helmreich's *The Enduring Community: The Jews of Newark and MetroWest* (Transaction, 1998), a book that is at once meticulously researched, carefully documented and eminently readable as it transports readers to the fields and roads and streets of Newark as it evolves from farmland to village to city.

(The MetroWest in the title refers to the name appropriated by the Federation to represent the municipalities in the general vicinity of Newark to which generations of Newark Jews migrated.)

In Helmreich's well-crafted narrative the sounds, sights and smells of Newark's long-dead Jewish districts come alive: the pushcarts of Prince Street giving way to the bustle of Springfield Avenue and the cash registers ringing up sales at such downtown emporia as Bamberger's, Hahne's, Kresge's and S. Klein's; ornate synagogues and humbler street-corner shuls marking the movement of Newark's Jews from the Canal Street area to the Central Ward to the leafy neighborhoods of Clinton Hill and Weequahic; bakeries, candy stores and luncheonettes all along Bergen Street and Chancellor Avenue; local

fixtures like Beth Israel Hospital, the Newark Museum, the Newark Public Library and the YMHA – all first rate and all contributing a cosmopolitan ambience to a city that, in terms of sheer physical size, was actually rather small.

But even in Jewish Newark's heyday, a golden age that would stretch, roughly, from the late 1920s to the mid-1950s, social and political forces – the decline of the city's once thriving banking, insurance and smokestack industries; the movement of upwardly mobile Jews to suburbia; the steady growth of a black underclass – were at work that would, in time, spell catastrophe.

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Newark's first Jews were Sephardim, but they were few and unorganized. It wasn't until the 1840s, and the first stages of the mass immigration of German Jews to America, that a definable Jewish presence established itself in Newark, a city in the midst of rapid change.

The former backwater of dirt roads and family farms was fast becoming a center of industry and commerce; in 1870 the city's population stood at better than 100,000 and two years later an estimated 130,000 visitors attended the Newark Industrial Exposition.

Jews from Eastern Europe began arriving in the U.S. in the 1880s. In Newark, as in New York City, there were important religious and cultural differences between the newcomers and the already-settled German Jews, who in many respects seemed more comfortable with their non-Jewish German neighbors than with their brethren from Russia and Poland.

"In Newark," writes Helmreich, "the relationships between [Eastern European and German Jews] were even more tense than elsewhere because Newark was small enough for people to know each other. For example, the German-Jewish and East European synagogues were located within walking distance of each other. Newark was small enough for youngsters to know which summer camps were for German Jews and

which were not, just as their parents knew which country clubs accepted Eastern Europeans and which did not.”

The prejudice against Eastern Europeans first showed signs of weakening during the 1920s. By the 1940s, with the Holocaust raging in Europe, it would be reduced to a negligible aspect of Jewish life in Newark, though even then it would not be entirely eradicated.

Meanwhile, the Jewish population of Newark had already topped 45,000 by the mid-1920s – more than half that number of Eastern European background. The 1920s were notable in other ways as well: the Conference of Jewish Charities was formed in 1923, giving Newark’s Jews a central communal organization and Newark Beth Israel Hospital, which had been founded in 1901, moved in 1929 to its permanent Lyons Avenue location. (Little-known fact: Paula Ben-Gurion, wife of Israel’s first prime minister, was a trainee at Beth Israel’s school of nursing).

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The growth of Newark Jewry’s influence and prestige continued unabated over the next couple of decades – the city elected its first (and only) Jewish mayor, Meyer “Doc” Ellenstein, in 1932 – and reached full bloom in the 1940s.

With about 60,000 Jews (or about 12 percent of the city’s total population) living in Newark proper, and thousands more in Greater Newark – the nearby towns of Irvington, Hillside, Maplewood, the Oranges, Bloomfield, Millburn and Verona – the community appeared set for continued growth and success.

Indeed, as Rutgers history professor Clement Alexander Price observes in a 1994 paper for the Jewish Historical Society of MetroWest, “despite its pockets of poverty and the divisions between the Orthodox and Reform and political conservatives and radicals, Newark’s Jewish community became by the end of World War II one of the city’s most vibrant entities. It was, in short, emblematic of the ethnic success story.”

By the end of World War II, Newark's Jews, having emerged unscathed from sporadic confrontations with local Nazis and Nazi sympathizers found among the large German population of Newark and next-door Irvington – a little-remembered tale told with flair by Warren Grover in *Nazis in Newark* (Transaction, 2003) – were more confident than ever, more secure in their status as Americans, more comfortable than they probably ever expected to be.

The center of Jewish gravity at mid-century was the city's Weequahic section, made famous by native son Philip Roth, whose body of work reflects an ambivalence about Judaism and Jewish identity but none about the singular experience of growing up Jewish in Newark. (Roth was one of many prominent American Jews born and/or raised in Newark; some others were Fanny Brice, Ed Koch, Jerry Lewis and Dore Schary.)

Roth's conflicted feelings about religion and ethnicity were typical of a generation of American Jews squarely on the fast track to secularization and assimilation. Even so, Newark's Jewish community had a rich religious tradition going back to the city's first three synagogues – B'nai Jeshurun (founded in 1848), B'nai Abraham (1855) and Oheb Shalom (1860). All three started out as traditional or Orthodox congregations but each eventually fell away from strict observance.

Over the years Newark was home to a surprisingly large number of prominent rabbis from the three major denominations. (By 1948 there were at least 40 synagogues in the city.) The most widely recognized Reform leader, certainly on a national scale, was Joachim Prinz, who arrived at B'nai Abraham from Germany in 1939 and became a major figure in Jewish organizational life and the civil rights movement.

The Orthodox community was well represented by rabbis such as Hyman Brodsky (his synagogue, Congregation Anshei Russia, was one of Newark's most important); Joseph Konvitz (Brodsky's successor); Chaim Glatzer; Mordechai Ehrenkrantz; Jacob Mendelson; Elias Singer; David Singer; Israel Turner; Herman Kahn; Zundel Levine; Louis Weller; Meyer Blumenfeld; the Pittsburgher Rebbe, Avrohom Abba Leifer; Oscar Kline; Zev Segal; Moshe Kasinetz; and Sholom Ber Gordon (a major influence on a young Newark resident who decades later would go on to help make ArtScroll an enormous success story – Rabbi Nosson Scherman).

Newark's Orthodox community was a lenient one, Helmreich told this writer in an interview about the book.

"In fact," he explained, "Newark offers us a very clear understanding of a typical mid-20th century American Orthodox community. What makes it particularly unique is that when American Orthodoxy began its steadily rightward drift, Jewish Newark was already in its decline. And by the time the new, stricter climate had become the norm even in Modern Orthodox circles, Newark's Jewish community had, for all intents and purposes, passed from the scene."

The result is that scholars and researchers can look at Newark's Orthodox community as a specimen frozen in time – a community that ceased to exist before it had the chance to change in the manner of other similar communities.

"It was a more tolerant Orthodoxy," Helmreich said. "The rabbis were willing to work with non-Orthodox leaders for the greater good of the community. There was a greater acceptance of differences. People didn't march in lockstep – there were disagreements even on such matters as day-school education."

Helmreich notes in his book that in 1932 a Reform rabbi, Marius Ranson, was invited to address the Young Israel Sisterhood. "Not only was Ranson Reform," writes Helmreich, "but he was in the left wing of his movement. People were not permitted to wear a yarmulke or tallis in his temple. Imagine a Young Israel synagogue today tendering an invitation to such a rabbi!"

Citing yet another example of changing times, Helmreich told me that "as unbelievable as it may sound today, there were Orthodox rabbis back in the 1940s who opposed the formation of what became Newark's most successful day school, Hebrew Youth Academy.

"It was a totally different climate and an almost unrecognizable mindset."

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The end of Jewish Newark is described by Helmreich in all its sad detail. He makes a point of stressing that, in a larger sense, Jewish Newark had begun its inexorable decline decades before, with a steady stream of Jews slowly making their way out of the city and into the surrounding suburbs.

But it was the escalating tensions between Jews and blacks that added a sense of urgency to Jewish flight. Helmreich is remarkably fair in apportioning blame for the demise of the Jewish community and doesn't hesitate to address such uncomfortable questions as Jewish racism on the one hand and the acquiescence of Jews in the takeover of their neighborhoods on the other.

The racism touched on by Helmreich may come as something of an unpleasant surprise to some – the American Jewish community, in Newark and elsewhere, was famous for its support of liberalism and civil rights – but it was a painful reality and hardly exclusive to Newark's Jews. Neighborhoods across the country were witness to the seemingly anomalous spectacle of liberal Jews fleeing their homes and neighborhoods at the first sighting of black newcomers – while presumably more conservative blue-collar white ethnics stayed put.

The journalist Max Geltman, in *The Confrontation: Black Power, Anti-Semitism, and the Myth of Integration* (Prentice-Hall, 1970) describes the good Jewish liberals of Newark who "mourned the dead in Mississippi, the wounded in Alabama, the uneducated in Little Rock, and every slight to a Negro anywhere outside New Jersey. But in Newark things were different . It was almost three months after I had moved there before I realized that my neighbors always said 'they' when they meant Negroes. My daughter heard the word schwartze for the first time in her life – from friends whose parents were members of the A.D.L. and solid supporters of integration in the South."

There was a time when black-Jewish relations in Newark held at least a semblance of promise. "Blacks and Jews," writes Professor Price, "were among the most prominent of the groups who came to Newark to escape terrible circumstances. Both groups found that the city's racial and ethnic relations were benign when compared to many other cities. There were no race riots or other dramatic forms of racial/ethnic confrontations that would stem the tide of blacks and Jews seeking some semblance of a Promised Land."

But that relatively idyllic state of affairs could not survive the contrasting fortunes of an upwardly mobile Jewish community and a black populace struggling, mostly unsuccessfully, to overcome poverty, prejudice and a series of ill-advised government policies.

"The decline of Newark," adds Price, "was a part of the general decline of old American cities in the twentieth century . As the old cities decayed, they were surrounded by a glittering array of shopping malls, corporate parks and residential communities whose newness seemingly underscored the inferiority of urban life . Although many old cities experienced much the same decline after World War II, few rivaled the losses which Newark sustained in population, vitality, and prestige."

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The riots of July 1967 served as the coffin nails for a Jewish community that had for all intents and purposes died years before. The weeklong explosion of violence, aimed in significant part at Jewish merchants (Geltman describes rioters "shouting 'get Goldberg!' as they ravaged business establishments without care whether anyone was in them or not") destroyed the hopes of the few optimists who had dared hold out hope for the city's remaining Jews.

Most of those Jews departed within the next few years, and by the mid-1970s there were few tangible signs left of Newark's glorious Jewish past.

No matter how great a revival Newark may yet experience, writes Helmreich, "it will bear little resemblance to the Newark that its Jewish population identified with. After all, B'nai Jeshurun [became] the Hopewell Baptist Church, Anshei Russia [became] home to the Abyssinian Baptist Church, and the Y that was a second home for thousands of Jews became, for a time, the abode of the Citadel of Hope Miracle Temple, now defunct."

For Jews, Newark today is little more than a graveyard, figuratively and literally: The city is home to at most a few hundred Jewish residents and nearly 100 Jewish

cemeteries. In the end, there may be no epitaph for Newark more moving or appropriate than that offered by journalism professor Jeffrey Brody, whose observations on the destruction wrought by the rioters of '67 are included by Helmreich in his book:

Walking along the former business section, it seems inopportune to recall the names of former shops (Blaustein's Furs, Kartzman's Deli, Kaye's Drugs, Manhoff's Fishery, Masur's Furs, and Tabatchnick's the herring king, for example). Repeating their names is like reciting Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead.

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