

The Jewish Farmer and the Small-Town Jewish Community: Schoharie County, New York

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In 1947 German immigrants Ludwig and Ilse Levy moved from New York City to a century-old wooden farmhouse 150 miles upstate. Their relatives wrote them off ("except when they wanted a vacation") and their new farming neighbors eyed them "kind of funny. They had never heard of Jews who would work."¹

Even more so today than a quarter-century ago, most Jews are identified with urban or suburban environments. Jews are by far the most urbanized major religious group in the United States.² Yet, according to Peter Rose:

There is . . . a scattered minority of American Jews living in little hamlets and rural villages who do not fully fit this urban image. Such people do not reside in old-style ghettos, in ethnic neighborhoods, or in modern homogeneous suburbs. Unlike their urban coreligionists, they are not members of on-going Jewish communities.

Rose proceeded to label these rural Jews "strangers in alien territory."³ Sociologist Eugen Schoenfeld, on the other hand, has

¹ Ludwig and Ilse Levy, Interview. (All subsequent direct quotations will be indicated in the text with no note.)

² Oscar I. Janowsky (ed.), *The American Jew: A Reappraisal*. Vol. IV (New York, 1964), p. 30.

³ Peter Rose, "Strangers in Their Midst: Small-Town Jews and Their Neighbors." *The Ghetto and Beyond*. (New York, 1969), p. 335.

concluded that the majority of small-town Jews are in fact "residents," not "strangers."⁴

This essay will, in part, attempt to reconcile this "resident" or "stranger" question in the context of one rural Jewish community, that of Schoharie County, New York. It will in particular emphasize the special role of the Jewish farmers, a group even more rare than the small-town Jew. After discussing the background and experience of the Jewish farm families, including several in-depth case studies, this essay will attempt to analyze the formation and eventual disintegration of the Schoharie County Jewish Community Center. Through our examination of how and why a scattering of Jewish families united and then dissolved, some light may be shed on the resident-stranger question. The essay will evaluate demographic, socioeconomic, and cultural factors, and the relationship between the Jews and their Gentile neighbors.

Although Rose and Schoenfeld used both surveys and interviews in at least ten communities to develop their conclusions, this study draws primarily on intensive interviews with the Jews of one county and on the personal experience of the author. Thus its conclusions are somewhat speculative. But because the vast majority of research on Jews in America ignores the rural Jew, this approach may offer some fresh alternatives to the stereotypical picture of American Jews. For instance, the role of the Jewish farm wife hardly jibes with that of the classical suburban Jewish mother. Furthermore, the experience of Jewish families living and working in near-isolation from other Jews offers some insight into the historical strength of the Jewish tradition and the significance which Jews attach to maintaining that tradition. While the essay briefly follows through to the present situation of Schoharie County's Jewish farmers and Jewish community, much of it takes a historical perspective, concentrating on the period from the end of World War II through the 1950's.

Success and Failure

By 1935, when Harry Rubin became the first practicing Jew to buy a farm in Schoharie County, Jews had been trying to farm in

⁴Eugen Schoenfeld. "Small-town Jews' Integration into Their Communities." *Rural Sociology* 35 (June, 1970), 189.

the United States for more than a century. Since 1820 a succession of Jewish agricultural colonies, scattered throughout the eastern and southern parts of the United States, had failed. The farmers, primarily immigrants, lacked training and experience in agriculture. Most of the sites were poor, and natural disasters aggravated the problems.

Nevertheless, a group of rabbis meeting in New York in 1882 encouraged Jewish immigrants to farm, the reasons being both patriotic and religious:

In colonizing them and settling them as agriculturalists, we feel, therefore, every moral assurance that they will become worthy American citizens repaying the protection and rights they have received by becoming faithful and loyal denizens of the soil, and forming a class of useful and honorable men who, adhering to their religious convictions, will also be imbued with the spirit of American institutions and contribute their full share toward the development of our country and the extension of its blessings, as freemen enjoying republican sturdiness and virtue.⁵

Jacob Gordin, a Russian immigrant to America, advocated Jewish agricultural colonies as a means of avoiding anti-Semitism in the United States. He maintained that it would decrease Jewish population in the cities and thus decrease the degree of economic competition between Gentiles and Jews.⁶

Despite good wages, a summer demand for farm workers, and good working conditions, few Jews turned to farming in the late nineteenth century. "The recent immigrants are not idealistically inclined," wrote Dr. George M. Price in 1891. "They migrated to America not for the sake of their people's rejuvenation, but for their own personal welfare."⁷ Price explained why the young Jewish immigrant could not follow a common American route to farming success. The aspiring Christian farmer worked as a laborer for a farmer for about five years while saving his wages; he married the farmer's daughter or a local factory girl, bought a small farm, and gradually worked into the farming establishment.

⁵Quoted in Leo Shpall. "Jewish Agricultural Colonies in the United States." *Agricultural History* 24 (July, 1950), p. 128.

⁶Abraham J. Karp (ed). *The Jewish Experience in America*. Vol. IV (New York, 1969), pp. 260-61.

⁷*Ibid*, p. 287.

But the Jew's religion precluded his marriage to a Christian girl. Moreover,

. . . a family which is not accustomed to physical labor and is religiously observant cannot become farm-hands with an Irish or German farmer. . . . Single members of the intelligentsia refuse to bury themselves in a strange village among people whose language, customs and religious views they neither understand nor share. They, therefore, prefer to work in shops and to learn a trade.⁸

Some individual farmers remained after colonies folded in Kansas and the Dakotas. Several New Jersey colonies survived in the late nineteenth century. Since the turn of the century Jews have farmed in upstate New York, Connecticut, and Maine, and, later, throughout the country. The major force in promoting Jewish farming has been the Jewish Agricultural Society, founded by Baron Maurice de Hirsch in 1900. Initially, the society promoted group colonization, but soon shifted its focus to individual enterprise. It offered financial subsidies, placement service, and "scientific" guidance. The advice, as will be discussed later, was sometimes uninformed.

The peak number of Jewish farm families nationally, about 20,000 at the end of World War II, roughly coincided with the high point of Jewish farming in Schoharie County. Until shortly before the war, no Jews farmed in Schoharie County for many of the same reasons which Price had suggested in 1890, particularly the Gentile environment far from a Jewish community. Located about 150 miles north and slightly west of New York City, Schoharie County ranks 58th among New York's 62 counties in population with about 24,000 persons. The nearest metropolitan area is the Albany-Schenectady-Troy area, an average of 35 miles distant. Traditionally, agriculture and related or dependent occupations have dominated the local economy. In fact, the county's cow population exceeds the human population by about 20 per cent.⁹

Attorney Jacob Wildove, whose parents became, in 1917, the first-known practicing Jews to settle permanently in Schoharie

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 304.

⁹ United States Department of Commerce: Bureau of the Census. "Census of Agriculture: Schoharie County, N. Y. 1969."

County, attributed the absence of Jewish farmers to both the nature of farming in the county and the farm's isolation. There is evidence that several Jews settled in Schoharie County in the nineteenth century, but either they or their children denied any ties to Judaism. Most of the farms before World War II were small family operations—which extended up to seven generations back. Many were located in extremely isolated areas. As Wildove recalled, “the farmers were more isolated then. A Jewish family would really have been cutting themselves off to go out on a farm.”¹⁰ Even Rubin, the first Jewish farmer, did not move to the county until after his daughter had been graduated from a Schenectady high school. She stated that:

My mother was very old fashioned and felt since there were no Jewish families out here, she wouldn't let her daughter grow up in a non-Jewish community. She made my father promise we would never move out of Schenectady until I graduated from high school.¹¹

Like most Jewish immigrants, Harry Rubin settled in New York City when he arrived in the United States from Poland. An assistant to his father, a kosher butcher and cattle dealer in the Warsaw area, Rubin crossed the Atlantic probably in a cattle boat. His wife and one-year-old son were to join him four years later. After struggling to keep employed, Rubin, unlike many immigrants, left New York for Schenectady. There he found work digging ditches for General Electric at three to five dollars weekly wage.

When his sister married the son of a kosher butcher shop owner, Rubin began working for the butcher. His contacts with cattle dealers and kosher butchers eventually enabled him to form a partnership and begin a small cattle-dealing business in Cobleskill, a village of fewer than 3,000 persons. “How they picked Cobleskill I'll never know,” his daughter said. The largest town in Schoharie County, Cobleskill's entire Jewish population in the 1920's consisted of one merchant family—who stayed for a few years—succeeded by another merchant family later in the decade. About fifteen miles away lived the Wildove family, also merchants, and a cattle dealer named “Dutch” Rubin (no relation to Harry Rubin),

¹⁰ Jacob Wildove Interview. (Subsequent quotations attributed in the text.)

¹¹ Mrs. Sidney (Bea Rubin)/Wallace, Interview.

whose only known connection with Judaism was a Jewish funeral. Another Jewish merchant family moved into the area later in the decade.

At first Rubin and his partner, Sam Copeland, were strictly cattle dealers, not farmers. They would take a very early morning train from Schenectady to Cobleskill, buy cattle at an auction, and walk the animals about thirty miles on dirt roads and across fields to Schenectady for sale to Swift and Company and other butchering concerns. Eventually, the partners rented farms in Schoharie County on which they would keep their cows. By 1930 they were able to buy a small truck; they gradually traded for slightly bigger models until finally they could afford a truck which was large enough to transport all their daily quota of cows to Schenectady. This ended what Bea Wallace dubbed, "the schlepping era."

Working with a different partner, Rubin expanded his market to Albany, and finally bought his first farm in 1935. By this time he was selling cattle to markets as distant as Jersey City and renting other farms at Depression-era prices. With the end of World War II, Rubin and his son Sol became full-fledged farmers when they purchased a larger dairy farm near Cobleskill. Their cattle-dealing business continued, but shifted to the trading of dairy cows rather than beef.¹²

The saga of the second Jewish farmer in Schoharie County, Julius Westheimer, has little in common with the story of Harry Rubin. Born in Germany, Westheimer was the son of a prosperous farmer and cattle dealer. At age fourteen Westheimer went to trade school to learn bookkeeping. He then moved to Switzerland, where he operated a spring mattress factory for more than twenty years and married a Swiss Jewish woman. Still a German citizen, he felt pressured to leave Switzerland when Hitler seemed to pose a serious threat. After two years in New York City, he and his wife decided not to start a business, but rather to buy a farm. They found one through a *New York Times* advertisement, spent a few weeks boarding on a farm in the southern part of New York State to learn American agricultural methods, and settled on a dairy farm in the Schoharie Valley, an area once

¹² Wallace and Mrs. Harry (Bess) Rubin, Interview. (Subsequent quotations attributed in the text.)

known as the "bread basket of George Washington's army." Unlike most of the other Jews who tried to farm in Schoharie County, Westheimer began with a substantial amount of capital.

As in the Rubin case, the Westheimer farm continued into the second generation. Born in Switzerland, Paul Westheimer was thirteen when his father became a farmer. Paul enrolled at M. I. T. with no intention of remaining on the farm. But a back injury suffered by his father forced him to take a one-year leave of absence after his sophomore year. He did not return to M. I. T. even though he became allergic to cows. The Westheimers sold their cows in 1956 and concentrated on grain and vegetables instead. Today, in addition to growing a variety of vegetables, the Westheimers operate a packing plant which employs thirty women.¹³

Paul Westheimer married the sister of a Jewish woman whose family had settled in the Town of Carlisle, Schoharie County, after the war. This particular family, German refugees, named Wuerzburger, was advised by the Jewish Agricultural Society to grow corn. Unfortunately, the clay soil of the area was totally unsuitable for corn. They also tried raising chickens, supplemented by selling brooms, then scrap materials. Finally, Salo Wuerzburger became a barber and opened a shop in Cobleskill.¹⁴

The Wuerzburger experience is much more typical than that of the Rubins or the Westheimers. The latter two families were the first Jewish farmers in Schoharie County, and their second-generation sons are the only Jews still actively farming in the county. Two other Jewish families, however, farmed for at least twenty years, until the death of Sam Riss and the retirement of Ludwig Levy. Both men came to Carlisle in 1947 and bought farms within a few miles of each other. Ironically, they saw each other rarely.

Sam Riss and his wife grew up and were married in Austria. His father was a "very small" farmer. In 1933 Sam Riss was about to open a law office in Vienna when the couple decided to visit Mrs. Riss's brother, a rabbi, in Brooklyn. They liked America so well, Mrs. Riss recalled, that they stayed. Mr. Riss worked as a

¹³ Mr. and Mrs. Paul Westheimer, Interview. (Subsequent quotations attributed in the text.)

¹⁴ Westheimer and Levy, Interviews.

furrier and his wife taught Hebrew. After their two daughters were married and their twin sons, Simon and Ed, finished high school, a *New York Times* advertisement induced them to purchase a farm in Schoharie County. Their sons' eligibility for the military draft (voided by a farm deferment) and Sam Riss's desire to leave the city influenced their decision. They started with some cows bought from Julius Westheimer and a farmhouse so archaic that it had only a wood stove for cooking and heating.

Whether it was "sheer intelligence" which taught the Riss family to farm, as Mrs. Riss recalled, or intelligent use of special low-interest loans available to farmers ("deficit farming"), as Ludwig Levy maintained, the family persevered for more than twenty years. Although Simon Riss soon left the farm for Cornell and eventually returned to the New York City area, Ed Riss remained on the farm and carried much of the labor burden. After his father died, Ed Riss moved to Schenectady and operated a farm near the city limits.¹⁵

Like the Riss family, Mr. and Mrs. Ludwig Levy knew next to nothing about farming when they moved to Schoharie County. "We were so stupid we didn't know one end of the cow from the other," Mrs. Levy said. A "rich man's daughter" in Germany, she had planned to become a social worker until the rise of Hitler forced her to emigrate at the age of twenty-three. Ludwig Levy came from more humble German origins. He arrived in the United States in 1928 as an apprentice banker with plans to stay for a few years to gain experience in order to land a better position in Europe.

Each held a variety of jobs in New York City until they left in 1946 to seek a new life as farmers. "If we knew what we would have to do, we wouldn't have done it," Mrs. Levy said. "All I knew was that I wanted to get out of New York." After a partnership with a German refugee family in Orange County, New York, did not work out well, Mr. Levy traveled across New York State to search for a farm with good soil and a relatively inexpensive price tag. He found it about one half-mile off a Carlisle town road. He bought it without the help of the Jewish Agricultural Society (J. A. S.) because his \$10,000 in savings disqualified him from receiving the Society's aid.

¹⁵ Mrs. Sam Riss, Interview.



Courtesy, The Jewish Agricultural Society, New York
A Jewish farm scene in upper New York State



Courtesy, Rabbi H. David Rutman, Milford, Mass.
Sholam Road (Warsing, N.Y.) leading to the first Jewish
farm settlement in the United States, 1837

Twice during their twenty-seven years of dairy and poultry farming (both because they found cow barns and chicken houses on their farms), the Levys tried to help farmers placed in Carlisle by the J. A. S. In the first instance, a New York City taxi driver named Moses bought a "very marginal farm." When his chicken operation floundered, Moses returned to New York City to drive a taxi and left his wife and small children to care for the chickens. The first snowstorm prompted Mrs. Moses to ask Mrs. Levy to drive her to the bus station in Schenectady. The neglected chickens thus became almost useless. Moses later tried raising beef cattle, but had neither the quality nor the quantity of land needed to succeed.

The second case demonstrates even more graphically what Levy called "the stupid" policy of the J. A. S., at least in Schoharie County. "They went from the premise of people who said they wanted to farm. They didn't consider capability," he said. A couple who had failed in a farm project in Israel purchased a "submarginal" farm in Carlisle. Aaron Apothaker's limited knowledge of Israeli farming was not applicable to the American version. He soon faced so many debts that he was forced to sell the ten cows he had purchased on chattel mortgage from Sol Rubin. When Rubin heard about Apothaker's illegal action, he paid him a visit. The slightly-built Rubin punched the six-foot-four-inch, 280-pound Apothaker in the nose. Apothaker countered with a one-two blow, breaking Rubin's jaw and several ribs.¹⁶

Generally, however, relations among the other Jews in Schoharie County were more cordial. By the early 1950's the county's Jewish population had swelled to more than twenty families. Of the farmers not previously discussed, only Fred Zusselman and his brother—who farmed for only a few years—helped organize the Schoharie County Jewish Community Center. One of the more successful Jewish farmers, Zusselman played a major role in the Center until he left after about ten years of farming to teach science in a Long Island high school. Two other Jewish farms operated for several years before their owners gave up. In the mid-1950's the brother and brother-in-law team of Baum and Zoberman ran a dairy and poultry farm in the remote hill country around Summit. Refugees, as were the Zusselmans, Baum and

¹⁶ Levy.

Zoberman, participated in the Jewish Community Center. Recently a Jewish couple operated a farm in the equally remote Jefferson area, but had little interaction with other Jews in Schoharie County.

Strangers In a Strange Land?

Before examining how nine Jewish farm families and about a dozen non-farming families formed the Schoharie County Jewish Community Center in 1952, it is useful to look at the experience of the farm families in adjusting to life among the "goyim." Anti-Semitism, in general, was not a major problem. Bea (Rubin) Wallace found "not too much. As a matter of fact, we had more problems in Schenectady than out here," she said. Julius Westheimer, as the first Jewish farmer in the Schoharie Valley, had to shatter the stereotypical image of the Jew as an urban white-collar worker. A local dentist refused to believe that he was Jewish. "Jews don't work with their hands," he said, according to Paul Westheimer. The dentist "gave" Mrs. Westheimer "one year up here and then back to New York City."

Maine dairy farmer Earl Rabb recounted an experience similar to Westheimer's in 1949 in a *Commentary* article. "... an omniscient bartender in a coastal town . . . has a way of dropping an eyelid when we talk about dairying. He simply won't be convinced."¹⁷ Julius Westheimer convinced his fellow farmers by example. "He was out there throwing around hay bales with the hired help. This helped a lot," Paul Westheimer said. In his own experience, the younger Westheimer has found:

As far as the actual farming process, I can't see where Jewishness was any problem. Being in a decided minority, often a minority of one, indications are given at various meetings. It's surprising how many people do take it into consideration and omit any specific reference to Christ in invocations. . . .

That was not the case at a Dairyman's League meeting Ludwig Levy attended during a period of low milk prices. The president of the local chapter warned his fellow farmers, Levy recalled, "If we wouldn't be the watchdog, 'all those people with the long

¹⁷ Earl Rabb, "Report from the Farm." *Commentary* (June, 1949), 575.

hooked noses and beards' would put us out of business. Shattering applause followed." Levy failed to get other Jews in the area to respond to this remark. But word passed through the rural grapevine that Levy would write the governor and bring in the Anti-Defamation League; the speaker appeared on Levy's farm and he and his wife, from then on, were "overly friendly." Although this incident occurred in the 1950's, it closely parallels historian John Higham's assessment of anti-Semitism in the early twentieth century:

. . . the "international Jew" as visualized from the 1890's to the 1930's was perhaps mostly a hobgoblin of the rural imagination, associated with all the insidious influences thought to emanate from faraway Eastern cities . . . thus ideological; anti-Semitism seems to have made its primary appeal to native Americans in areas of low Jewish density, where the supposed enemy was a remote and shadowy figure. . . . Studies of small towns characteristically reveal complete acceptance of local Jews alongside negative stereotypes of "The Jew."¹⁸

One such study of small-town Jews in upstate New York (which may have included Schoharie County) concluded: ". . . while most (Jews) say they personally have not experienced anti-Semitism, many are of the opinion that they are being exempted from commonly held stereotypes about Jews."¹⁹ Mrs. Levy told of hearing neighbors comment, "Them Jews— . . . I don't mean you." Anti-Semitism as such did not pose a serious problem for the Levys; their neighboring farmers were very helpful. But they did feel a social barrier. In large part, they believed it was because they were "newcomers" and because, as small as the community of Carlisle was (perhaps 250 families), it was ethnically diverse and divided. "When you moved into a small community like Carlisle, you were never considered a native. You never made it, even if you weren't Jewish," Mrs. Levy said.

Austrian-trained lawyer Sam Riss, however, did make it—at least to the extent that he was elected Justice of the Peace in Carlisle. "Sam got along so well with everybody," his widow said. Paul Westheimer also succeeded in winning elective office.

¹⁸ John Higham. "American Anti-Semitism Historically Reconsidered." *Jews in the Mind of America* (New York, 1966).

¹⁹ Rose, p. 344.

He served on the Schoharie Central School Board of Education for thirteen years, including four as president. He is active in several farm and community organizations, as is Sol Rubin. Most of the non-farming Jews also have a record of deep community involvement. Schoenfeld observed a similar phenomenon in a study of small-town Jews in southern Illinois. "By and large, Jewish people in small towns seem to manifest the middle class characteristics of the 'joiner.'"²⁰ Rose recorded similar findings, noting "few limitations on formal and informal social participation and interaction."²¹

Moreover, Rose found that small-town Jews, living as a tiny minority, are more conscious of being Jewish than urban Jews living among many other Jews. "In one form or other *every* respondent indicated that there are times when he is called upon to represent *The Jews*."²² This would certainly apply to the Jews of Schoharie County, whether it involved several women preparing a model seder for the Lutheran Church's "interfaith Sunday" or a fourth-grade pupil explaining Hanukkah to his class.

Possibly the only time small-town Jews were not "representing" the Jews is when they were together. For several years prior to the formation of the Schoharie County Jewish Community Center (SCJCC), one Jewish family would invite the entire Jewish community of the county to a party each month. Several parties were held on the Jewish farms, including the yearly end-of-summer picnic on the Riss farm. This group also gathered annually for a fund-raising party for the United Jewish Appeal. It is believed that a remark by the late Mrs. Meyer Wallace (mother-in-law of Bea Wallace) at one of these affairs sparked the birth of the SCJCC.²³ Wildove recalled, "One of the things that generated the idea, the feeling that we should have something, was that we had had the UJA appeal. We felt we ought to do something as a unit. We all got together for that [the UJA]; it sort of led to the other thing."

About twenty families formed the SCJCC in 1952 with organizational help from a couple who had formed a similar Center in their home city, Oneonta (thirty-five miles southwest of Cobles-

²⁰ Schoenfeld, p. 186.

²¹ Rose, p. 344.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Wallace, Rubin.

kill). Nearly half of the charter members were farmers, including one family from just outside the Schoharie County border. The Westheimer, Riss, Rubin, and Zusselman families were among the leaders. Other charter members included a college dairy instructor, two nursery-education college instructors, a dress manufacturer, an auto supply dealer, a jeweler, several scrap iron dealers, a gas station operator, a barber, an attorney (Wildove), and a dentist.

The demographic composition of the group offers some insight into why the Center was formed and why in 1952. Most of the charter members had migrated to Schoharie County and formed families after the end of World War II. About half had children who were born within two years of the Center's formation, a factor which stimulated interest in developing a means to offer a Jewish education and experience outside of the home for the children. Four members were immigrants with married children. Only Wildove was a native of the county. Thus as new residents, and particularly as new Jewish residents, most faced a "settling-in" period during which, as Mrs. Levy noted, they were outsiders. It would be misleading to say that most Jews were not accepted. Most were, but it was a gradual process. The desire to hold religious services, to formalize and regularize a Jewish intellectual and communal gathering and to provide a Jewish experience for the children of the community, all contributed to the formation of the SCJCC.

Paradoxically, the founding of the SCJCC and the holding of bimonthly Friday night services helped the Jews assimilate into the community. As Arthur Vidich and Joseph Bensman stated in their classic study *Small Town in Mass Society*, the church played a major role in the life of American small-town residents in the 1950's. The social and communal aspects were at least as important as the religious services. It was normal, almost expected, for everyone to attend the "church" of one's choosing in a small town. People respected fellow citizens who worshipped regularly and practiced their religion. One Jewish farmer told Rose:

It's funny, but though we're really out of touch with Jews we're the ones who try to keep up with the traditions. . . . We think of ourselves as more orthodox than anything. You know, the Gentile farmers around us are

pretty religious too. If you can't go to church, then you have to bring religion into the home.²⁴

Community acceptance and encouragement of the Jewish group were indicated in several ways. The weekly Cobleskill newspaper published the Center's schedule under church notices. Although a church offered use of its facilities, the members held services in the Cobleskill American Legion Hall. The Legion, a major organization in the town at the time, graciously rented the room for a nominal fee. In a sense, the Center had the effect of "normalizing" the life-style of the Jewish families in the eyes of their Christian neighbors.

"Normal" meant periodic services, even though they were held on Friday nights, not on Sunday morning; it meant every other week, not weekly; and it meant being led by one of the older men on a rotating basis, not by a clergyman. For a brief period a retired cantor, who had moved to the area from Lawrence, Long Island, regularly conducted services. The entire Jewish community pitched in to help the cantor, who had unknowingly bought a house without water or heat in the hamlet of Lawyersville. After he moved to an even more remote area, the men took turns driving up in the hills to fetch him for services. This communal spirit was especially evident when one of the members was ill. A succession of visitors consoled him (or her). Often the group sent a specially prepared fruit basket, delivered by the corner grocery store owner. If a death occurred in the family of one of the Jews, even a relative living far away, a few phone calls quickly mobilized a *minyan* to sit *shiva* at the mourner's home.

For five or six years the Center thrived on its small scale. The programs (which followed the services instead of a sermon) ranged from listening to Jewish music on records to discussing articles from Jewish newspapers or magazines. Members took turns organizing the programs, which were followed by a social hour, featuring home-baked cookies and cakes. For the children, the members set up a Sunday school which met in the apartment of a college nursery education instructor. In addition to housing a celebration of each Jewish holiday (except Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur), the Legion Hall was the setting for Bar Mitzvahs.

²⁴ Rose, p. 340.

The Center and the Community

As the SCJCC prospered, the Jews of Schoharie County became more active and were accepted as an established part of their communities. Rose's observation about rural Jews fits many of the SCJCC members:

Complete assimilation into the Gentile community is not the goal. He (rural Jew) wants to remain a hyphenated American, sharing the "best of both." . . . He is more a part of his community than he is apart from it. He is far more assimilated to the Gentile milieu than his urban cousin. But . . . he remains a Jew.²⁵

The Center's membership held fairly constant for about five years. Some of the charter members left the area; other Jews—including farmers Baum and Zoberman, a high school agriculture teacher, and the first Jewish teacher in the Methodist-dominated Cobleskill Central School—joined when they moved to the county. Local junior college students occasionally attended services. The Levys were one of the first charter members to stop participating. Mr. Levy explained:

The more we went there, the more we felt we were the fifth wheel on the wagon. We didn't have much in common. . . . We drifted away. We felt like outsiders.

One of the few childless couples who belonged to the SCJCC, the Levys attributed part of the feeling of ill-ease to their German background (even though several other members were of German origin). They trace the coldness they felt from the several prominent Eastern European Jews in the community to the actions of Jews in Germany early in the twentieth century. Mr. Levy recounted a scene he had witnessed as a small boy in a German-Jewish store, which illustrated a lack of compassion for persecuted Russian Jews on the part of German Jews. "It backfired here in Cobleskill," he concluded. Moreover, because the Levys employed no help on their farm, the Friday services cut into their sixteen-hour work day. Mrs. Levy explained, "To us it was a sacrifice. We had to get through at 7 and wash. We didn't want to stink like a cow."

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 346.

She meant “we” since both Levys worked as full-time farmers. She emphatically stated:

I am a full-fledged farmer in my own right. You can ask any farmer. They would hire me. . . . I was never a housewife in my life. Now I’m a retired farmer and I enjoy it greatly.

Although Mrs. Levy probably ranked as the most active Jewish woman farmer in Schoharie County, most of the other farm wives took part in the farming operation. While this may have shattered stereotypical images of the Jewish woman, it certainly was common practice for the farmer’s wife. Vidich and Bensman noted: “. . . the farmer’s wife . . . is capable of making or breaking a successful farm operation by whether she works in the barn, the fields, or garden at critical moments and in critical seasons.”²⁶

Most of the other Jewish farm wives emphasized the ceremonial aspects of Judaism more than Mrs. Levy. Mrs. Riss, the former Brooklyn Hebrew teacher, took time off from her barn chores to teach Hebrew to a generation of Schoharie County Jewish boys. In groups of two or three they would ride the school bus to her farm for private instruction (and home-baked cookies and ice cream) in preparation for their Bar Mitzvahs at synagogues in Schenectady. In addition to the lessons, which continued long after the Center had been dissolved, Mrs. Riss organized many of the holiday celebrations for the Center. Mrs. Paul Westheimer, one of the more active Center members, has always tried to maintain “a Jewishness in the home, within the realm of possibility.”

The Levys’ resignation and, later, the decline in the number of Jewish farmers—Zusselman, Baum, and Zoberman all had left by 1960—adversely affected the Center’s precarious critical mass. Because the membership never grew appreciably, each member’s attendance was very important. This had its advantages in that it produced a far higher participation rate than most urban congregations could boast and contributed toward a very closely-knit communal spirit. But it also led to the downfall of the Center. In part the declining attendance of the late 1950’s can be attributed to the replacement of some of the hard-core members, who

²⁶ Arthur Vidich and Joseph Bensman. *Small Town in Mass Society* (revised). (Princeton, 1968), p. 56.



Courtesy, The Jewish Agricultural Society, New York
Jewish poultry farm in Farmingdale, N.J.

had left the area, with less enthusiastic Jewish families. "The new people in town were not as interested as the founders, who had felt the need for getting together. The new ones were more sophisticated, big cityish; they lacked religious feelings."²⁷ In Schoenfeld's sociological framework these newcomers fit into the "stranger" category.

"The stranger" is an individual whose relationship with the community is primarily instrumental. He is a cosmopolite whose reference group is not the community in which he resides, whose ideologies are not those of the community, and who judges its residents in stereotyped particularistic terms.²⁸

The resident, the category which fits most of the small-town Jews Schoenfeld studied and which appears to fit most of the original members of the SCJCC, exhibits the opposite characteristics. Schoenfeld wrote, "Compared with urban and suburban Jews, these small-town Jews are more attached to their community."

This attachment to the community, which grew during the years the SCJCC functioned, contributed to the demise of the Center. Bea Wallace said:

We had quite a Jewish social life. The couples were very, very close. But as time went on we drifted apart. . . . Today I feel I have as much social life with my Christian friends and my few Jewish friends here as I need.

The increased assimilation into the Gentile community had its direct effects on the Center. For instance, when a Jewish couple received an invitation from a Gentile friend to a Friday night party, they faced a dilemma. If they went to the party, regular church-goers would wonder why the Jews had skipped their services, and their fellow Jews would also be upset. "It was almost like you were expected to be there (services)."²⁹ But if they repeatedly turned down invitations, the Jewish couples would cut themselves off from much of the community's social life. As more and more Jews decided, "we didn't feel the need to associate as one religious group any longer," the Center's position became more precarious.³⁰

²⁷ Arnold Ruxin, Interview.

²⁸ Schoenfeld, p. 179.

²⁹ Sherle Ruxin, Interview.

³⁰ Ruxin.

From Friday to Friday the gathering of a *minyan* became a touch-and-go situation. A continuing debate over whether to count women toward the *minyan* (they never were) added to the tension which had gradually built up during several years of petty bickering among the small group's members. The format of the services, a makeshift Conservative-Orthodox amalgam, and the life-style of the Sunday school teacher sparked debate. Furthermore, members, including the Westheimers and the Rubins, whose children had grown from pre-school to elementary-school age, preferred to join a synagogue in Schenectady or Albany.

As membership and participation declined, it exaggerated the internal tension. The increased assimilation into their local communities and a relaxing of social ties among the Jews—many of whom now had less in common with each other than with their Gentile friends—combined to dissolve the glue which had held the Center together. To the families with children closer to the Bar or Bat Mitzvah age, the larger urban synagogues—of whatever branch they chose—offered an attractive religious alternative. Thus, in 1960, using the funds accumulated from the fifteen-dollar annual membership fee, the members of the Schoharie County Jewish Community Center held their final affair—a feast on the “works” from a Schenectady delicatessen.

Many of the members joined congregations in Schenectady or Albany. The Rubins affiliated with an Orthodox synagogue, and the Westheimers with a Conservative one. The Westheimers have remained the most active members. They regularly drove their two daughters and a son to Hebrew school in Schenectady, an eighty-minute round trip. “In that respect living out here makes it more difficult,” Mrs. Westheimer said. Yet, as attorney Wildove observed, “We’ve always done remarkably well in getting Jewish education for the kids. Most in the county have gone someplace or other.” Several families, Orthodox and Reform members, formed a car pool to transport their children thirty-five miles to religious school in Schenectady each Sunday. Besides easing the burden on the parents, the car pool provided some group spirit and incentive to stimulate interest in Jewish education. Bea Wallace maintained, “Because one was Bar Mitzvah, the others had to be. There was just no two ways about it.”

Today the car pools have gone the way of the Center as the

original members' children have reached high school or college age or beyond. One remaining remnant of the community spirit is the *shiva* observance, ready to be mobilized by a few phone calls. Socially, the Jewish community of Schoharie County is fragmented. There are several groups of Jews who remain as close as, or closer than, they were twenty years ago. Others only rarely see each other. The Jewish community is more diversified in terms of life-style, religious practice, age, and almost every other characteristic. Only Paul Westheimer and Sol Rubin actively farm. Julius Westheimer and the Levys are retired; the others either have died or have left Schoharie County.³¹

The future outlook, given the historical trend toward farm consolidation in Schoharie County as across the nation, appears to preclude any spectacular renaissance of Jewish farming. An occasional Jewish family may attempt to give the Schoharie County soil a go. Meanwhile, the third-generation Rubin, twenty-seven year old Alan, works with his father on the dairy farm, but concentrates almost totally on the farm machinery part of the agribusiness. Alan Westheimer, a sophomore at Cornell, studies agriculture and plans to join his father in their vegetable growing and packing business. Although Alan has met several Jewish agricultural students at Cornell, the cards may be stacked against him. In a course on rural sociology, he learned that the percentage of American farmers who are Jewish is zero.³²

Farmers like Alan Westheimer's and Alan Rubin's grandfathers, who came to Schoharie County between 1935 and 1955, successfully shattered the urban Jewish stereotype. Initially they were "strangers in an alien territory." Most became "residents." They showed that there is much that the Jew can receive from the American rural tradition, and it is easy for him to become part of it, without sacrificing one iota of his Jewishness.³³

³¹ Since the completion of this article, Mrs. Ilse Levy has died.

³² The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* estimated that as of the late 1960's there were fewer than 10,000 American Jewish farmers, or less than .1 per cent of all U.S. farmers were Jewish.

³³ Gerald M. Phillips. "Letter to the Editor." *Commentary* (Feb., 1960), 163.