

ARTICLES

Jewish Women in the Central Appalachian Coal Fields, 1890–1960: From Breadwinners to Community Builders

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When Bessie Zaltzman died in 1949, she left most of her estate to her son Louis. This was not a trifling amount, because entirely through her own efforts she had amassed a small fortune worth \$84,000. Starting out fifty years earlier with nothing but a shiftless husband whom she divorced around 1905, she managed to acquire a cow and scraped together a living for herself and her three small children, selling butter and milk. Eventually she had a few cows, a small shop to sell her wares, and then some real estate. She became a landlady, owning small residential properties and overcoming crises that included floods, fires, and lawsuits. Not only was she a determined businesswoman, she was also determined until the end of her life to maintain her commitment to Orthodox Judaism. Of her two surviving children, she left only a token amount to her son Abe, who had disaffiliated with the Jewish community. She did, however, instruct Louis to make sure that Abe was never in economic distress and established a Kaddish fund to ensure that her errant son would be properly mourned after his death. She also left money to Jewish charities and three synagogues: one in Jerusalem and the others in Bluefield and Keystone, West Virginia, in the coal fields where she had spent her entire adult life after emigrating from Russia as a teenager.¹

Bessie Zaltzman was a woman of strong will, as her business enterprise and her frequent clashes with other members of Keystone's Jewish community show. The outlines of her life represent a somewhat unusual, but by no means implausible, trajectory for an East European Jewish woman of her day. Although it is tempting to dwell in detail on the life of this fascinating woman, she is cited here as just one telling example of the role played by Jewish women in the coal fields of central Appalachia. From the late 1890s and well into the post-World War II era, women were essential to the creation and maintenance of numerous, small, Jewish coal field communities. Their economic

contributions allowed their households to survive and prosper within a notoriously unstable local economy, while their concern with creating a Jewish environment for themselves and their families led them to become the driving force behind Jewish communal organization. Not only did their efforts enable Jewish communities to flourish deep in the mountains of central Appalachia, their commitment to transmitting their heritage to their children under less-than-ideal conditions demonstrates how women in small-town America ensured the maintenance of Jewish continuity for future generations.

The Great Migration of East European Jews to America coincided with the development of the nation's southern coal fields, which began in earnest in the early 1880s and peaked during World War I. In just a few short years, the coal industry transformed a thinly populated region of Appalachian Mountain farm families to a rural-industrial society controlled by large companies, with a growing work force and a pressing need for commercial services to support the new industrial activity. Newcomers from a variety of ethnic groups flocked to central Appalachia, attracted by the opportunities of a booming economy. Most of them—African Americans from other parts of the South and immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe—went to work in the coal mines. But others, especially Jewish immigrants, sought to provide retail services to a growing population. The Jews who came to the region followed a pattern exhibited by a significant minority of East European Jewish immigrants; as many as 30 percent of the migration stream chose not to settle in New York and other major port cities, but rather to search for opportunities for self-employment in smaller cities and towns across the nation. In the coal fields, their success in constructing a niche within the small commercial sector of an overwhelmingly industrial economy enabled them to establish their own small yet vital communities. Between the 1890s and 1930s, Jews from Eastern Europe founded congregations in nine small coal field towns in southern West Virginia, southeastern Kentucky, and southwestern Virginia.²

The survival of these Jewish coal field communities depended on three requirements. First, like everyone else in the region, Jewish families had to provide for themselves within the confines of the coal economy. Second, they had to feel comfortable enough with their social environment to make the commitment to stay. Third, they

couldn't become so comfortable as to completely assimilate into the surrounding culture. An internal desire to maintain their distinct identity, their religion, and at least some version of their cultural practices had to motivate them. As many historians of small-town Jewry have noted, maintenance of Jewish identity was especially difficult for Jews who lived far from the centers of American Jewry as tiny minorities in the midst of an overwhelmingly Christian population. In all of these dimensions—economic, social, and cultural—Jewish women played a crucial role in sustaining their families and communities.³

Despite the opportunities of a growing economy, members of the region's commercial sector faced daunting challenges. The boom-and-bust nature of the coal industry caused frequent periods of wage cuts and layoffs that shriveled the purchasing power of the local work force. Strikes and other forms of labor conflict, endemic to the coal fields, also severely affected local merchants. National downturns, such as the Great Depression, hit coal fields even harder than other places because of the reliance on a single industry. Many local businesses faced the experience of losing everything and starting again from scratch, with bankruptcies not uncommon. Meanwhile, during the good times, payday Saturdays would find the stores crowded with shoppers and their owners would have to scramble to meet the demand.⁴

Like other groups in the U.S. and in the coal fields, Jews devised strategies based on their old-country traditions and experiences to overcome adverse economic conditions. One major strategy was a reliance on the family economy. Small Jewish businesses in America were true family businesses, with wives and children working alongside husbands and fathers to help make ends meet. Daughters as well as sons helped in the store from an early age. In the coal fields, young women as well as men not only worked for their parents, but also took jobs as sales clerks at other stores in order to contribute to the household income. Many coal field families in the early years took in boarders, a responsibility that fell entirely on the wives. Jews who grew up in the region during the 1920s and 1930s recalled that at the very least, their mothers "helped out" in the family store during busy times. But "helping out," though it was the accepted term to describe a wide range of women's economic activities, greatly understates the

contributions to the household economy made by many of these women.⁵

Motivated by varying combinations of family need and personal fulfillment, Jewish coal field women often took on significant responsibilities in the family business. Some wives acted as their husband's business partner in decision making and division of labor, if not in a legal or financial sense. The division was often based on personality, with the more outgoing partner serving customers and the more reserved one handling behind-the-scenes tasks such as bookkeeping. If the family owned more than one store, the wife sometimes managed a store. One man related that after his father went bankrupt in the Depression, his mother went to work in the



Family portrait of Totz Family, circa 1900. From left, 1st row: Harry Merowitz, Lena Lazarus Totz, Moses Totz, Bessie Forman Totz, Lena Totz Merowitz. From left, 2nd row: Abe Totz, Louis Totz, Harry Totz, Jenny Merowitz, Sarah Merowitz, Isaac Merowitz, Israel Totz. (Courtesy Nancy Brant)

family's next business venture out of necessity. Yet she remained active once conditions improved, which suggests that she was too important, or enjoyed it too much, to quit. One woman remarked that for her mother, the store "was her life." She liked working and would spend most days at the store. Of course, this did not absolve her from

domestic chores, and she could often be found cleaning the house at 2:00 a.m. Another woman recalled that her mother did just about everything in their small, family, dry goods store, from serving customers to altering clothing to traveling with her husband to New York on buying trips. In many ways this was a hardship for the family; as the daughter stated, "We were latchkey kids." Yet she saw her mother as a role model of strength and ability, proudly calling her a "tremendous buyer." Meanwhile, her mother had "no social life," torn between work and home duties. But she looked forward to the New York trips, where she and her husband would splurge on the opera.⁶

Many immigrant groups of the era had a history of married women helping to earn income for the family, mostly by working in the home or in a family business. For Jewish women, religious custom made it even more acceptable to play a major economic role. Since the cultural ideal for Jewish men in Eastern Europe was a life devoted to religious study, a woman who could operate a business to support the family while her husband pursued his scholarship earned respect and praise. Although Eastern Europe's economic realities made this ideal possible for very few families, the concept of a married woman as breadwinner was ingrained in traditional culture. Jews who grew up in the coal fields recounted many instances of grandmothers owning or operating small shops in Eastern Europe, New York, or Baltimore, and their daughters who came to the region simply built on their example.⁷

Coal field census records and business directories from 1900 to 1920 listed married Jewish women as owners of clothing stores, dry goods stores, and confectionaries. In later years they owned pharmacies, jewelry stores, and even one auto supply business. Some of these women had husbands who operated their own separate businesses, such as Blanche Sohn, who owned a confectionary and then a dry goods store while her husband, Eli, operated a saloon and later a clothing store from around 1904 to 1920. When the couple went into business together, she did the buying, according to a 1920 local newspaper item that informed readers, "Mrs. Eli Sohn is in the markets purchasing spring millinery. She will buy largely for the approaching season. Mr. Eli Sohn is painting the front of his store building in a very handsome style." A few women entrepreneurs, such as Bessie Zaltzman, had husbands who either could not or would not support them. More common were widows who took over their late husband's business or started one after his death, sometimes in

partnership with grown sons. Mollie Gaskell, widowed in 1912 at age twenty-seven, became one of Williamson, West Virginia's, most respected merchants and a Jewish community leader as proprietor of the Williamson Bargain House (under the name M. V. Gaskell). Ethel Catzen Cohen inherited and managed her father's extensive business interests in Northfork, West Virginia, where he had been the chief real estate developer.⁸

Despite the respect local Jewish communities showed to most of these women, Bessie's story reveals it was possible to overstep the boundaries of accepted female behavior. As early as 1902 she became embroiled in a number of legal battles against Jewish businessmen which blazed in the local courts for years. One man tried to take advantage of her weak position as a divorced woman by holding her liable for a loan he had made to her ex-husband. His motivation may have been purely economic, but there is a hint of moral disapproval on the part of her opponents as well. Before her divorce, this man had spread rumors that she was having an affair—rumors that were probably true. Some years later, another Jewish man, whom she had sued over a sick cow she had purchased from him, advised her that she needed to get herself a husband. Her retort: "I don't have to have no husband. I have got good children and I have got good property."⁹

Certainly the Jewish tradition of female entrepreneurship contradicted the modern, middle-class ideal that a woman's place was in the home. After the immigrant generation passed away, it became less common for women to be heavily involved in the family business—or operate their own business—except out of necessity. One woman interviewed for this article acted as her husband's business partner into the 1970s because she enjoyed it and because she had grown up in her parents' family business. Yet she saw herself as an exception. More typical in the post-World War II era was a woman described by her son as "99 percent a homemaker," a woman whose ambition "was to be a good hausfrau." Since she had been forced to quit school in the sixth grade in Baltimore to help her struggling family by working in the needle trade, the middle-class ideal probably came as welcome relief from a life of toil. Nevertheless, in many Jewish coal field families, single daughters continued to work as teachers, stenographers, nurses, and even manager of a local radio station, while a few married women remained active in the family business into the third generation, long after economic security had

been achieved. Once a family business became successful, women who did choose to stay involved often had their household duties relieved by a live-in maid (a common presence in middle- and upper-middle-class households in the coal fields and throughout the South).¹⁰

Interviews with Jews who grew up in the region, men and women now in their seventies and eighties, reveal a sense of pride in their mother's strength, capability, and resourcefulness, as demonstrated to their children by their economic activities. As one man said approvingly, "my mother had a good business head on her." Another remembered his mother as a "bright, feisty little woman" who pragmatically chose to work as a saleslady in another family's dress shop as the best way to earn an income after her husband's early death. This same combination of determination and confidence in helping to meet their families' economic needs would also characterize the efforts of Jewish coal field women to meet the religious and cultural needs of their small communities.¹¹

While women's economic activities built on East European customary practices and went against the tide of middle-class American life, their actions in the communal arena would be at odds with Jewish tradition and well in keeping with modern American religious and social trends. Jewish women in Eastern Europe may have been accepted as breadwinners in the marketplace, but their religious role was strictly confined to home and family. Their responsibilities were not trivial; since much of Jewish ritual takes place within the home, women's religious duties were recognized as significant. Nevertheless, their role was clearly subservient to that of men, who carried out the supreme command to study the sacred texts and who went daily to the synagogue to pray. As feminist historians have noted, one of those prayers provides a telling view of the female position in traditional Judaism, as the men expressed their thanks to God for not making them women.¹²

A variety of factors converged to lead Jewish coal field women into the traditionally male communal realm. In the first place, somewhat paradoxically, Jewish immigrant women who settled in the region were more likely than their male counterparts to remain loyal to their traditional upbringing. After all, it was usually their husbands, fathers,

and brothers who had made the choice to follow business opportunities rather than remain in the sheltering embrace of Jewish neighborhoods in the cities. Women were often reluctant, or at least had reservations, about leaving their families behind to move to an area where few Jews lived and where it would not be easy to maintain a traditional Jewish life. As one woman said in an interview, "I can't tell you how my mother reacted coming from Brooklyn, New York, to Scarbro, West Virginia." Her mother in fact exclaimed to her husband, "You brought me to a wilderness!"¹³

Economic imperatives would continue to drive the men. Though many of them were attached to the traditions themselves, they were willing to make sacrifices because making a living had to come first. The first ritual to go, of course, was observance of the Sabbath, since Saturdays were the busiest shopping days at the coal fields. Spending the day in prayer, study, and rest was completely out of the question. The men also found it impossible to hold daily prayer services. Also, as Williamson Jewish leader Ida Bank stated in a 1926 speech reviewing the progress of her local congregation, "petty business jealousies" had prevented the men from coming together to address communal needs. Some men did take on religious and communal responsibilities, from merchants who acted as lay rabbis and community leaders to ordained rabbis imported by the local congregations. But women soon became the prime movers in attempts to maintain Jewish identity and practice both within and outside the home.¹⁴

Their efforts began in the home, where women observed as many rituals as possible. They continued to light candles on the Sabbath and tried to follow the dietary practices of Orthodox Judaism. Difficulties in obtaining kosher meat and other kosher foods led most of them to gradually abandon strict observance, but they continued to prepare traditional meals, especially on the holidays. Some of their strategies were clearly ineffective, if sincere: one man recalls that his mother brought her own knives to the local (non-Jewish) butcher and asked him to use them to carve her cuts of meat. Jews who grew up in the coal fields remember the strenuous attempts their mothers made to keep a Jewish home. Even if the women eventually had to give up various traditions, the effort in itself made a strong impression on their children and went a long way toward reinforcing a Jewish identity. With fathers consumed by work and rarely home, almost all the

people interviewed for this article pointed to their mother's influence as being decisive. As one woman typically remarked, "[M]y mother instilled a lot of Judaism into us."¹⁵

The piety of an individual woman inspired one town's Jewish population to take its first steps toward communal organization. Sana Moskovitch Pickus came from Russia to join her three grown sons in



*From left: unidentified, Rebecca Spector, Bessie Spector
(courtesy Nancy Brant)*

Beckley, West Virginia, in 1921, and the small Jewish community held its first religious services in honor of her arrival. The following year, the town's Jewish women organized a religious school for the children, which they operated for more than ten years before the congregation itself was officially founded. Their action was highly typical of

Jewish women in other small American towns, both in the coal fields and beyond.¹⁶

As their concern with maintaining a Jewish way of life in the home spilled into the communal realm, women in small towns often organized religious groups or activities well in advance of the formal establishment of congregations. For example, the Jewish Ladies Guild of Williamson convened in 1913 as the town's first Jewish organization. As one of its early leaders wrote, the Ladies Guild "was organized for social reasons and also to take care of the needy Jewish traveling poor who were very numerous at that time." The three motives that caused Jewish women in the coal fields to come together—to educate their children, to meet charitable needs, and to improve their social life—also typified the objectives that caused Jewish women in other American small towns to coalesce. Mutual aid and organized charity to the Jewish poor were deep-rooted concepts in religious and communal life. Traditionally, men oversaw these functions, but women in small-town America often took them over when the men failed to act. The activities of most of the coal field ladies aid societies started with assistance to transient Jews who were as much of an embarrassment to the Jewish community as anything

else; generally, charity took the form of money for a meal and a train ticket out of town. The women also made donations or small loans to local families, Jewish and non-Jewish, that had fallen on hard times. In the context of providing charity, the women could also enjoy social gatherings with other Jewish women—a considerable incentive.¹⁷

As the women became more organized and expanded their fund raising, their activities reveal stronger assertions of Jewish identity. As a typical example, in the early 1920s the annual beneficiaries of the Hebrew Ladies Aid Society of Welch, West Virginia, included an orphan asylum in Palestine, the Orthodox Jewish Home for the Aged in Cincinnati, and the matzo funds of New York and Baltimore. The women also raised money to help destitute rabbis and other poverty-stricken Jews in the old country, including the “hunger-suffering” sister of Keystone’s rabbi. In later years, support for Zionist groups such as Hadassah became prevalent. Contributing to Jewish causes in faraway places, from Baltimore to Israel, kept the women in touch with the currents of modern Jewry and enabled them to keep from feeling isolated in their coal field homes.¹⁸

But the women recognized that these coal field homes deserved their attention as well and that there were local Jewish issues that desperately needed to be addressed. They soon turned their attention to the critical goal of passing their heritage on to their children. In Beckley this goal provided the motivating force to organize, and other coal field women’s groups also considered it a key priority. The Williamson Ladies Guild founded a religious school in 1916—still several years before the congregation officially came into existence. In her 1926 speech, Ida Bank recalled that there were “five children who attended our first Sabbath School and I was their teacher, with no experience in this work, with no instructions, only with the will and ambition to do something for the children along religious lines and to help them on the path to Judaism.” Another leader, Ida Nabe, identified the three main functions of the group: “First, religious instruction of our children; second, the support of our charities and institutions; third, helpful in all things congregational.” A Jewish man who grew up in Logan, West Virginia, recalled that “the little [religious] education we had” was provided by women and the occasional visiting rabbi. The Welch congregation had a local rabbi to instruct their children, but he needed the occasional assistance of the women, whose role was “to make the children be good.”¹⁹

Ida Nabe's phrase, "helpful in all things congregational," is misleading, since it sounds more like a supportive than a leading role. In actuality, after seeing to their children's education, the coal field women's groups embarked on an ambitious agenda to promote full-fledged Jewish congregations with regular religious services, programs, and, most important, places of worship. The women poured their energy into raising funds to build synagogues. They also organized and cooked for the religious/social events that held communities together: Hanukkah parties, Purim festivals, community seders. They organized trips to large cities to buy kosher and holiday foods. They made sure that the single men in their midst had a family to go to during Jewish holidays and they hosted visiting rabbis in their homes. When new Jewish families moved into town, they immediately visited the wives and applied peer pressure if necessary to get them to join in. They were not above a little arm twisting in their efforts to maintain group cohesion; members who missed meetings without a valid excuse received a fine.²⁰

The progression from an initial concern with charity to religious education of the children to congregational development—in other words, the evolution from Ladies Aid Society to Temple Sisterhood—was the common pattern of American Jewish women's groups of the first half of the twentieth century. Some historians, such as Jenna Weissman Joselit and William Toll, downplay the sisterhood role as being essentially auxiliary, while others, such as Jacob Rader Marcus and Sherry Blanton, recognize it as crucial to the very existence of Jewish communities in small towns. Beth Wenger notes that the role of Jewish women in congregational development was indeed significant but often masked because it took place offstage. She points out that Jewish women served as "unseen caretakers of communal needs. . . . It was not uncommon for women's groups to raise money and then allow male-dominated synagogue boards to allocate the funds."²¹

Research from the coal fields supports the view that women's role in communal organization was critical, not merely auxiliary, yet, as Wenger suggests, often hidden. As elsewhere, men were the ones who actually incorporated Jewish institutions, spoke at dedication ceremonies for the newly built synagogues, and served on the boards. Certainly, some men did play a strong role in organizing religious activities and raising funds. But they often needed considerable

prodding, and women were a necessary behind-the-scenes force. For example, in Welch the men had a mutual aid society of their own. Yet the ladies, in a 1919 meeting, voted to help the men "in making their meetings more interesting and get the members to attend the meetings better." As might be guessed, this mostly involved serving meals. The men's society revived but eventually disbanded. Later, after the synagogue was built, the newly named Welch Sisterhood kept things together, since, as one woman put it at the time, the men "have had no real organization, only a few men taking any interest in Temple matters at all."²²

So out of necessity, with the same pragmatism that guided their economic behavior, women moved their religious activities out of the home and into the communal realm previously denied them by tradition. With men spending most of their time on their businesses, Jewish coal field women began to see themselves as the guardians of religion, and the men were hard pressed to disagree. The women were participating in what Wenger has termed a "new, gender-based reorganization of Jewish communal life" that signified a "radical" alteration in women's traditional role. Yet in the coal fields, as elsewhere, this reorganization was not particularly controversial. For one thing, as long as women did not demand public recognition for their leadership, they did not overtly disturb preexisting notions about the proper communal power structure. Their new responsibilities could be seen simply as an extension of their customary task as nurturers and therefore, according to Joselit, "did not challenge prevailing assumptions."²³

More important, women's new role conformed to prevailing American social patterns. In society at large, men had mostly abdicated religious leadership in their full-time pursuit of capitalist success. Their abdication was accompanied by what historians such as Paula Hyman have referred to as the "feminization" of religious life in America and other industrial societies. Religion now fell into the domestic sphere where women reigned. Thus, for Jewish men and women anxious to Americanize without abandoning their religion and identity, the emergence of women's communal role was a natural and welcome occurrence.²⁴

Accompanying this development was a shift away from Orthodox Judaism and toward Reform Judaism, with its much less restrictive view of women. Almost all of the coal field congregations moved from

Orthodox to Reform during the 1920s, and the expanded activities of women certainly influenced this process. Yet even while breaking new ground, women clung to tenets of traditional Judaism that felt right to them. The Williamson Sisterhood, for example, sponsored an annual religious service in the 1920s which was led entirely by women. This surely would have been considered ridiculous in Eastern Europe, if not dangerously revolutionary. Yet the same women focused their education efforts on boys to make sure they were prepared for the traditional bar mitzvah. Many of them still tried their best to keep a kosher home, a practice considered obsolete by most followers of Reform Judaism at that time. In 1922 the Welch Sisterhood decided against affiliating with the Reform Movement's Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, instead opting to join the Women's League of the United Synagogue of America because "this league is Orthodox to its utmost." The following year the women changed their minds and joined the Reform group. Pragmatism had won out; the Federation had a West Virginia state affiliate that offered more in the way of resources and support.²⁵

Such contradictory and ambivalent behavior suggests that the process of change was not completely free of conflict. And despite societal support for women's increased communal involvement, some tension did occur along gender lines. In Logan controversy erupted when women tried to move their role from behind the scenes to the forefront, asking to be recognized as members of the congregation and entitled to seats on the board. The February 1925 minutes of the congregation, kept by Secretary Harry Stern, read as follows:

[The Sisterhood ladies said they] wanted to become members of our congregation and assist us in our work. They could not state how they could benefit us. This brought up considerable discussion pro and con with the result that it was decided to table this matter...until the Sisterhood could bring someone here who would be able to tell us more clearly the benefits of having the ladies of the Jewish community as active members of the B'nai El Congregation.

The men's response shows not only that there were boundaries women still would not be permitted to cross, but that their previous contributions, although critical, had gone unrecognized. The women

knew what to do about this, however. The following month the minutes note that the community seder normally held every year had been canceled, since "it would work a hardship on the ladies." After that the minutes record increased consultation with the sisterhood on matters such as taking care of a visiting rabbi and renting a permanent space to hold services. The men still would not accept the official membership of women, but voted to have joint meetings with the sisterhood board on "matters of importance."²⁶

Communal activities helped immigrant Jewish women adjust to a coal field environment that many of them had found alien on first arrival. The opportunity to socialize with women of similar background and to engage in cultural expressions that were important to them mitigated the consequences of living far from the centers of Jewish life and contributed to their willingness to remain in the region. Their daughters, who grew up in the coal fields, participated in Jewish women's groups on reaching adulthood. Communal involvement helped them maintain an identity that had been instilled by their parents. This generational continuity was necessary for Jewish communities to continue to thrive in the face of Americanization and integration into coal field society.

Assimilatory pressures beckoned because, despite the feelings of displacement that new arrivals may have experienced, Jews were far from unwelcome in their new surroundings. The emerging middle class of coal field merchants and professionals was too small to reject any potential members. They saw Jewish families as fellow contributors to the development of the region—people who brought skills and networks that were needed to progress. Indeed, Jewish families were among the founders of several coal field towns. Jewish men joined other merchants as small-town boosters and contributed to town development through their commercial and civic activities. And yet their religious and cultural distinctiveness in an area of devout Christianity meant that Jews could never be complete "insiders," even if they wanted to be. Torn between assimilating into middle-class society and maintaining their separate identity—and aware that by remaining religiously and culturally different, they would always be viewed by their neighbors as not quite fitting in—coal field Jews

developed strategies to negotiate the subtle terrain between difference and belonging. Their communal organizations represented one key strategy: the congregations, the B'nai B'rith lodges, and the women's groups helped to mediate between the Jewish collective and the surrounding society.²⁷

The ladies aid societies and sisterhoods enabled Jewish coal field women to express their separate identity, yet in ways that were similar and acceptable to their middle-class Christian counterparts, since women's church groups were extremely popular at the time. Without their own organizations they found themselves assimilating perhaps further than they intended: Jewish women in Welch first belonged to the Women's Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church before organizing the Welch Hebrew Ladies Aid Society in 1915. With their own communal groups facilitating their interaction, Jewish women could freely and respectably join with other middle-class women in social clubs and charity work. Their organizational activities extended beyond their own community, for example to Salvation Army rummage sales, Red Cross flood relief efforts, and distributing annual Christmas baskets to the poor during the Depression. They also held events to promote Jewish-Christian understanding and to educate their neighbors, who often showed considerable ignorance about Judaism. The Williamson Sisterhood held an annual "Neighbor Night," when each member invited one of their Christian friends to Friday night services. The Welch Sisterhood participated in the Welch United Council of Churches in the late 1940s and early 1950s, although the Williamson Sisterhood bowed out of their local branch in 1947, having decided, according to one leader, that "we have no place in this organization."²⁸

Despite this hint that interfaith relations were not always pleasant, the coal field version of Jewish women's religious articulation could take some rather ecumenical forms. In the 1920s, before the Beckley congregation acquired its own building, the sisterhood "aided in the holding of religious services . . . at the Beckley Presbyterian Church, with a non-Jewish choir, and with a student rabbi from the Hebrew Union College." In preparing to furnish their new temple in 1922, Welch Sisterhood members visited some of the town's newer churches to see how Christian women had furnished *their* places of worship. Things got a little ridiculous in 1935 when the Williamson Sisterhood minutes saw fit to report that "the flowers in the temple on

Easter Sunday were sent by Mr. Hammond of the Mark Russell Seed Co."²⁹

While most socializing occurred within their own group, among people they felt entirely at ease with, Jewish women did not remain sheltered behind their ethnic associations. Indeed, some Gentiles became full-fledged sisterhood members; the *History of the Beckley Jewish Community* acknowledges the active contributions of women "who had married Jewish men, either with or without becoming formally attached [through conversion] to Judaism." Most Jewish women mixed easily with other residents of coal field towns, and those from pioneering families were accorded particular respect. In a 1920 eulogy of one such woman, the Welch newspaper stated:

Mrs. [Pauline] Josephy was one of the most popular ladies of the city and enjoyed a broad friendship. She was active in business and charitable circles and her untimely death caused a shadow of sincere sorrow to sweep the entire city... She had been a resident of Welch for a number of years and assisted her husband in the conduct of a flourishing store here.

Mrs. Josephy's friends in the Methodist women's society (of which she had formerly been a member) passed a resolution expressing its "love for and appreciation of [her] life and beautiful character." Local newspapers also noted the contributions of Jewish women to civic life and what passed for "high society" in these rugged little towns. In 1922 the Welch newspaper praised the "delightful" dinner served by the Welch Sisterhood at a Chamber of Commerce meeting. (On the menu: chicken fricassee, string beans, mashed potatoes, celery, liver salad, pickles, hot rolls, and French pudding with wine sauce.) A 1933 society column item called a sisterhood event "the most brilliant social affair to be held in Welch this season."³⁰

Certainly this congenial atmosphere helped Jewish women become comfortable with their lives in the coal fields. For some, however, interaction with non-Jews had its dangers. One woman who grew up in the region admitted that her mother did not want her to have gentile friends, and especially discouraged her friendship with boys, fearing that it would lead to intermarriage. Another woman stopped speaking to her daughter for several years after she married a local non-Jewish man. Eventually intermarriage became a fact of life

that the older generation was forced to accept, although their efforts to deter it were at least partly successful. Many second-generation coal field Jews stated in interviews that despite their friendships with non-Jews, their parents had passed on to them a strong aversion to intermarriage that caused them to make special efforts to find Jewish mates.³¹

For at least three generations of Jewish women, communal work helped resolve the tension between the urge to fit in and Americanize, and the urge to preserve their cultural heritage and lead a Jewish life. Communal activities served as both expressions of Jewish values and ways to interact with non-Jews. Their organizations were in perfect social conformity with those of the churchwomen around them, thus allowing them to retain a distinct identity and blend in at the same time. Indeed, as many historians of small-town American Jewry have pointed out, forming their own religious groups helped legitimate the Jewish population in the eyes of the larger society, especially in the religion-soaked atmosphere of the South. That motivation no doubt pertained to the coal fields as well; the interfaith activities of Jewish women's groups reveal a desire to interact with gentile women on equal terms. Alternatively, women's communal activities enabled them to enter into larger coal field society, have social intercourse with others, yet have a familiar base to return to. This base provided a refuge not just from assimilation, but also from undercurrents of anti-Semitism which were certainly not absent and were occasionally felt by Jews who grew up in the region. Communal solidarity also helped assuage whatever underlying discomfort may have been caused by a ubiquitous Christianity that in some of its forms could be alienating or even threatening.³²

Despite Jewish women's successful efforts to foster community, factors undermined Jewish community life. Women who grew up in the region often went away to college (partly motivated by the desire to find Jewish husbands), and most of them did not return. They were replaced, in a demographic sense, when local Jewish men who went off to college brought wives back with them when they came home to enter the family business. Ultimately, however, economic conditions would prove fatal to Jewish life in the coal fields. Starting in the mid-

1950s, a drastic and sustained decline in the coal field economy caused local businesses to suffer and led young people to make their lives elsewhere. Of the nine coal field congregations, most disappeared by the 1980s, though two still remain today. But for the first half of the century, Jewish women's communal, economic, and social activities helped carve out a place for Jewish communities in the coal fields. Their efforts advanced the cause of Jewish continuity by instilling a Jewish identity that persists in their descendants, wherever they may live.³³

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NOTES:

1. Will Book 6, 496, Deed Books 36, 79, 92, 93, 101, 102, 105, 112, 132, 159, Circuit Court records 1909–10, McDowell County Courthouse, Welch, W.Va.; U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Census, McDowell County, W.Va., 1900; Louis Zaltzman, letter to Abraham I. Shinedling, reprinted in Abraham I. Shinedling, *West Virginia Jewry: Origins and History, 1850–1958* (Philadelphia: Maurice Jacobs, Inc., 1963), 986.

2. On the history of central Appalachia and the development of its coal fields, see Mary Beth Pudup, Dwight Billings, and Altina Waller, eds., *Appalachia in the Making: The Mountain South in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Ronald D. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880–1930* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982); Randall G. Lawrence, "Appalachian Metamorphosis: Industrializing Society on the Central Appalachian Plateau, 1860–1913" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1983); Jerry Bruce Thomas, "Coal Country: The Rise of the Southern Smokeless Coal Industry and its Effect on Area Development, 1872–1910" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1971). On the tendency of some East European Jewish immigrants to journey beyond America's large metropolitan areas, see for example Joel Perlmann, "Beyond New York: The Occupations of Russian Jewish Immigrants in Providence, R.I. and Other Small Jewish Communities, 1900–1915," *American Jewish History* 72 (March 1983): 369–94; Ewa Morawska, *Insecure Prosperity: Small-Town Jews in Industrial America, 1890–1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). On the economic niche constructed by coal field Jews, see Deborah R. Weiner, "Middlemen of the Coalfields: The Role of Jews in the Economy of Southern West Virginia Coal Towns, 1890–1950," *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 4 (Spring 1998): 29–56. The nine coal field congregations were located in Beckley, Keystone, Kimball, Logan, Welch, and Williamson, West Virginia; Harlan and Middlesboro, Kentucky; and Pocahontas, Virginia. A tenth congregation was located on the edge of the coal fields in the regional center of Bluefield, West Virginia. Shinedling, *West Virginia Jewry*; Harlan, Kentucky, Congregation B'nai Sholom Records (includes congregation, sisterhood, and B'nai B'rith), Small Collections, The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American

Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio (hereafter AJA); "Student Rabbi Survey, 1935-1936," Hebrew Union College Collection (AJA).

3. On the maintenance of Jewish identity in small-town America, see Lee Shai Weissbach, "East European Immigrants and the Image of Jews in the Small Town South," *American Jewish History* 85 (September 1997): 231-62; Leonard Rogoff, "Synagogue and Jewish Church: A Congregational History of North Carolina," *Southern Jewish History* 1 (1998): 43-81; Abraham Karp, *Haven and Home: A History of the Jews in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985); Marshall Sklare, *America's Jews* (New York: Random House, 1971); Abraham D. Lavender, ed., *A Coat of Many Colors: Jewish Subcommunities in the United States* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977). On Jewish identity in the coal fields, see Frank Anthony Fear, "The Quest for Saliency: Patterns of Jewish Communal Organization in Three Appalachian Small Towns," (master's thesis, West Virginia University, 1972); and Jerome Paul David, "Jewish Consciousness in the Small Town: A Sociological Study of Jewish Identification," (master's thesis, Hebrew Union College, 1974).

4. On the economic conditions faced by coal field merchants, see Weiner, "Middlemen of the Coalfields."

5. John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); Judith E. Smith, *Family Connections: A History of Italian and Jewish Immigrant Lives in Providence, Rhode Island, 1900-1940* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985); Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonya Michel, *The Jewish Woman in America* (New York: Dial Press, 1976); Morawska, *Insecure Prosperity*. On the economic activities of Jewish family members in the coal fields, see U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Census, Fayette, Logan, McDowell, Mingo Counties, W.Va., and Tazewell County, Va., 1900, 1910, 1920; *Beckley City Directory 1932* (Pittsburgh: R. L. Polk & Co., 1932); *Williamson, West Virginia, City Directory, 1952* (Chillicothe, Ohio: Mullin-Kille Co.) and *Williamson Daily News, 1952*; Shinedling, *West Virginia Jewry*, 512.

6. Martha Albert, interview with author, Williamson, W.Va., November 8, 1996; Gail Bank, phone interview with author, September 28 and October 4, 1998; Sidney Fink, interview with author, Beckley, W.Va., October 12, 1996; Bernard Gottlieb, interview with author, Clarksburg, W.Va., November 5, 1996; Reva Totz Hecker, interview with author, Baltimore, Md., November 5, 1998; Emanuel Katzen, interview with author and Maryanne Reed, Princeton, W.Va., May 30, 1996; Lou Mankoff, interview with author and Maryanne Reed, Williamson, W.Va., March 1996; Ira and Mary Jo Sopher, interview with author, Beckley, W.Va., October 13, 1996; Jean Abrams Wein, interview with author, Beckley, W.Va., October 13, 1996; Sam and Harvey Weiner, interview with author, Logan, W.Va., November 8, 1996; Milton Koslow, interview with author, Charleston, W.Va., May 13, 1998; Irving Alexander, "Wilcoe: People of a Coal Town," *Goldenseal* 16 (Spring 1990): 28-35; U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Census, McDowell and Logan Counties, W.Va., Tazewell County, Va., 1920; *Beckley City Directory 1940* (Pittsburgh: R. L. Polk & Co., 1940). Manuel Pickus, interview with author, Charleston, W.Va., May 18, 1998; Betty Ofsa Rosen, interview with author and Maryanne Reed, Williamson, W.Va., May 28, 1996; Betty Schuchat Gottlieb, interview with author, Parkersburg, W.Va., December 18, 1997.

7. Bodnar, *The Transplanted*; Smith, *Family Connections*; Thomas Kessner and Betty Boyd Caroli, "New Immigrant Women at Work: Italians and Jews in New York City, 1880-1905," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 5, no. 4 (Winter 1978): 19-31; Marc Zborowski

and Elisabeth Herzog, *Life Is with People: The Jewish Little-Town of Eastern Europe* (New York: International Universities Press, 1952); Baum, et al., *The Jewish Woman in America*; Paula E. Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995); Irene D. Neu, "The Jewish Businesswoman in America," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 66 (1976-77): 137-54.

8. U.S. Census Bureau, Manuscript Census, McDowell and Mingo Counties, 1910, 1920; *Beckley City Directory*, 1932, 1940; Kitts City and Coalfield Directory, 1904 (Bluefield, W.Va.: City Directory Co., 1904); *Bluefield City Directory, 1910-1911* (Pittsburgh: R. L. Polk & Co., 1910); *Bluefield City Directory, 1915-1916* (Pittsburgh: R. L. Polk & Co., 1914); *West Virginia State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1900-1901, 1904-5, 1910-11, 1914-15* (Pittsburgh: R. L. Polk & Co.); *Williamson Daily News*, February 6, 1920, p. 4; Shinedling, *West Virginia Jewry*, 803, 1102, 1302; Abraham I. Shinedling and Manuel Pickus, *History of the Beckley Jewish Community* (Beckley, W.Va.: Biggs-Johnston-Withrow, 1955), 20, 44, 56; Martha Albert interview.

9. In 1902 Sam Katzen sued Jake Shore for slander for spreading the rumor that he and Bessie (separated from her husband but not yet divorced) were living together. Bessie and Jake were already engaged in a property dispute by that time. Sam eventually dropped his suit and paid all court costs, which suggests that there was some truth behind the rumors. One lawsuit that Bessie was involved in ended up in the West Virginia Supreme Court, which overturned a decision against her and sent the matter back for retrial. While the outcome of most of her court battles could not be ascertained, it appears that at least one case was settled out of court after many years, perhaps because of the weariness of all concerned. Circuit Court records 1902, 1909, 1910, Deed Book 102, McDowell County Courthouse; "Zolsman vs. Totz," *West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals Book 74* (June 1914): 604-6.

10. Baum, et al., *The Jewish Woman in America*; Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*; Smith, *Family Connections*; Neu, "The Jewish Businesswoman in America"; Eli Evans, *The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 255-62; Martha Albert interview; Sidney Fink interview; Milton Koslow interview; Betty Ofsa Rosen interview; Shinedling, *West Virginia Jewry*, 1007, 1294; Rose Marino, *Welch and Its People* (Marceline, Mo.: Walsworth Press, 1985); Shinedling and Pickus, *History of the Beckley Jewish Community*, 20, 51, 64, 67; *Beckley City Directory*, 1940; *Williamson, West Virginia, City Directory, 1952*.

11. Bernard Gottlieb interview; Milton Koslow interview.

12. Zborowski and Herzog, *Life Is with People*; Baum, et al., *The Jewish Woman in America*; Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*; Jenna Weissman Joselit, "The Special Sphere of the Middle-Class American Jewish Woman: The Synagogue Sisterhood, 1890-1940," in *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, Jack Wertheimer, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 206-30.

13. Jean Abrams Wein interview. In her memoir *The Jew Store* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1998), Stella Suberman offers an eloquent description of her mother's reservations about leaving behind family and the Jewish community to accompany her husband to western Tennessee, where he opened a store.

14. Williamson, West Virginia, B'nai Israel Sisterhood Records, 1913-53, Microfilm Reel 348-49, AJA; Harlan congregation records; Shinedling and Pickus, *History of the Beckley Jewish Community*; Shinedling, *West Virginia Jewry*. As East European Jews adapted to American work patterns, the cessation of Sabbath observance of course

became a widespread phenomenon throughout the country, but especially in small towns where no internal Jewish economy existed. See Gerald Sorin, *A Time for Building: The Third Migration, 1880–1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 180–81; Morawska, *Insecure Prosperity*, 155–56.

15. Early on a few coal field towns had Orthodox rabbis who served as *schochets*. One or two Jewish merchants trained in *kashrut* took on the job of slaughtering chickens, but not all families had access to these sources of kosher meat. Some families tried ordering meat from Cincinnati, Ohio, or Charleston, West Virginia, but it often arrived spoiled. Lou Mankoff interview; Bernard Gottlieb interview; Milton Koslow interview; Jean Abrams Wein interview; Manuel Pickus interview; Sidney Fink interview; Reva Toltz Hecker interview. The phenomenon of “kitchen Judaism” as an important component of ethnic identity has been commented upon by many authors. See for example Morawska, *Insecure Prosperity*, 158.

16. Shinedling and Pickus, *History of the Beckley Jewish Community*, 81–86.

17. Williamson Sisterhood records; Harlan Sisterhood records; Welch, West Virginia, Congregation Emanuel records (includes Hebrew Ladies Aid Society, sisterhood, and B’nai B’rith records), Manuscript Collection, Box 379, AJA; Logan, West Virginia, Congregation B’nai El records (includes congregation, sisterhood, and B’nai B’rith records), Microfilm Reel 2125, AJA; Shinedling and Pickus, *History of the Beckley Jewish Community*, 127–28; Marino, *Welch and Its People*; Sherry Blanton, “Lives of Quiet Affirmation: The Jewish Women of Early Anniston, Alabama,” *Southern Jewish History* 2 (1999): 25–53; William Toll, “A Quiet Revolution: Jewish Women’s Clubs and the Widening Female Sphere, 1870–1920,” *American Jewish Archives* 41 (Spring/Summer 1989): 7–26; Jacob Rader Marcus, *The American Jewish Woman: A Documentary History* (New York: Ktav, 1981); Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*.

18. Sisterhood records, Williamson, Welch, Logan, Harlan; Shinedling and Pickus, *History of the Beckley Jewish Community*, 127.

19. Shinedling and Pickus, *History of the Beckley Jewish Community*, 86; Sisterhood records, Welch and Williamson; Sam Weiner interview.

20. Sisterhood records, Williamson, Welch, Logan, Harlan.

21. Joselit, “The Special Sphere”; Toll, “A Quiet Revolution”; Blanton, “Lives of Quiet Affirmation”; Beth S. Wenger, “Jewish Women and Voluntarism: Beyond the Myth of Enablers,” *American Jewish History* 79 (1989–90): 16–36. Marcus asserts, “it cannot be overemphasized: the synagogue—the Jewish community, too—was, and still is, dependent upon women.” (*The American Jewish Woman: A Documentary History*, 777).

22. Sisterhood records, Williamson, Welch, Logan, and Harlan; Shinedling and Pickus, *History of the Beckley Jewish Community*; Shinedling, *West Virginia Jewry*.

23. Wenger, “Jewish Women and Voluntarism,” 17, 21; Joselit, “The Special Sphere,” 223; Toll, “A Quiet Revolution.” One clue that women did not realize the radical nature of their foray into new gender territory was that they continued to refer to themselves by their husband’s name in all their organizational records. For the historian, some detective work is needed to discover that “Mrs. Hyman Bank” was really Ida. Sherry Blanton notes the same phenomenon in her study of the women of Anniston, Alabama.

24. Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*; Wenger, “Jewish Women and Voluntarism”; Joselit, “The Special Sphere”; Toll, “A Quiet Revolution.”

Hyman analyzes the paradox of Jewish women as "guardians of religion," pointing out how the role was at the same time tradition centered and modern, both assimilatory and nonassimilatory. By upholding tradition in the home, women conformed to family-centered notions of modern bourgeois religion; by their communal activities they attempted to preserve Jewish distinctiveness and Jewish culture while participating in larger American trends that ran counter to longstanding Jewish practice (see pages 26–31).

25. "Jewish Women Hold Services," *Mingo Republican*, December 3, 1926; Shinedling and Pickus, *History of the Beckley Jewish Community*; congregation records, Logan, Harlan, Welch.

26. Logan congregation minutes, 1925.

27. See Mary Beth Pudup, "Town and Country in the Transformation of Appalachian Kentucky," in Pudup, Billings, and Waller, eds., *Appalachia in the Making: The Mountain South in the Nineteenth Century*, 270–96, on the welcoming attitude that coal field local elites showed to newcomers who they considered to be fellow boosters. An investigation of coal field newspapers from the first three decades of the century uncovered numerous articles praising the commercial and civic endeavors of local Jewish merchants. See Weiner, "Middlemen of the Coalfields." Almost all of the people interviewed for this article expressed some version of the "insider-outsider" dichotomy. Many dismissed it as relatively unimportant to their lives, but for others it resulted in an ambivalence that emerged as they struggled to explain the subtle contradictions involved in their relations with non-Jews. Immigration historians have discussed how ethnic-based organizations, far from isolating their members and promoting separatism, actually aid in the assimilation process by mediating between old and new environments and helping immigrants adapt to their new homes. See for example Bodnar, *The Transplanted*.

28. Sisterhood records, Logan, Welch, Williamson. On Jewish communal groups mirroring middle-class Christian groups, see Toll, "A Quiet Revolution"; Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*; Rogoff, "Synagogue and Jewish Church."

29. Shinedling and Pickus, *History of the Beckley Jewish Community*, 127; Sisterhood records, Welch and Williamson. Evidently, the non-Jewish choir was not a particular innovation of Beckley Jews; according to Sherry Blanton, the Anniston temple choir "has been exclusively composed of Christians." ("Lives of Quiet Affirmation," 46).

30. Shinedling and Pickus, *History of the Beckley Jewish Community*, 130; *McDowell Recorder*, September 3 and 24, 1920; *McDowell Recorder*, January 20, 1922; *Welch Daily News*, October 24, 1933.

31. Jean Abrams Wein interview; Reva Totz Hecker interview; Betty Gottlieb interview; Bernard Gottlieb interview; Sam and Harvey Weiner interview; Gail Bank interview; Sidney Fink interview. An undetermined percentage of coal field Jews did discontinue their association with Judaism and the Jewish community, either because of intermarriage or for other reasons. Interviewees could name several individuals and families who, for all practical purposes, had "stopped being Jews." However, their number was far too small to threaten the existence of coal field Jewish communities.

32. On Jewish communal organization as a path to legitimacy in small-town society, see Evans, *The Provincials*, 93; Toll, "A Quiet Revolution"; Rogoff, "Synagogue and Jewish Church." Interviews with coal field Jews reveal an overall attitude that denied the existence of anti-Semitism yet acknowledged that Jews could be made to

feel different by the larger society, sometimes uncomfortably so. Also, local Christian radio shows, attempts to impose prayer in the public schools, and other manifestations of aggressive Christianity occasionally disturbed members of the Jewish coal field population.

33. For details on the decline of Jewish coal field communities, see Shinedling, *West Virginia Jewry*, and Weiner, "Middlemen of the Coalfields."