Traveling with Jewish Taste©

A Pittsfield "Stay-cation"

By Carol Goodman Kaufman

I have traveled to many places both around the world and in this country, but it recently struck me while trying to research my family tree that I had never written about my own hometown. Since we have so many second homeowners and tourists who may not know of the Jewish history of Pittsfield, I thought it would be fitting to provide a little flavor here.

Perhaps the earliest reference to a Jew in Pittsfield is all the way back in 1815, when it was reported that a boy dug up a set of tefillin while clearing employer Joseph Merrick's yard of rubbish on Fort Hill. When word went out of the discovery, clergy and scholars flocked to see the parchment, and ensuing articles published about the find caused quite a stir across the country.

Rosa and Lippman Kelm, one of twenty-five families that founded Temple Temple Anshe Amunim in 1869

An advertisement for England Brothers Department Store, circa 1975

At that time, many people believed that Native Americans were descended from the Lost Tribes of Israel, and they were convinced that the tefillin had been dropped by an ancient Israelite, having traveled across the Bering Strait or by boat across the Atlantic.

An article with the Agatha Christie-ish title, *The Case of the Missing Philactery* by William N. Goetzmann reports that the tefillin were donated to the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester on the condition that an article be written about them. The Society failed to write one, so they went to a New Jersey scholar, Elias Boudinot. When, upon his death, Boudinot's papers were donated to Yale University, the tefillin were not among them. They have not been seen since.

While Berkshire County now counts about 4,000 Jews as permanent residents, the first significant group to take up permanent residence in the factory and mill town was German peddlers.

Among them were Moses England, Joseph R. Newman, and Louis England in the year 1857. The England Brothers Department Store which reigned over North Street from 1857 to 1988 would come to boast an escalator, operated elevators, and all manner of offerings, from clothing to cosmetics, candy to Scout supplies. I can still hear the bell signaling the pneumatic tubes transporting money back and forth between departments to back offices.

Daniel England, elected the seventh mayor of Pittsfield in 1902. Rarely have Jews held high office in the city.

The peddlers were followed by all manner of craftsmen and provision dealers. Then, toward the end of the nineteenth century, a wave of Eastern European and Russian immigrants fleeing pogroms joined their co-religionists in multi-family homes in the northwest quadrant of the city.

My grandparents were among the latter group to arrive, and they fit the profile. Max and Fannie Goodman operated a grocery store and deli, first on Dewey Avenue, then on Pecks Road. My Bubby Sarah Deborah Katz ran a provisions store on John Street, while Zaydie Louis Katz taught Hebrew on the second floor of a house on Linden Street.

Elaine Epstein tells me that she paid a dollar a week for lessons.

One of Zaydie's students told me how impressed she was by the copious tears he would shed every spring upon reading the story of the Exodus from Egypt. When I repeated this to my mother, she laughed. Apparently, Zaydie suffered from allergies. Hence, the tears.

As Jews became more prosperous, many moved to the east side of town, while others moved further west. By 1930 over half of Pittsfield's Jews were involved in trade, twenty-five percent were clerical workers, about thirteen percent were factory workers, while less than three percent were manufacturers.

The purchase of land for a cemetery indicates the establishment of a Jewish community, but until the late 1800s puritanical Massachusetts outlawed Jewish cemeteries.

In fact, it refused naturalization to Jews. So, while wandering among gravestones may not be your idea of a fun time, it is a wonderful way to get a feel for the history of the city's Jews, and an excellent way to research one's family tree.

The earliest plots can be found in the Pittsfield Cemetery, where, in 1871 Temple Anshe Amunim, and in 1898 Congregation Knesset Israel, purchased land for burial plots.

Ahavath Sholem established its own cemetery on Churchill Street in 1912, and the Temple purchased acreage from that congregation in 1947 for further expansion of its cemetery. Knesset Israel acquired property for its own burial grounds on Pecks Road when the Pittsfield Cemetery plots were filled.

Of the city's synagogues, Temple Anshe Amunim (originally Amonim) founded, by twenty-five families in 1869 is the oldest – and the fourth oldest congregation in the Northeast. In 1882, the society occupied rooms at the corner of North and Fenn Streets. In 1904 the temple affiliated with the Reform movement, and, in 1959, it moved to its current location on Broad Street upon the donation of land by the England and Blau families.

Knesset Israel followed in 1893 as an Orthodox shul, catering to the needs of the more religiously rigorous Eastern European Jews.

However, at the instigation of Dr. Kenneth Goldblum, a Conservative congregation sprouted, and the subgroup moved to the Jewish Community Center on East Street. Knesset Israel moved to Wendell Avenue in 1954, where the current Berkshire Athenaeum now stands, and ultimately to Colt Road in 1974.

The name changed to the more modern, Sephardic Knesset Israel around this time, and this writer was the first bride to be married in the Colt Road building.

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Bagels

(Just Like My Bubbie Made?)

She ran the store and raised five children, but also managed to make her own bagels. Since I never tasted them myself, here is my approximation of a basic, plain bagel based on other recipes out there. New Yorkers will insist, of course, that Berkshire water won't suffice, but they are welcome to bring me a jug or two from the City and I will be happy to use it.

This recipe is a real *potchke*, but since it is broken down over two days, it should be manageable.

Ingredients

Dough:
1 tablespoon honey
1 teaspoon instant yeast
1-1/2 teaspoon salt
1 cup plus two tablespoons of lukewarm water
16 ounces unbleached bread flour*

Poaching Liquid:
2 to 3 quarts water
1 tablespoon of baking soda
1 teaspoon of salt

Directions:

Day One:

- Stir the honey, yeast, and salt into the lukewarm water.
- Place the flour into a mixing bowl and pour in the honey mixture.
- Using the dough hook of your mixer, blend on the lowest speed for three minutes. (The dough should form a stiff ball. If it is too dry, add a bit more water.)
- Let the dough rest for five minutes.
- Resume mixing with the dough hook on the lowest speed for another three minutes.
- The dough should be stiff yet supple, with a satiny, barely tacky feel. If the dough seems too soft or overly tacky, mix or knead in a little more flour.
- Place the dough in a clean, lightly oiled bowl, cover the bowl tightly with plastic wrap, and let the dough rise at room temperature for one hour.
- Line a cookie sheet with parchment paper, then coat with vegetable spray.
- Divide the dough into six to eight equal pieces.
- On a clean, dry work surface (no flour!), form each piece into a loose ball. For added traction, you may wipe the surface with a damp cloth.
- Roll the ball into a rope about eight inches long on a clean, dry work surface.
- Taper the rope slightly at each end and moisten the ends. Wrap the rope around your hand to make a circle, the ends overlapping by about two inches. Squeeze the ends together, then seal by pressing the seam into the work surface. The hole in the middle should be about two inches in diameter.
- Place each bagel onto the prepared sheet pan, then spray lightly with vegetable oil.
- Cover the pan with plastic wrap and refrigerate overnight.

Day Two:

- Remove the bagels from the refrigerator about an hour before you plan to bake them.

Check whether they are ready for baking using the "float test": Place one of the bagels in a small bowl of cold water. If it sinks and doesn't float back to the surface, shake it off, return it to the pan, and wait for another fifteen to twenty minutes, then test it again.

- About thirty minutes before baking, preheat the oven to 500°F (probably not good to do on a hot day).
- Fill a large pot with water to a depth of five inches. Cover and bring to a boil, then lower the heat to a simmer.
- Stir in the baking soda and salt.
- Gently lower each bagel into the simmering liquid, adding as many as will comfortably fit in the pot.
- After one minute, use a slotted spoon to turn each bagel over.
- Poach for another 30 to 60 seconds, then use the slotted spoon to transfer it back to the cookie sheet, domed side up.
- Transfer the pan of bagels to the oven, then lower the oven heat to 450°.
- Bake for eight minutes, then rotate the pan and check the underside of the bagels. If they're getting too dark, place another pan under the baking sheet.
- Bake for another eight to twelve minutes, until the bagels are a golden brown.
- Cool on a wire rack for at least 30 minutes before slicing or serving.
- Enjoy alone or with a *shmear*.

* Please note: Our culinary arts neighbor tells us that weighing the dry ingredients makes for better consistency.

Makes six to eight bagels

Jewish Education Today

Holocaust Education, Mandate, and Other Genocides

By Michele Alperin

If Holocaust education in U.S. public schools is to live up to the commitment of "never again," some experts believe that teaching the subject hand in hand with other genocides is what truly enables such efforts to influence future generations.

Linda Milstein – a volunteer at CChange, one of the many Holocaust centers providing materials, consultations, resources, and training to educators in New Jersey – says state-level Holocaust education requirements in America can work to "hopefully prevent genocides from happening in the future."

"If we want to try to prevent genocides and major abuses of human rights from happening, then the Holocaust becomes the exemplar of how a genocide developed and was carried out, and the effect that it had," said Milstein.

But simply having a state-level mandate does not ensure that this material becomes a substantive part of kindergarten through twelfth grade education. Individual educators are tasked with creating substantive classes, and funds must be allotted for pre-service and in-service teacher education, curricular development, coordination, and assessment.

Yet a public mandate still has symbolic value. A recent brouhaha in Pennsylvania highlights the passion of survivors and their children to ensure that schools teach the Holocaust, and how that meshes with political realities.

Rhonda Fink-Whitman, daughter of a survivor, started a personal lobbying effort for Pennsylvania to mandate statewide Holocaust education when a legislator she met at the Holocaust Awareness Museum and Education Center in Philadelphia told her about his problems passing a mandate bill.

For her effort, Fink-Whitman made a short video in which she interviewed college students from Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey. "The girl from New York and the girl from New Jersey were able to give me names, facts, figures, times, dates, places, but the kids from Pennsylvania couldn't even form those sentences. That's because Holocaust and genocide education has been mandated in New York and New Jersey since 1994," said Fink-Whitman.

Getting a state mandate is not so simple, as Hank Butler has learned. Butler, executive director of the Pennsylvania Jewish Coalition, said his organization has been working on Holocaust education for a couple of decades, and specifically on a mandate bill since 2009, when the state cut off the $60,000 in annual funding going to the Pennsylvania Holocaust Education Council – opposition to the mandate throughout the education establishment centered on the fear of setting a precedent of the state requiring a course curriculum for schools to teach a subject.

Now, a recently passed Pennsylvania bill represents a compromise: the department of education will develop curricular options using Holocaust professionals, which will be distributed to all of the state's public schools; for schools that decide to use these options, the state will pay for teachers to be trained, and they will get continuing education credits; then, two years after implementation, the state's Board of Education will do a study determining which schools are teaching these subjects and which are not.

If less than 90 percent of schools are teaching the subjects, then the Board of Education will require that all schools teach them.

New Jersey – the state that has probably had the greatest success in mandated Holocaust education – got an early boost from former governor Thomas Kean, whose father was one of the few U.S. Representatives who protested the ban on Jewish immigration to the U.S. from Nazi Germany.

Kean set up New Jersey's Holocaust Council through an executive order in 1982, and the state legislature funded it at $125,000.

But state mandates are not always actually funded by the state, nor do they always have a superstructure in place to ensure their effectiveness. Paul Winkler, executive director of the New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education, says, "If you push for a mandate, there are arguments against it. Many educators felt that having a mandate would have people teaching a subject they weren't familiar or comfortable with." New Jersey law, therefore, stipulates that the state's Holocaust commission will develop materials and train teachers.

"Just because there is a mandate, if there is no plan of action on how to implement and at least get it into the schools -just having a mandate is of no value in itself," said Winkler.

New Jersey also decided to make genocide education a part of mandated Holocaust education. The greater inclusiveness, according to Winkler, has made it easier to get Holocaust education into venues like urban centers that previously claimed they had no Jewish connections and hence did not need to talk about the Holocaust.

Unlike in New Jersey, the Holocaust-education mandate in New York does not provide funding, and has no centralized organization to create materials and train teachers.

Elizabeth Edelstein, director of education at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City, said, "There are multiple forums that bring together representatives from educational systems, cultural institutions, and institutions of higher education, all of whom create materials and offer courses for teachers in New York about the Holocaust."

Illinois passed the first U.S. Holocaust education mandate in 1990, and in 2005 the education was extended to include other genocides. But the mandate is unfunded, leaving organizations like the Illinois Holocaust Museum – which was instrumental in getting the mandate passed – to do what they can to fill in the gap. The museum runs more than a dozen professional development trainings on the Holocaust and genocide, but needs to seek funding to cover the training cost as well as reimbursement to public schools for bringing in substitute teachers.

The three-story Tower of Faces at the U.S. Holocaust museum displays photographs taken in Eishishok, a small town in what is now Lithuania, that had a vibrant Jewish community for nine-hundred years. In 1941, an SS mobile killing squad entered the village and within two days massacred the Jewish population.

Speaking from her own experience and not on behalf of the Illinois Holocaust Museum, Noreen Brand, the museum's director of education, said, "My idea is that states shouldn't have a mandate unless you have funding to do teacher training and you have a program for pre-service education that teaches teachers how to teach the mandated subject." Not having adequate training, she added, "causes people to do random activities, using poor literature and making poor choices."

In Florida, Linda Medvin – who chairs the Commissioner's Task Force on Holocaust Education for the state's Department of Education – emphasized the need to move Holocaust education from the Holocaust survivor community into the hands of educators.

"The dichotomy is teaching the Holocaust through memory or through context and history," she says. "The importance now, seventy-five years later, is to teach through context so it moves forward."

Florida's Holocaust-education mandate was passed in 1994. Medvin says she is transforming the task force into an education organization by bringing in educational professionals to write curriculums, do research, and develop an online course providing background information for teachers about the Holocaust.

Teacher professional development happens through ten task-force sites, which receive $100,000 a year in discretionary funding that must be approved by the state legislature.

With the right leadership, even a state without a mandate can bring the Holocaust into public education. Michael Abramson, whose state has no mandate, chairs the North Carolina Council on the Holocaust.

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, headed by State Superintendent June Atkinson, supports the council to the tune of $35,000 annually.

"Atkinson says every school in North Carolina has been asked to have a class on the Holocaust and genocide," said Abramson, adding that Atkinson gives continuing education credit and pays for substitute-teacher costs for the council's eight workshops, which each serve sixty to ninety educators.

Since North Carolina does not exercise significant central control over curriculum, Abramson carefully targets his message to both the politics and preconceived notions of his audience to get superintendents and high school principals on board for Holocaust education, often convincing them that the Holocaust was more than a Jewish event.

Regarding the possibility of a Holocaust-education mandate in North Carolina, Abramson said, "I don't even know if that would work. I've noticed the only way to push this is the retail business of going into a school system, shaking hands, meeting a teacher, having a speaker."

Michele Alperin writes for JNS.

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The last of the schuls built in the city, in 1911, was the Orthodox Ahavath Sholem Congregation, at 177 Robbins Avenue. Both Orthodox schuls have been closed for some time now, a symptom of the liberalization of American Jewry.

Despite their differences in observance, it was the Reform Temple that helped the other congregations to get established. This spirit of cooperation and collaboration continued with the building of the Pittsfield Hebrew Alliance. The facility on Robbins Avenue was the first incarnation of a Jewish Community Center, a building designed for the express purpose of serving every organization in town.

By the 1920s Pittsfield's Jewish population totaled about 1,500, so in 1925 community leaders sent to all Jewish residents a fundraising letter for the purpose of constructing the Pittsfield Hebrew Alliance Building on Robbins Avenue.

The campaign goal was $35,000. A pageant and ball was held in 1939 to raise funds for its reconstruction of the building. Every Jewish organization in town participated in the fundraising, and every one was entitled to use the new facility. These groups included the Hebrew Ladies Aid Society and the YM and YWHAs. Construction was delayed due to World War II, but in 1945 the building was dedicated.

The community continued to grow, and in 1944 the community purchased a residence at 235 East Street to serve as the Jewish Community Center. The cornerstone, still visible today, was laid in 1951. In its heyday, the Center was the place to be.

The building housed a nursery school, the Community Hebrew School, Boy and Girl Scouts, Campfire Girls, the Federation, and an assortment of classes, including arts and crafts, sports, and ballroom dancing. Theatrical productions – amateur and professional, adult and children's – were produced on the gymnasium stage, always to full houses.

The building still stands, now occupied by a church.

Surprisingly, very few Jews have held elected office in Pittsfield. The first – and only – Jew to hold high political office in Pittsfield was Daniel England, who was elected the seventh mayor of the city in 1902. Much later Michael I. Eisner (not the Disney one) served as a state representative for one term. A century later, Ben Kaplan served as a Ward 4 City Councilor.

Today, Pittsfield and surrounding towns offer a wide-ranging host of Jewish educational and cultural activities – film festivals, lectures, concerts, study-sessions, and religious services … simply too much to try to mention in a column.

Suffice to say, Pittsfield's Jewish community may be small in numbers, but the cultural and religious life is full and robust.

Carol Goodman Kaufman is a psychologist and author with a passion for travel and food. She is currently at work on a food history/cookbook, tracing the paths that some favorite foods have taken from their origins to appear on dinner plates and in culture around the world. She invites readers to visit her website at carolgoodmankaufman.com and participate in the discussion on her blog, "Food for Thought."

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