

Borscht Belt's Spiritual Survivors; Resilient Catskill Synagogues Enter Historic Register

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The sanctuary of the old synagogue is still arranged for worship. The waxed benches still form tidy rows; the homespun red-and-white-striped curtains that separate the men from the women are firmly pulled back. But the floor is dusty and the hill outside is full of weeds.

Shortly after the turn of the century, Jewish families who fled Europe because they were persecuted, and then New York City because they were hot and crowded, arrived here in Sullivan County. They raised cows and harvested beets, set up butcher shops and started the bungalow colonies that were the seeds of what, several decades later, became the Catskill Borscht Belt.

And, naturally, they built synagogues, little ones in every hamlet -- white stucco with cobalt-blue Stars of David in Swan Lake; clapboards the color of vanilla pudding in Parksville, and weathered gray asphalt shingles in White Sulphur Springs.

Now the Borscht Belt is far gone, and in these parts, its imminent death is the longest-running story around. As for this other, older Jewish world, it persists -- in remnants of the settlers' drugstores and dry-goods shops, in their old farms and in their synagogues.

Today, in their diversity, these old synagogues are a sometimes tarnished reflection of what remains of that world. Of the 20 Sullivan County synagogues built between the turn of the century and World War II, 15 remain. Most have a dwindling handful of members, but a few could be said to be experiencing some kind of rebirth. At one, the dominant sound is the creaking of a door left blowing in the dry wind. At others, you can hear the murmur of prayers.

In some sense, though, the survival of all these synagogues is precarious. And on Aug. 8, seven of the county's synagogues were listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The designation, though more of an honor than real protection, was largely the work of more of an honor than real protection, was largely the work of Maurie Sacks, an anthropology professor who started surveying these old synagogues four years ago. "I felt then -- and I still feel -- that these are endangered buildings and I wanted to have a record in an archive," she explained, "so that 50 or 100 years from now, people can learn about the people who built them."

The designation celebrates their distinctive vernacular architecture: "intact symbols" and "recognizable Jewish places." These synagogues, the listing reads, "both separated their congregants from the Christian surroundings in which they lived and symbolized Jewish assimilation into the American rural landscape."

When she started her project as part of a one-year sabbatical from Montclair State University in New Jersey, Ms. Sacks, 58, thought she would be documenting the demise of the once-treasured synagogues, which, taken together, present an intriguing melange of Eastern European and New York State regional architecture.

And she certainly found synagogues -- like those in White Sulphur Springs and Swan Lake -- that are virtually deserted. But, to her surprise, she also found several synagogues that had come back from the edge of extinction; like Agudas Achim in Livingston Manor, a flawlessly maintained tan stuccoed building with bold stained-glass Stars of David and a handsome vaulted ceiling in the sanctuary.

While Agudas Achim switched to Reform Judaism in 1984 to increase its membership ("We had to wait until some of our older members moved to Florida," said the congregation's president, Bob Freedman. "We didn't want them to feel cut out") the synagogue in Parksville had to remain Orthodox to survive.

"We have the boys who wear the black hats and the white shirts -- the Lubavitchers who come from the camp," said Annette Fisch, a jovial woman in a jaunty white straw hat, referring to a nearby summer camp. "They consider it their duty to hold services here. They send us a group of 10 boys. If it wasn't for the boys, the place would be closed all summer."

The visiting Hasidim conduct the old-style services at the Parksville synagogue -- the women pray in the balcony -- but it is a core group of townfolk like Mrs. Fisch, 69, and her husband, Morris, 78, who keep up the 1907 building at the end of Main Street, a dusty thoroughfare lined with vacant glass-fronted stores, parallel to Route 17, the major highway in the area. The Dead End Cafe is down the street. A rusted-out compact car buries itself on the side of the next driveway.

But inside the synagogue, there is excitement, not only about the National Register designation but also about the resurgence of the synagogue.

"When I was a child, there was never room here," Mrs. Fisch recalled. "Me and my girlfriends had to go sit on the porch because there was no room. One time, Eddie Cantor came here, to this very synagogue!"

The synagogues were at their peak in the 1950's. Although the big resorts like Grossinger's and the Concord had their own chapels, the townfolk who supported the tourist industry -- the merchants and the waiters -- needed their own places of worship.

Then things changed. "People started to ask what happened to all the people," Mr. Fisch said. "I just told them, 'I'll take you up to the cemetery.' The young people must be off to college; there's nothing to hold them."

But the congregation itself held on, and slowly, something happened. "My sons told their prospective wives that one of the things going on is that they must come here for the High Holy Days; they cannot stay in New York," Mr. Fisch said. "Now our grandchildren say it's not the holidays if they're not here."

And then the Hasidim started arriving. Mrs. Fisch's face lights up when she tells of the time 50 of the young men showed up for the services.

"So my husband had to go out and buy 20 new books!" she recalled. Even now, the two refrigerators are packed -- with gefilte fish, pickled herring, cookies, soda, wine and whisky -- refreshments for after the services, which take place every day in the summer.

(Is there a religious significance about two refrigerators? Ms. Sachs asked, always looking for material for her study. "No, one's broken," Mrs. Fisch replied.)

None of the seven synagogues have full-time rabbis. But in Livingston Manor, the congregation has actually grown, from about 40 families in 1984, when the services switched to Reform, to 105 families, which the president, Mr. Freedman, thinks is more than ever. It may even be more than in 1924, when the two groups of Jewish locals, the Workmen's Circle-type socialists and the more Orthodox shopkeepers and hotel owners, got together to build one house of worship.

When they changed over in 1984, the members started a Hebrew school; there were three children. Now there are 12. Each month, the members hold one religious service on Friday night, and on the next morning, an educational discussion of religion.

"We're very unpretentious here, like the whole Livingston Manor community," Mr. Freedman, 52, said. "There's a school for troubled kids in Hancock, and they contacted another synagogue and asked if their Jewish kids could attend services and that synagogue said no. Now they come here, about 12 kids, they come every Shabbat, and they're wonderful."

In Glen Wild, another of the seven honored synagogues sits without a regular congregation -- but hardly unloved.

Abe Jaffe, 90, a short, stocky retired chicken farmer, pulls up with his daughter, Naomi, who lives in Troy but visits every weekend. Although the Anshei Glen Wild synagogue has not had any services this summer, it has two dozen members who pay for its upkeep -- and a cemetery.

"We have a cemetery and that's what keeps the congregation together," Mr. Jaffe said. "We're not taking in any new members." Two or three years ago, Mr. Jaffe said, he persuaded some men at an Orthodox hotel nearby to hold some services, just as they do in Parksville. But the men stopped going to the synagogue. "They have services in their hotel," he grumbled. "When there's a Jewish synagogue, you're supposed to support the services here."

The Glen Wild synagogue was built in 1913, he continued, "according to religious dictum: there are 12 windows, and we face east." It has the Ark for the Torah, and a bima, or pulpit, in the middle. He grinned, his craggy face breaking into a laugh. "Yes, it's all according to Hoyle," he said. He and his brother were original members.

He was asked if he worried about the synagogue and who would care for it after he had gone.

Not at all, he said. "There's a couple of young people who have inherited my interest," he said. "And I see all these changes as inevitable."

Religious Pioneers

Sullivan County synagogues added to the National Register of Historic Places on Aug. 8:

Agudas Achim, Livingston Manor

B'nai Israel, Woodbourne

Anshei Glen Wild, Glen Wild

Bikur Cholim B'nai Yisroel, Swan Lake

Chevra Ahavath Zion, Monticello

Tifereth Israel Anshei, Parksville

Jewish Community Center of White Sulphur Springs

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