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AGUDAS ACHIM:

A Century of Friendship and Shared Memories of Jewish Life in the Catskills

BY BENJAMIN HALPERN

Livingston Manor is a small hamlet, located about 120 miles northwest of New York City, in western Sullivan County. The village was located above the confluence of the Willowemoc, Little Beaverkill, and Cattail Creeks, known, regionally and beyond, for their abundance of fish and wildlife. In 1905, the New York, Ontario and Western Railroad had just completed its double-tracked main line, providing the southern Catskills with what was then considered a high-speed link, by rail, to the mid-Hudson region and the bustling metropolis of New York City.

A new station had just been opened in Livingston Manor, which by then had become a busy village defined by the industrial presence of the railroad itself, as well as by the factories that made many products from the hardwoods abundant in the region's forests, and by the dairy farms in the surrounding hills that brought their milk to the depot for shipment to New York City. Livingston Manor had a vibrant business district, a school that incorporated all levels from first grade through high school, and three churches surrounding the downtown. In January 1909, Max Schwartz, a Jewish immigrant from Russia, brought his family to Livingston Manor. He opened a butcher shop on Main Street, and his family thus became Livingston Manor's first Jewish residents. In April of that same year, my grandparents, Mottel and Manya Sorkin, along with



Evening view of front elevation. August, 1996. All photos by the author, Benjamin Halpern.

their infant daughter Leya, also settled in the village and opened a tailor shop. Other families soon followed. Livingston Manor was now on the way to becoming a multiethnic community, but not without some bumps in the road.

My grandfather, also a Russian Jew, first settled in Brooklyn's garment district and worked in a factory that was owned by my grandmother's brother. In 1908, their daughter Leya was born. Like many who lived in the crowded conditions that defined immigrant life in New York City, Mottel contracted tuberculosis. Fortunately for him, his condition began to improve, and he was sent to a farm near Liberty to recuperate. Such relocations were common, and many were coordinated by a network of Jewish organizations with a Socialist appeal, such as the

Workmen's Circle. During one of her visits upstate, my grandmother decided that she wanted to raise her family in the Catskills, and she and my grandfather sought the opportunity to set up a business in Livingston Manor. Even though the village needed a tailor, only one businessman would rent to them, and their presence was met with skepticism, as most of the residents had no previous interaction with Jews. Livingston Manor, like many communities of that period, had its share of bigotry and a reluctance to accommodate people from different cultural backgrounds. The Ku Klux Klan was quite active in Livingston Manor until the mid-1920s.

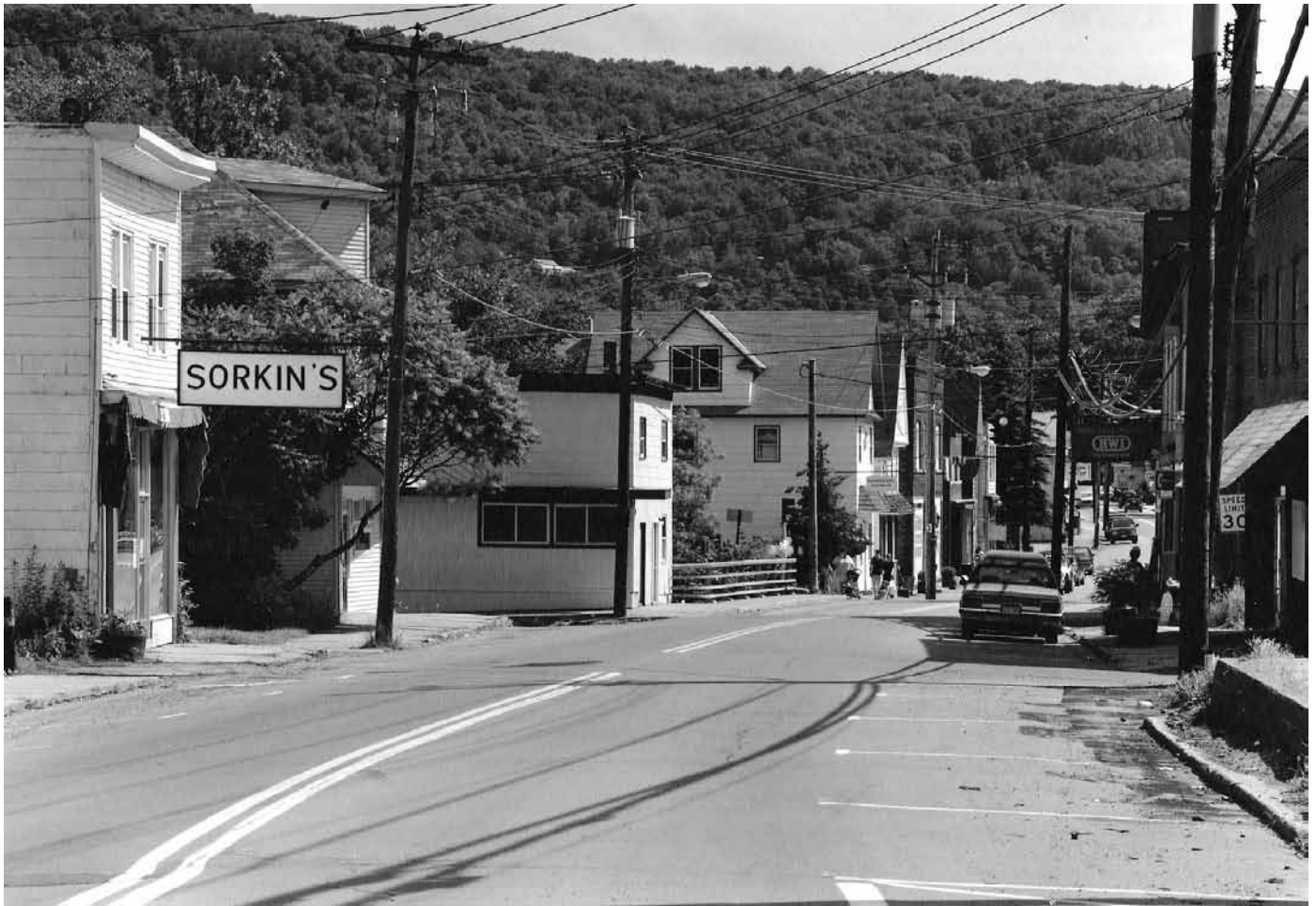
Despite these obstacles, and the harsh winters and floods that frequented the downtown, more Jews came to the community, and by 1920, there

was a sizable Jewish presence in and around Livingston Manor. By 1920, my grandparents' business had evolved into a small dry goods store, known as Sorkin's Department Store, and they had three children. Their youngest daughter, Belle, would, one day, become my mother.

Jewish businesses began to flourish within the village, but the Jewish farms outside the village faced a different fate. The soil and climate were not conducive to raising crops to feed animals, and those who tried to establish themselves as farmers found the going very tough. Some left their land to find other occupations, either in the village or in New York City, and others held on by accepting summer guests, who were also Jewish immigrants in search of a reprieve from the summer heat and uncomfortable conditions in New York



Winter view of Livingston Manor, nestled in the valley formed by the confluence of the Cattail, Little Beaverkill, and Willowemoc Creeks. The Vitale Lumber Mill is in the foreground, and the two silos used to store coal, delivered by rail from Pennsylvania, are visible to the left of center. Main Street is visible above the mill. December 1983.



Upper Main Street, Livingston Manor, looking through the primary business district. Sorkin's Department Store, built by my grandparents in 1923, headed a business district that was once defined by the presence of Jewish merchants. Ca. 1996.

City. In time, the number of people seeking summer refuge grew large enough to support small businesses that catered to these visitors. Farmhouses became boarding houses; workers' cottages housed summer tourists, and, in time, opportunities presented themselves that led to the construction of small hotels and bungalow colonies that catered to working class Jewish immigrants and their families.

Most of the Jewish immigrants were characterized by their strong will to succeed and to create opportunities for their children—opportunities that would not have been available had they not come to America. The Jewish settlers proved to be strong members of their new community, and in time, the mutual tolerance that characterized their early years in Livingston Manor



Edgewood Inn, the last of the small Jewish hotels around Livingston Manor. The hotel was owned and operated by the Wittenberg and Haas families, and catered to working and middle-class Jewish people from New York City and vicinity. This photograph was made in December 1986, following its last season of operation.



Announcement for High Holiday Services, written in Yiddish and Hebrew, in 1924. Yiddish was the primary language spoken by the Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe and Russia.

son—who were carpenters and devout practitioners of Orthodox Judaism. The building is reminiscent of synagogues in Eastern Europe and Russia; it achieved the ritualistic separation of men and women through the construction of a balcony to accommodate women, while men over the age of 13 participated in the service. The Orthodox Liturgy, entirely in Hebrew, was followed during worship. Although most of

evolved into a sense of mutual respect between the villagers and their Jewish neighbors. At home, and with each other, most Jews spoke and read Yiddish, a language common to most European and Russian Jews of that period.

Children, growing up in Livingston Manor, however, were encouraged to learn English and often excelled in their studies. Jewish families, though, also sought to preserve and exercise their spiritual and cultural beings, in their new surroundings.

By 1913, a Jewish benevolent society, known as *Agudas Achim*, or Society of Friends, had been organized, and a cemetery was established two miles east of town.

Religious services were held in a private park pavilion, located on the site now occupied by Livingston Manor Central School. The desire to educate children and adults, alike, about their faith and culture gave rise to a new community center, known as the Shalom Aleichem Schul, named in honor of the prominent Jewish writer. In 1923, Congregation Agudas Achim was incorporated, and in 1924, a synagogue bearing that name was erected. The synagogue was designed and built by Max and Izzie Brooks, Polish Jews—father and

AGUDAS ACHIM SYNAGOGUE

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Announcement for High Holiday Services, written in English, in 1964. By that time, English had become the primary language spoken by the children of immigrants, and a fluent secondary language for the immigrants themselves. Ca. 1996.

these families identified themselves, culturally, as Jews, many did not practice Orthodox Judaism at home.

After World War II, many children of Jewish immigrants began to leave the rural setting of Sullivan County in pursuit of jobs and education. My mother, Belle Sorkin, however, returned to Livingston Manor, following her employment by the War Department. Soon, thereafter, she married my father, Walter Halpern, who came to the area from New York City after the war. My father worked as a laborer, for the City of New York, on the construction of the massive network of tunnels used to transport potable water from the newly constructed reservoirs in the central Catskills to the City. From the time they married in 1953, until my father's



Agudas Achim Cemetery. August 1996.



Agudas Achim Synagogue, from the southeast. July 1996.

passing in 1995, my parents owned and operated Sorkin's Department Store, the dry goods business started by my grandparents.

I was born in 1958 and spent the first 18 years of my life in Livingston Manor. Among my fondest childhood memories are the walks to *schul* (synagogue) on *Shabbos* (Saturday) with my *Zeyda* (Grandfather) Sorkin. The services were still conducted entirely in Hebrew, and my grandfather would often explain to me what was taking place. Being in that synagogue, in the presence of my grandfather and other members of his generation, gave me the sense that I was indeed in a holy place with some very special people. Sadly, my grandparents and members of their generation would not be with us much longer. My *Zeyda's* passing, in the summer of 1968, created a void in my life, but our friendship for my first 10 years, and the time we spent in the synagogue, gave me a strong foundation on which to build my life.

By the time I reached adolescence, much had changed. My grandparents and most of their peers had passed on. Many of the boarding houses, hotels, and Jewish businesses were closing, as a younger generation either sought other forms of employment or moved away. Finally, the once flourishing, Congregation Agudas Achim, that gave me such a sense of fulfillment as a child, was now facing the bleak possibility of extinction. Only a handful of Jewish children remained in the community, and the Congregation could no longer afford to maintain a full-time rabbi or even a part-time educator. Preparation for Bar Mitzvah required our being transported to classes held in nearby Liberty, which still had a vibrant Orthodox congregation. By the mid-1970s, it became nearly impossible to attract the minyan of 10 males, over the age of 13, necessary to conduct Orthodox services over the High Holidays. The synagogue was falling

into a state of disrepair, and by the time I left for college in 1976, the Congregation was on the verge of collapse. Since then, a turn of events, brought about largely by a group of dedicated and determined individuals, gave rise to a resurgence of Jewish activity that was about to take place in the historic setting of Agudas Achim.

Between 1970 and 1985, a number of young Jewish families moved into the region from the New York metropolitan area, and a few young men and women who had grown up in the Congregation had returned. The new families and returning members wished to retain their Jewish identities, but did not wish to affiliate themselves with an Orthodox congregation. Also, there were several families who were descendants of the founding members of the Congregation who, for various reasons, wished to break from the Orthodox traditions. Under the leadership of Robert and Lynne Freedman, the Congregation became affiliated with the Reform

Movement and joined the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1986. While this new Congregational identity appealed to this group of people, change did not happen without controversy and division among the more devout and traditional members. In an effort to appease some of these members, the Congregation saw to it that a portion of the traditional Orthodox liturgy and music were incorporated into its services for the Sabbath and High Holidays, albeit with the egalitarian worship and English translation that characterize the Reform service. For some, this gesture helped assuage the division, but for a few families, the wounds caused by the break from tradition would never heal.

When asked why the Congregation became affiliated with Reform Judaism, Mr. Freedman, still the President of the Congregation, replied that there were three primary reasons for doing so, that he hoped would enable its survival in the long term. First, this



Entry foyer, Agudas Achim Synagogue. Orthodox ritual required adult males to perform a ritualistic hand washing prior to entering the sanctuary, and for women to sit separately in an upstairs balcony. Ca. 1996.

new group of congregants possessed an overwhelming desire to conduct services in which men and women would play equal roles, including the leadership of the service, itself. Second, there was an equally strong desire to conduct services in which the primary language would be English, with Hebrew being secondary. With relatively few members fluent in conversational Hebrew, this would enable those in attendance to identify more directly with the modern liturgy, much as their ancestors, who spoke Hebrew, had done, several generations earlier. Finally, Mr. Freedman pointed out that many Jews who had moved to western Sullivan and eastern Delaware Counties, either as year-round or seasonal residents, also identified with Reform Judaism, and for them, Livingston Manor would be the nearest Congregation. The Reform Congregation always reached out to and welcomed these new residents as members.

To the credit of the members of Agudas Achim, their determination and hard work have paid off. The temple was restored and is now recognized on the National Register of Historic Places. *Shabbos* services are once again held, though now on Friday evenings, on a monthly or semi-monthly basis. All the major holidays are now celebrated, and religious education for children and adults is once again offered at the synagogue. The Congregation was blessed with the charismatic presence and spiritual leadership of the late Ellen Singer, a Jewish educator of international renown, who served its membership from its re-chartering in 1986, until her recent passing in June 2013. Under Ms. Singer's tutelage, many young members became B'nai Mitzvah, and many congregants began to learn more about the true meaning of Jewish life. Ms. Singer also led a wide array of community service and outreach programs that continue to meet the needs of many people, particularly women, who live within the lower Catskill region.



Holy Ark, Congregation Agudas Achim. December 1993.

The Congregation has also been blessed with the leadership of several dedicated rabbis, whose spiritual presence and sensibilities allowed them to reach out to and include Jews of different backgrounds in their services. Danny Maseng, an Israeli national and cantorial soloist, known worldwide, served the Congregation from 1994 through 1999. I had the privilege to take part in a High Holiday service in 1995 that was led by Mr. Maseng. Danny's uncanny ability to communicate through music and his

ebullient warmth as a person created a service that was both a spiritual awakening and a true homecoming. It was particularly meaningful to me, as this was the first service I had attended with my mother following the passing of my father earlier that year, and it is one I will never forget. Danny Maseng is now Director of Music and Cantor of Temple Israel in Hollywood, California, and is also recognized internationally as a leader in Jewish education, musical composition, and musical performance. The current rabbi, Fred Pomerantz,



View from the Ark, looking toward the rear of the sanctuary. The balcony is where women sat during Orthodox worship. Ca. 1993.

The members of Congregation Agudas Achim of Livingston Manor would like to invite you to join them in a celebration of one hundred years of friendship and service to the Jewish Community in western Sullivan County, and beyond. The event will take place at 1 p.m., on October 13, 2013, at the synagogue, located on Rock Avenue (Old Rte. 17) in Livingston Manor. We would, especially, like to invite anyone with a personal connection to the Jewish community in the village, or the Congregation itself, to come and share with us their stories and personal memories that tie them to this special group.

who has served the congregation since 2004, is well known in his own right, as a charismatic leader, a counselor, and a scholar of the modern Reform Liturgy. Rabbi Pomerantz has a unique ability to relate to everyone in his presence, and he communicates his message through art, music, and poetry, woven into his liturgy and sermon. His services are truly uplifting, and Congregation Agudas Achim is very fortunate to have Rabbi Pomerantz on its bema.

As an adult, I have had many opportunities to return to the Temple, sometimes alone and other times with my own family. Often, I sit in the same seat where I once sat, next to my *Zeyda*, some fifty years ago, on a *Shabbos* morning. I recall the morning light

peeping through the glass windows, the generational presence of those who came seeking a better life, the solemnity of the day, and the feeling that I was part of a tradition that is rooted in millennia past. I have been able to show my wife and children that Judaism still lives in this sanctuary. On one visit, in December 1993, my daughter Sarah and I visited the Temple. On that day, I decided that I was going to photograph the building, in its entirety, and in the broader historical context of the Jewish community of Livingston Manor. On this and many subsequent visits, I photographed the *schul*, the cemetery, and the village, and have decided to share with you a sampling of these images.

Congregation Agudas Achim invites you to visit Livingston Manor this fall, amidst the beautiful autumn colors, and to join them in celebration of the rich history that defined their first hundred years. For more information, and directions to the Temple, you may visit the Agudas Achim web site, www.congregationagudasachim.org or contact its president, Mr. Robert Freedman, either by phone, 845-439-5708 or e-mail, president@congregationagudasachim.org

Benjamin Halpern is currently employed as a freelance photographer in Champaign, Illinois. He has developed a strong interest in American history and folklore, which he strives to record and depict through his photography. Ben grew up in Livingston Manor, a small hamlet in New York's Catskill Mountains and graduated from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and the University of Illinois in 1980 and 1982, respectively, with Bachelor's and Master's degrees in electrical engineering. From 1982 to 1987, Ben worked as an electrical engineer at the University of Illinois' Urbana-Champaign Campus. In mid-1987, after nearly 15 years as an amateur, he decided to pursue photography as a full-time career.

Some of Ben's professional assignments include the photo documentation of the Engineering and Agricultural Campus historic districts for the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the photo documentation of the historic district at Chanute Air Force Base for the Historic American Building Survey, and the Bagnell Dam Osage Power Plant for the Historic American Engineering Record of the National Park Service. In addition, Ben has worked

extensively photographing buildings for architectural firms around Illinois and New York. In 1987, Ben was commissioned by the Erpf Catskill Cultural Center in Arkville, New York, to photograph historic architecture and landscapes in the Catskill Mountains for the traveling exhibit, "Catskill Architecture: An Irreplaceable Heritage." In 1996, he was commissioned under a grant from the New York State Council for the Humanities to produce a slide presentation of historic synagogues in the western Catskills.

Ben's exhibits include three studies of the railroads in East Central Illinois, a photographic study of his hometown, Livingston Manor, and a documentary on farming in east Central Illinois. He has also exhibited a set of photographs of the historic synagogue in Livingston Manor at the University of Illinois under a grant from the University's Committee on Jewish Culture and Society. Ben is currently working on two documentary projects: one, with the New York Folklore Society, illustrating the heritage of the dairy industry in the lower Catskill Region, and the other with the Public Library of Steubenville and Jefferson County, Ohio, showing what remains of the once mighty steel industry in the Upper Ohio Valley.



Agudas Achim Sanctuary, from the balcony. By the time this photograph was made, the seating had been rearranged in the more communal pattern common of Reform congregations. December 1993.

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