Commentary

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From the American Scene: Colchester's Yankee Jews

The casual tourist, stopping for a moment as he drives through Colchester-halfway between Hartford and New London, halfway between Norwich…

by Alexander

THE SHTETL, *OR JEWISH VILLAGE SET DOWN IN THE MIDDLE OF A NON-JEWISH countryside, is not something we are likely to associate with any place but Eastern Europe. But New England, it seems, also has its* shtetlach. *Here Alexander and Lillian Mermin Feinsilver tell the story of the good people of Colchester, Connecticut, a town as typically Jewish as it is typically Yankee.*

The casual tourist, stopping for a moment as he drives through Colchester—halfway between Hartford and New London, halfway between Norwich and Middletown—sees a typical New England town. There is a spacious, well-kept central mall, with a wooden bandstand and a baseball diamond. A path sheltered by towering elms wends through the green toward the graceful white Congregationalist meeting house. Not far away stands the house which Nathaniel Foote, founder of Colchester, built in 1699 after buying the land from the Indians.

The local DAR uses it now. A row of fine white houses lines one side of the mall. There are memorials for the Civil War and for World Wars I and II. But the tourist, looking at the two world war plaques, would not fail to be struck by the high proportion of Jewish names among those of old New England stock.

On the other side of the mall is a two-story, red brick business block. Here are two pharmacies; a barber and a beauty shop, above which are lawyers' offices; two taverns, which are busiest between five and seven o'clock; a grocery store; a women's clothing shop; and three liquor stores. The general store, modern and well stocked, is Jewish-owned. Its attractive soda fountain appears to have a breezy but nice teen-age clientele, among Whom one occasionally sees a Negro youngster or two. The drug store, efficient and immaculate, serves hot pastrami and corned beef sandwiches and hot stuffed *kishke* (not "derma") at its busy lunch counter. The market has a sign in its window proclaiming "Kosher and Non-Kosher Meat Sold Here." The mayor, the barber, the deputy sheriff, and the butcher are all Jewish.

"But this is nothing compared to what Colchester was thirty or forty years ago," the butcher tells you. "Then all the Jewish markets carried *only* kosher meat. About half the town of two thousand was Jewish then, and thousands of Jewish summer visitors from New Haven and New York came to stay at the hotels or rooming houses or on the farms. Then, everything was Jewish *and* kosher." Though Colchester has been called the Catskills of Connecticut, it is more than that. It is the scene of one of the two or three most noteworthy Jewish efforts to build a farming community in America.

Although a few Jewish settlers began drifting into Colchester in the 1880's, the first real settlement was in the 1890's through the impetus of the Baron de Hirsch Fund. Colchester was one of several farm settlements in eastern Connecticut aided

by the Fund, including Oakdale, Montville, and Chesterfield. Although Colchester was, for a time, the center for a state federation of Jewish farm associations, Chesterfield was originally more important: a new town developed around the farming community, for which the Fund built both a creamery and a synagogue. Over the years, however, the Jewish settlement in Chesterfield and in neighboring Oakdale and Montville declined, while in Colchester it grew.

Most of the settlers came to Colchester not at all prepared for farm life. Many came on their own, applying to the Fund for financial assistance only after making bad choices of farmland or otherwise running into difficulties. A striking example of the unsuccessful new farmer was Chaim Maier Cutler (Cutlerovitch), a wealthy businessman who had come in the 1880's. The story is told that at the time the pogroms were beginning in Russia he was playing cards with his Christian business partner. The latter had been steadily losing and writing IOU's, until he had lost $30,000, at which point he pulled out a revolver and demanded the return of the notes. Feeling that if his trusted partner could do that to him there was no hope for a Jew in Russia, Cutler went first to Palestine and then to New York. He entrusted the task of purchasing and outfitting a farm for him to his brother-in-law, a sewing machine operator.

"*Der reicher Cutler*" (the rich Cutler), the story continues, brought out to the farm his wife and daughters, a cook and a governess, hiring a farmhand to work while he and his family sat on the porch reading. Some ten or twelve years later, when Leon Broder (Brodsky), a young relative of Cutler's, came to Colchester, he found his "rich relative," to whom he was looking for subsidy, in tatters. Cutler had overpaid for his farmland, and his fortune had dwindled year by year through ignorance and mismanagement (his laborers pulled out the onions and left the weeds) until he was then, in 1900, mortgaged like an ordinary immigrant. Broder, now in his seventies and head of a grain company, relates that when he met Cutler, the latter said, "*Zehst dem tsurissenem hemd? Morgen ver ich gubernatur!*" ("You see this torn shirt? Tomorrow I'll be governor!")

Most of the other settlers were similarly misguided in land purchase by inexperienced relatives or friends, usually aided by ubiquitous "agents" who preyed upon the newcomers' ignorance and gullibility. Two of the better-known agents had a system of sighting a group of new arrivals and playing host at the saloon with liquor and song, painting romantic pictures of their guests' financial success soon to be achieved at farming. Downtown Jewish residents had only to hear the gay singing accompanying these till-early-morning sessions to know that another group of *shlepurim* (poor beggars) were in tow. It was common to find that a new settler had been sold stony or impoverished farmland or a barren cow, and it was not long before the de Hirsch Fund began advertising against purchasing any land through private agents before checking with the Fund to assure an honest transaction.

Under these circumstances, the first Jewish farming community could not prosper. A hardy few—such men as Frank Nelkin, David Levine, Sam Levine, and Barnett Dember—were able to stick it out and make a living. Others left to take work or to go into business in nearby cities or in New York. The old Tulin (Teletitsky) had come and gone by the mid-1890's, starting a grocery business in Hartford. Rosoff did not stay very long either, but in his brief residence he achieved some sort of fame as the farmer who had a cow that gave 35 to 40 quarts a day and had to be milked three times daily.

Colchester had a number of settlers who were businessmen from the start. As early as 1887, a Shenyan family manufactured cigars, and there were two Jewish merchants, Luntz and Nahinsky, on Main Street in the early 1890's. As the community grew, others came. Hirsch Cohen ran a butcher shop. Isaac Agronovitch, who came from Russia via Brooklyn in 1893, was in business at different times in both Chesterfield and Colchester. Sam Stern, who started as a peddler at the turn of the century, now operates a liquor store on Main Street. Its shelves hold, alongside the bottles, old *National Geographics*, a dictionary, a Hebrew Bible, a *Siddur*, Abraham's *Chapters on Jewish Literature*, and similar volumes. A Hebrew calendar and a Passover Haggadah hang on the wall.

The first Jewish communal effort was the setting up of a cemetery, around 1890, with the purchase of a plot on the New London road. In 1898 the Ahavath Achim congregation was established. Daily services were held in the home of Hirsch Cohen, and High Holy Day services in Grange Hall. Hebrew classes for the children were held on the site of the present Alpert store. One mother boasts that her grown daughter, now a mother herself, still knows "every Maftir and every Haftorah."

As some of the early settlers moved away, the congregation diminished. In 1902, Hyman (Menachem Pesach) Mintz persuaded the remaining members to buy a house on Windham Avenue and convert it into a *shul* named Pische Tshuvoh. Mintz proceeded to entice the men to *shul* daily by having hot tea or *bromfen* (brandy) available at 5 A.M. On cold winter mornings the prospect of a warm house with a warming drink helped to guarantee a *minyan*. The *shul* is now the home of an elderly Polish couple, after several transformations. It was used for a time as a Hebrew school, and even as a cloak factory. Behind the house still stands a structure, now rather rundown, Which contains the old *mikvah*.

Within a year or two after the establishment of the *shul*, the Jewish community had a serious scandal. A man named Marks owed $40 to a Polish laborer on his farm. Not having the money to pay him, he killed him, cut up the body, and buried it. A neighbor noticed that Marks put stones at a certain spot every day. The curious neighbor dug there one day and discovered a human foot. Since Marks had shortly before disappeared, the state offered $1200 reward for him, dead or alive. A certain Mike Levine thereupon shaved his beard and went to New York's East Side to look for Marks. He soon found the murderer and managed to bring him back and claimed the reward. Marks was tried in New London and hanged. But Levine's action in hunting down the murderer for the sake of the reward struck the Jewish community as despicable and he was banned from the *shul*, and eventually left Colchester.

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At the very time that the Jews were coming in, the town of Colchester was undergoing a general decline. The Hayward Rubber Company, one of the biggest in the country, which had been the chief industry for almost half a century, closed its doors in 1893. The late Cyrus Pendleton, local physician and unofficial town historian, in an address in 1935 described the situation: "Following this the leather shoe factory, established to take the place of the rubber mill, soon failed. Then the canning factory, the creamery, and the bank wound up their affairs and became ancient history. The 200th anniversary of the founding of the town [1899] found Colchester on the bottom rung of the ladder with no prospects for the future."

By 1900, Colchester had fewer than 2,000 inhabitants; in 1870, the census had shown over 3,300. But the Jewish influx checked the decline, and the population of Colchester became stabilized, from 1900 to 1930, at about 2,000. The greatest Jewish settlement occurred from about 1910 to 1925.

This period saw Colchester's emergence as a summer resort. From the beginning, the farms took in summer boarders. By the time of the First World War, there were a number of hotels. The '20's saw their heyday. There were then seven major hotels: the Broadway House, Fairview House (opposite the Amston road, operated by the Cohen family), Schwartz's, Kessler's, Horowitz's, and Dember's. Downtown rooming houses also overflowed with paying guests. The seasonal total of Jewish visitors has been estimated at over 4,000, chiefly from New Haven and New York. Rare indeed was the New Haven Yiddish-speaking family that had not at some time visited Colchester for a week-end of "change," or a week of rest. One of the present writers, then a child in New Haven, made at least one visit with mother and aunt, who had been sent there by their doctor for fresh air. The same writer approached bearded Barnett Dember not long ago, one of Colchester's oldest Jewish residents. He was sitting in skullcap on his porch glider, and met her with two kindly, quizzical eyes, and the comment, "*Eppes a bekanteh*"—"Someone I know."

“I remember Colchester well, very well,” a grand lady reminisced recently, beaming; Hartford born and raised, she had long ago settled in New York. “We stayed on a farm, and late in spring we’d begin stirring for the annual shift to our Colchester home. Actually, I never felt that Colchester was a vacation refuge. It was even more like home than Hartford. We stayed there the best part of the year—it was compact, and all of our daily activities were focused on the farm and on the town.

“I used to milk cows, and collect eggs. The stores and townspeople seemed all to be Jewish, and those not Jewish accepted us as though we were regular residents. I never felt that distance and coldness I’ve sensed in natives when I was a visitor to resort towns on the Cape, or in the upper New York mountains, or even in Miami. I guess my sense of comfort may have come in part from the fact that Colchester developed naturally as a Jewish town, the vacation character wasn’t imposed on it from outside.”

The Jewish community grew, and in 1913 a new synagogue was built on Lebanon Avenue, which is still active; It was given the somewhat unwieldy name Ahavath Achim Upische Tshuvoh. The story behind that name records some of the early personal feuding that enlivened the settlement’s growth. Mintz and a few friends would not hear of a new synagogue being built anywhere but on the site of the existing Pische Tshuvah on Windham Avenue, while the majority, headed by Hirsch Cohen and Sam Levine, were in favor of a new spot on Lebanon Avenue.

The advocates of the Lebanon Avenue site went ahead, but not wishing to have the new building carry the name of the synagogue which Mintz had founded, they went back to the original "Ahavath Achim." In due time, however, the Mintz faction relented and joined the new congregation, and both names were combined. The thriving community also built a Talmud Torah (now also known as Zion Hall, and used for many meetings in addition to Hebrew classes) on Pleasant Street, and established a new "Hebrew Cemetery" on Linwood Avenue.

The 30's brought further changes. With the depression, the hotels declined. Some went out of existence and were turned into apartment houses or private homes; one burned down. During the depression, Colchester Jews tended to stay in the area, either farming full-time or supplementing part-time farming with other work; but most of this was stop-gap farming, to be dropped at the return of better business conditions. The hurricane of 1938 did considerable damage, and a number of farmers defaulted on their loans. A few refugee families came from Germany with some possessions and managed to establish new poultry and dairy farms. One such family opened a leather factory; and indeed, two of the outstanding poultry farms of the state—those of Isidore Brounstein and Morris Stolman—date from that period. But the rate of Jewish settlement was declining.

While the Jewish population has shown some growth in the past two decades, it has never equaled that of the peak or "middle" period—even with the arrival of some twenty DP families in recent years (representing almost half of all such families settled on Connecticut farms). Neither has it kept pace with the general population, which has increased from 2,000 to 3,000 since 1930. Today, perhaps 750 of Colchester's residents are Jews, representing approximately 175 families and making up about 25 per cent of the population—as against 1,000 (50 per cent) in 1915 and 640 (32 per cent) in the early 30's.

Jewish Colchester today reflects all the various stages through which it has passed. The farm group still represents the largest single occupation, including about 60 families who farm full-time and others who do so part-time. Jews make up over 40 per cent of all farmers in Colchester and 20 per cent of all Jewish farmers in Connecticut (a total of about 300, according to Benjamin Miller, New England representative of the Jewish Agricultural Society).

The farms vary considerably in size and are almost universally owner-operated. Their chickens go mostly to New York. The dealers come up to buy them, crate them on the farm, and send them out. But "it is no good to be a farmer," according to the wife of one poultry farmer who has been there for over fifteen years. Her husband had been a baker in New York but had trouble with his sinuses, and a "big professor" told them to get themselves a farm. It's hard work, she says, the investment is high, and the enterprise can be wiped out overnight.

A few sons of the earliest settlers continue to operate their families' farms. Joseph Dember is one of these. Samuel Cutler operates the grain company established by his farmer father, Pincus Cutler—no relation to *der reicher Cutler*. A number of young men, including former GI's, have taken courses in agriculture at the University of Connecticut. One won top honors several years ago for his flock in a "Chicken-of-Tomorrow" contest.

But most of the offspring have left the farms. Tulin's son Abraham is a well-known New York attorney, active in Zionist affairs. A nephew, Leon, now deceased, was a Yale law professor. Pincus Cutler's son George, who once served as state representative from Colchester, is now a Hartford attorney. Most of the ten Elgart boys settled all over the country, in teaching and in business. Rosoff's son is a New York wholesaler. Moses Savin, grandson of Chesterfield's first *shochet*, operates a trucking company in New London, and is prominent in city and state government as well as in B'nai B'rith. His brother Abe ("Butch") Savin is a contracting road-builder, active in Jewish life in Hartford. Joseph and Daniel Polsky, who founded the Yantic Grain Company of Norwich, are sons of Mordecai Moses Polsky, a farmer in Oak-dale who was an early de Hirsch agent for Colchester and vicinity.

Many simply shifted to occupations in town. The proprietors of all four grain companies either were born on farms or have had some farming connections; Joseph Shapiro of the Westchester Grain and Oil Company still operates a poultry farm. The two ladies' coat and dress factories were both established by farm families. Harry Levine, son of a farm settler of 1899, started his clothing factory in a chicken coop.

After the farmers in number come the factory workers. About 40 Jewish families are employed today in three leather factories and two ladies' coat and dress shops (all owned by Jews). Jewish businessmen and manufacturers total about 35, a majority of those in their fields.

And the resort flavor, though not so strong, lingers. One hotel is still in operation—Levy's, on the old Elgart farm—and some families take in roomers during the vacation season. Indeed the reputation of Colchester as a resort area has been so lasting that "Colchester" often means for out-of-towners the area including Lebanon and Moodus, where other hotels have taken over the trade. Colchester still is more or less "the town" for surrounding small communities. It is where one goes to pick up one's kosher meat or have one's chickens killed or to participate in a Hadassah card party.

The one movie house in town is Jewish-owned, and of the two doctors one is Jewish. The other is a Catholic who was expelled from Germany because he had one Jewish grandparent. The two dentists and two lawyers are also Jewish. (A third Jewish lawyer is in business and does not practice.) Joseph Agronovitch still runs the general store started by his parents.

What of Jewish communal life today? On the surface, one might say it hasn't changed much from the time of Hirsch Cohen and Hyman Mintz. The congregation holds Orthodox services three times daily; Hebrew school (from kindergarten to high school) is in session five days a week, after public school,

eleven months of the year; there is a full-time *shochet* for killing chickens; sleeping quarters for wayfarers are provided behind the synagogue in fulfillment of the injunction to care for the stranger (in one week before Tisha b'Av there were as many as nine *meshullachim*, men presenting credentials from charitable organizations to collect funds.) Many of the newest European immigrants are quite Orthodox.

Yet there are signs that the Orthodox pattern is wearing away. The Orthodox-trained rabbi conducts a late Friday evening Conservative service, and the children conduct their own Sabbath morning services—both American modernisms. And the young families don't participate. As one resident put it, "They join, but they are not active."

A one story, brown-shingled building, Zion Hall contains a small auditorium and stage, a classroom, a kitchen, and a tiled *mikvah*, long out of use. Here, the Hadassah, the ZOA, and the Young Judea hold their meetings and many of their fund-raising activities. The "Over-21" Club also operates in Zion Hall.

Many want to consolidate the activities of Zion Hall, the Hebrew school, and the synagogue in one large impressive brick building. This will take a great deal of money, which is now in the process of being raised. Some think that perhaps with more attractive surroundings, younger people will be more inclined to make better use of the synagogue and communal facilities. But as one settler put it, "Everything is here now, if they only want to use it." Many hate to see the old synagogue fall into disuse. One man sentimentally recalls watching his father pour cement for the foundations.

The process of "Americanizing" is of course not new. When Leon Broder first came to the home of *der reicher Cutler* more than fifty years ago, the latter's wife was already—to Broder's horror—serving *fleishig* potatoes (mixed with chicken fat) with a *milchig* meal. On the whole, however, kosher meats are still generally used in Colchester, in part, at least, because of the feeling that they are better and fresher.

The European Jewish tradition of group self-help has been strongly preserved in Colchester. There is, characteristically, a Gemilus Chesed, free loan association of the synagogue, as well as the Leon Broder Free Loan Association. In addition, a cooperative Jewish Aid Society (formerly the Harry Elgart Lodge, named for its founder) has for many years provided loans at interest (as well as cemetery space) for members.

It is intriguing to note that even among those who have left Colchester, there has remained a continued affiliation with the home community. Almost 30 per cent of the 172 members of the synagogue are out-of-towners: either former Colchester residents or their children who have retained membership (which costs only $15 a year), partly in order to secure burial privileges. Some who have moved away keep legal residence in Colchester and vote locally. Isadore M. Davidson, son of an early farmer, in recent years moved back to Colchester after retiring from a lifetime business in Hartford, to work a small part of his father's original farm.

With respect to other Jewish organizations, Colchester reflects a more or less standard pattern: there is a Ladies' Aid Society, which acts as the congregational sisterhood; Hadassah; ZOA; and Young Judea. As might be expected, Hadassah has the largest membership, 130, including residents of nearby towns as well as some of the younger women who do not belong to the synagogue organization. The Ladies' Aid Society has 75.

The interior of the synagogue presents a general old-world atmosphere—from the hands in the priestly blessing on the inside door, to the traditional seating around the central *bima* or prayer desk, to the separate women's gallery, to the back-wall shelves of large worn Hebrew texts and the study tables adjoining. But, sign of the times, one side of the chapel, and one side only, has modern fluorescent lighting fixtures.

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Over the years, the Jewish group ran into some of the familiar rough spots as they fitted themselves into the larger community: the unsavory reputation developed by some Jewish agents in their real estate dealings; the resentment of staid New Englanders at the crowds of Jewish summer visitors; the "restricted" policies (still in effect) of hotels on nearby lakes; the wartime talk that Jews were inclined to buy farms to dodge military service. The charge, incidentally, was disproved by a study of the Jewish Agricultural Society's New England representative, who found that the proportion of boys from Jewish farm families in service was even greater than that of the general population. An honor roll hanging in the synagogue lists 82 names of members or their children who saw service, including three who gave their lives.

Yet many an early Jewish settler had occasion to be befriended by a *goy*, and today when the Hebrew school children hold a Purim masquerade, pictures of those in prize-winning costumes appear on the front-page of the newspaper. At the time of the writers' visits the town was expecting to name a new street going past Joseph Dember's farmhouse Dember Road.

The second and third generation of Colchester Jews are closer culturally and economically to the old Yankee stock than the more recently settled Slavic elements, who constitute 45 per cent of Colchester's population (about one-half of these being Polish in origin). Most of the Slavic groups live on the outskirts of town, have not penetrated into all levels of economic endeavor as the Jews have, and do not have a centralized core in the town itself. The Irish, who were once

numerous in Colchester, have decreased to only 3 per cent. The Italian and Negro populations seem to be increasing lately but still number together only about 2 per cent. The Jews seem to have inherited the mantle of their Anglo-Saxon predecessors in Colchester as the most firmly entrenched and influential group in town. With it apparently goes recognition of the rights of all minority groups. The 50 or so Negroes in town—although they happen to live on the outskirts—appear to be free from the effects of discrimination, their white neighbors having learned to know them as individuals.

More than twenty years ago, in writing of Colchester, Charles G. Chakerian noted (in *a New England Town in Transition*, 1931) that "the social distances which separate the different elements of its population are pronounced and significant . . . social and religious activities appear to divide the town into small national and religious groupings . . . there is an absence of cooperation between the social, religious, and national 'colonies'. . . ." Yet two decades later the Jewish group, at least, shows striking changes. Jews have participated to a great degree in the general life of the community, holding many public offices, both in the "borough" (the downtown area) and the "town." They served in such important capacities as warden (mayor), burgess (alderman), prosecutor, tax collector, clerk, bailiff, elementary-school board chairman or member, trial judge, etc. They supply the leadership in the Republican party, which until recently had dominated the local scene for over a quarter-century. For almost fifteen years now, Samuel Cutler has been a member of the board of Bacon Academy, the oldest high school in Connecticut (founded in 1803) and a source of great pride to Colchester. The town health officer is Jewish, and several Jewish residents were on the committee for the town's 250th anniversary celebration. Sam Maiofes, who runs a dry goods store and sells real estate, has served as secretary of the chamber of commerce, and it was partially through his efforts that the new weekly newspaper, the Colchester *Citizen*, was begun several years ago by publisher Curtiss Johnson. Many of Colchester's representatives in the state's General Assembly have also been Jewish.

The writers when they began this research could discover only seven cases of intermarriage in the history of Colchester, five of these occurring a good number of years ago. Presumably the situation reflects the continuance to some degree of "social distances" that Chakerian wrote of, as well as the modern ease of transportation, the lack of which in earlier periods made out-of-town "dating" a difficult matter. Even these five early cases, however, exhibit varied patterns. In two marriages the Christian girl was converted, one of these ending in divorce; in a third case—involving the son of a former president of the synagogue—the children were raised as Christians and have married Christians. Recently, in one year, two Jewish girls married Gentiles.

A visitor to Colchester cannot but be impressed by the wholesomeness with which the Jews of Colchester accept themselves and—whatever slight evidences there may be to the contrary—are accepted by the non-Jews. The Jewish man who served as mayor for several terms keeps a Jewish National Fund "Blue Box" in his food store, giving free dog bones to customers—both Jews and Gentiles—only on condition that they put a contribution into the box. (He manages to raise about $300 yearly this way.) Perhaps too neatly symbolic of the Jewish situation in Colchester is the small mounting above the synagogue doorway: an American eagle holding two flags astride a Mogen David. The traditionalist might even find sad symbolism in the fact that a piece of the Mogen David is broken off.

Perhaps, however, there is no cause for special Jewish lament, even among traditionalists, for what may seem like the passing of the old glory. The pattern is after all typical of all New England towns: the boys and girls, of Gentile and Jewish settlers alike, grow up, scatter to the large cities of the world, and cultivate a pleasant nostalgia. And for those who still live in Colchester, or go there for the season as in years past, it remains a center of a Jewish life more rooted, more relaxed, more integrated with the landscape and the community than that which may be found in Lakewood or the Catskills—evidence, it may be, for the belief that there is something in the New England spirit especially responsive and hospitable to Jews.
