

PRESERVING NEW JERSEY'S JEWISH PAST IMMIGRANTS TO AGRARIAN AREAS IN THE SOUTH BUILT SYNAGOGUES TO PRACTICE THEIR FAITH.

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Body

They arrived with little more than their prayers and the promise of a better life.

Fleeing the persecution and poverty of turn-of-the-century Eastern Europe, these Jews created symbols of undying devotion to their **faith**: a cluster of simple chapels dotting the farm country in and around Cumberland County.

Even now, seven small **synagogues** of wood or brick can be found amid the cornfields and big sky in burgs such as Carmel, Norma and Brotmanville. Two are in Vineland and Upper Deerfield. Two more are in Woodbine, Cape May County, and Monroeville, Gloucester County.

Tomorrow afternoon at Vineland's **Beth Israel Congregation**, these structures will be on display in an ambitious exhibit of photographs taken by Mays Landing photographer Mark Olsen.

"It's truly a miracle that so many of these **synagogues** survived the years," said Philadelphia author Anne Fox. "They speak of a simpler time, when **synagogues** were small and were the center of a community, especially in an agricultural place."

A few years ago, Fox began interviewing congregants of the **synagogues**. She enlisted Olsen to record images of the structures **built** by the hands of the **Jewish immigrants**.

Fox will speak at tomorrow's photo exhibit, in conjunction with an annual **Jewish** book fair cosponsored by the **Jewish** Federation of Cumberland County and the Beth Israel Community Library.

"The **synagogue** buildings are extremely beautiful and filled with a sense of tradition and history, which desperately needs to be **preserved** for future generations to understand," said Fox, who wants the buildings to become registered on the **New Jersey** and National Registers of Historic Places.

Built between 1880 and 1910, the seven structures have remained, for the most part, intact. Historians say they may be the largest concentration of early **synagogues** remaining in the United States, Fox said.

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French **Jewish** philanthropist Baron Maurice de Hirsch arranged for the first group of **Jewish immigrants** from Russia in 1882. Determined to make their living from the barren and rough land, they established their first colony outside Vineland in an **area** they named Alliance.

In time, other Jews followed from Hungary and Romania, each group establishing its own **synagogue** and its own customs of worship and branching out to nearby Monroeville, Carmel, Bridgeton and Woodbine.

Another wave of **Jewish immigrants** came in the 1930s to escape Hitler's oppression, landing in Vineland and helping to establish the region's poultry industry. A third group, survivors of the Holocaust, arrived after World War II.

Fox hopes to write a book about her experiences interviewing the keepers of these religious sentinels and highlighting Olsen's striking color and black-and-white photographs.

"I think these **synagogues** symbolize a very important part of the history of this **area**, a history that needs to be examined and **preserved**," said David E. Uniglicht, a member of the board of directors of the Woodbine Brotherhood **Synagogue**.

The focus of Fox and Olsen on these buildings comes at a pivotal time for Uniglicht's congregation. After Rosh Hashanah services in September, the Woodbine **synagogue** closed its doors to the faithful for good. And the **building** has been put up for sale.

For the last decade, Uniglicht almost singlehandedly tended to the Woodbine **synagogue**, a wooden structure **built** in 1893 as a smaller version of the historic Touro **Synagogue** in Newport, R.I.

In recent years, **synagogue** members buried in a neighboring cemetery have far outnumbered living congregants.

"We're extremely saddened that it is closed," Uniglicht said. "But Judaism is a living religion, and we can't continually look backward. We have to look to the future, and we felt for our members it would be better served joining a living congregation."

Uniglicht said he felt a strong connection to the old **building**, where his grandparents married in 1906, and where he attended worship services most of his life.

"I think it may be that kind of attachment, that connection to these buildings and their roots, that has kept them **preserved** in the way they have been in this **area**," muses Fox.

At the book fair, Fox will also talk about her book, *My Heart in a Suitcase*, which chronicles her experiences as part of a kindertransport of 10,000 German children sent to safety in England during World War II. Most never saw their families again.

The book fair, which runs from noon to 5 p.m. tomorrow, will feature books, CDs, software, tapes and gift items. Proceeds will benefit the Beth Israel Community Library, which houses one of the largest Judaica collections in the region, according to Doris Hecht, who is chairing the event.

IF YOU GO The **Jewish** book fair and **synagogue** photo exhibition will be held from noon to 5 p.m. tomorrow at the Beth Israel Congregation, 1015 Park Ave., Vineland. For more information, call 856-696-4445.

Graphic

PHOTO;

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PHOTO

The Garton Road Synagogue, in a photograph by Mark Olsen, is part of the exhibit tomorrow at Vineland's Beth Israel Synagogue.

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