

# Virtual Restoration of Small-Town Synagogues in Texas

## Identity: Staying Jewish or Running for Cover

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Staying Jewish in America takes work; in small towns it took more. America, on the one hand, celebrates the diversity of its population, but on the other, demands a degree of conformity that restricts it. Occasionally it's OK to dress in quaint "native" costumes, sing songs in a foreign tongue, and serve strange foods. But not always. One could belong and be Jewish, but up to a point. Big cities had more room for diversity and could offer more choices.

If "getting along" is the payment, then "belonging" is the reward in small-town living. It applies to relations among and between Jews and gentiles and has both economic and social aspects. Since Saturday was the big shopping day, keeping a retail store closed on that day was in most cases a form of economic suicide. Yet, not keeping a store closed on *Rosh Hashanah* or *Yom Kippur* showed a lack of self-respect and to the Goyim bad form. Mutual dependency promoted behavioral conformity: one got along or got out.

Most Jews whether from eastern or western Europe were, upon arrival, nominally Orthodox. Practical observance, based on three points, *Shabbat*, *Kashrut*, and *Mikveh*, was severely challenged by small-town, if not American, life. Most people felt compelled by economic circumstance to work on *Shabbat* as well as *Succoth*, *Pesach*, and *Shavuot*. Kosher meat was not always available, and the *shohets* (ritual slaughterers) preferred for various reasons to locate in big cities. Family purity requires monthly immersion by a married woman in a *mikveh* (ritual bath) whose presence already assumed a degree of communal concentration and organization. There seemed to be no contest between strict observance and economic practicality. There were alternative solutions for the single-minded, but most weren't, and compromise was inevitable. The fact is the bond of Orthodoxy was largely sentimental and easily broken; its influence on small-town life was practically irrelevant.

Reform Judaism, which began in 19th century Germany, offered an ideal American program: saving "identity" (I am a Jew) but discarding the "imperative" (*mitzvot* or living a Jewish life). Its more aggressive big-city obvious Jewish signs (*tallit* and *yarmulke*) were forbidden. But small towns had to accommodate a range of observance and were rarely doctrinaire. The Reform men in Texarkana as a regular and conscious duty filled out a Saturday Orthodox minyan for the few who wanted one. The bylaws of the synagogue in Laredo allowed whoever started first to determine the form of service, the others went downstairs. A Reform Jew bought the land for the Shul in Brenham yet never set foot in the place. Cooperation among groups was more common than not. Orthodox families sometimes needed Reform assistance in certain delicate family matters. Many small-town synagogues

still require the wearing of yarmulkes, although they might count anyone who shows up for a minyan and then not necessarily to ten.

Most German Jews, already by education and culture more "enlightened" than those further east, established Reform congregations from the beginning. Some reached the extremes of liberalism in which it was proper for the Torah to be seen but not heard. While most small towns were Reform, Wichita Falls, Corsicana, and Galveston also supported Orthodox (later Conservative) synagogues. San Angelo, however, remained unaffiliated. Where Orthodoxy held out it was due largely to force of personality (Rabbi Goodman in Wichita Falls and Rabbi Feigon in Galveston) or family commitment (the Toubins in Brenham and the Wohlers in Corsicana). There was dissension, much of it stemming from practices which were common in Europe but not here. Orthodox Jews in Port Arthur tried to bring suit in civil court to force the Jewish community to remain officially Orthodox. The idea of a state-sponsored or authorized religion is common elsewhere including England. While the American concept of the separation of church and state does avoid the more onerous aspects of what can become an oppressive practice, it does make religious institutions beholden to the wealthiest donors without whose contributions most places would fold.

Jews were happy to be here. Whatever conditions and compromises they encountered, it had been far worse elsewhere. They wanted to belong. In small-town Texas this meant public schools for the children and Friday-night football. But Friday night was also "temple night". In San Angelo they found a *davener* who could complete the service in 12 minutes flat, in time to make the 8pm game. Belonging, more practically, meant to the local country club. And with some exceptions Jews were simply blackballed till long after the WWII. It was hard for them to understand why, as they were often the staunchest workers if not the leaders of many charitable projects and agencies. No one wanted to swim or play golf that badly, but the country club was where deals were made and social status certified. When the barriers finally fell, many refused to let bygones be bygones and would not join.

The quest for belonging reached its nadir in the American Council for Judaism, a kind of "America First" clone which took hold in parts of the South with a vengeance after WWII. The mirror image of Zionism, its adherents sought to declare their American loyalty by fighting against the establishment of the State of Israel. It may have made a kind of sense in the shadowy postwar years, but today it is an embarrassment for which most Jews would have little sympathy. Real antisemitism existed but was rarely overt. The Ku Klux Klan gained a foothold in the '20's but was eventually condemned by responsible community leaders of all faiths. The story is told of Rabbi Henry Cohen, together with a Christian clergyman, and the sheriff turning back a mounted mob of Klansmen on the bridge to Galveston Island.

The real threat to the continuity of Jewish life in small towns did not come from religious or political compromise, but from diminishing numbers. There just weren't enough Jews to constitute a self-perpetuating society. The resolutely Orthodox recognized this quickly and barely remained in the country for more than a generation. The rest discovered in the army or at UT (if not before) the larger Jewish world and wanted to belong to it. Having grown up as a tiny but highly visible minority they were eager for society in which dating was not problematic, where one could be Jewish or not, and where choices could otherwise be made outside of the narrow selection with which they had grown up.