

The Jews of Keystone: Life in a Multicultural Boomtown

by

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The general outlines of Jewish settlement and economic progress in America are well known. Following the colonial Sephardim, German Jews arrived in the mid-nineteenth century, dispersed throughout the country, started out in petty trade, and soon found varying degrees of success in commerce. East European Jews came around the turn of the twentieth century, concentrated in large northern cities and found opportunity as skilled workers, especially in the garment industry, before achieving economic mobility.¹ Although this overall trend cannot be denied, some historians have objected to the sweeping generalizations often made about American Jewish migration patterns, pointing out that up to 30 percent of immigrants from eastern Europe chose not to settle in major metropolitan areas. The economic history of these eastern European Jews more closely resembles that of the German Jews who preceded them: they started out as peddlers and small traders, and often became successful merchants in small cities and towns throughout America.²

The Russian Jews of the southern West Virginia coalfields certainly fit the peddler-to-merchant paradigm. Yet their story suggests that we need to do more than just allow some eastern Europeans into the German model if we want to fully capture the complexity of the American Jewish immigrant experience. The Keystone, West Virginia, Jewish community thrived from the

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1890s to the 1930s. Its first settlers did indeed come as peddlers, but they were fully prepared to take advantage of all the opportunities that Keystone provided. Although for some this meant opening small shops that later grew into department stores, for others it meant a somewhat less conventional course. The Keystone environment intertwined with the immigrants' old country background enabling Jews to create a considerably diverse ethnic economic niche. The town's distinctive socioeconomic development, in turn, shaped their relations with non-Jews and also influenced the development of Jewish communal life.

At first glance Keystone and its Jewish community present a seeming incongruity. Perhaps former resident Louis Zaltzman, son of Russian Jewish immigrants, who moved there with his parents in 1896 at the age of four, expressed this best when he recalled, "The community there was small and rough, no electric lights or water supply, dirt and unpaved streets and roads, and very little law. It was a frontier town with fourteen saloons and about fifteen Jewish families." It also was home to B'nai Israel, the first Jewish congregation in southern West Virginia, whose members built a strictly Orthodox synagogue in 1904 complete with a mikveh and balcony seating for women.³ But there was no incompatibility between the raucous boomtown and the group of pious Jews. As Zaltzman neglected to mention, many of the congregants made their living as saloon keepers. Jewish immigrants and their children were perfectly at home in Keystone as merchants and mechanics, as purveyors of liquor and vaudeville, as landlords and landladies, as politicians, policemen, and pool sharks, as bankers and volunteer fire fighters, and as respectable leading citizens of this less-than-respectable town.⁴

The creation of Keystone as a turn-of-the-century boomtown can be traced to two factors: the topography of southern West Virginia and the sudden development of its coal industry. Before the 1880s, the steep, mountainous terrain of central Appalachia, which encompasses southern West Virginia, southwestern Virginia, and southeastern Kentucky, had caused transportation networks to bypass most of the region despite its vast coal deposits. With limited access to outside markets, the local economy

revolved around self-sufficient farming by a small, scattered population. Very few merchants and towns were needed to service such an economy. McDowell County, where Keystone is located, had the smallest population in the state in 1880 with only three thousand residents. Ten years later it still lacked incorporated towns.⁵

Around that time, the urgent need for coal to fuel the nation's booming industrialization finally made profitable the expensive and arduous construction of railroad networks through the mountains. As soon as the trains arrived, the coal industry flourished. The coalfields' rapid industrial development was organized and controlled by capitalists from outside the region who acquired the land, built the railroads, and formed subsidiary coal companies or leased the land to coal entrepreneurs. They were supported by the small pre-existing local elite, mostly merchants and some landowners, who lacked the capital to bring about such a transformation themselves. Meanwhile, members of local farm families became the basis for a new coal mining labor force, both voluntarily and involuntarily, as conditions around them changed rapidly.⁶

The local population, however, was too small to satisfy the labor needs of the coal industry. Through recruitment and word-of-mouth, southern and eastern European immigrants poured into the region from northern port cities while African Americans arrived from the South. A disproportionate number of the new arrivals were young, single men. Most of the coal miners and their families (if they had them) moved into hastily constructed camps and villages built by the coal companies. These company towns, devoted to the sole purpose of extracting coal, remained a dominant feature of the landscape for decades.⁷

Yet local industrial growth generated demands for a variety of economic activities and services that could not be met either by company towns or by the few pre-existing villages and merchants. Keystone sprang up as the first independent town in McDowell County to meet these demands. In 1890 the town did not exist; a small hamlet named Cassville occupied its site. In 1892 the Norfolk & Western railroad opened a depot there and

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the Keystone Coal & Coke Company began operations, thus giving the town a new name and an impetus to grow. Within eight years Keystone had a population of slightly over one thousand, fully 10 percent of whom were Jewish.⁸

Jewish immigrants were among the town's very first inhabitants, arriving in 1892 on the same rail line that had just begun to ship the coal out. Most of the earliest Jews came as peddlers from Baltimore at the instigation of one particular wholesale firm, the Baltimore Bargain House, which supplied them with goods on credit. The firm's owner, Jacob Epstein, himself a former peddler, intentionally built his business around itinerants, who expanded markets by venturing into the under-served hinterlands. Epstein evidently recognized the emerging coalfield as a potentially lucrative territory and encouraged some of these men to try their luck along the new railroad line. When the peddlers found promising towns to settle in, they opened up businesses and sent for their families. In the 1890s Keystone was the most promising of all the towns along the N&W railroad, and by 1900 it had a young and growing Jewish community of fifty-four adults and fifty-six children in twenty-five households. According to the 1900 census, all but five of the adults were immigrants: forty-three from Russia, four from Austria-Hungary, and only two from Germany.⁹

The timing of Keystone's birth with the arrival of Russian Jews in America accounts for the East European character of the town's Jewish population; the young town offered ample opportunities for young and adventurous immigrants. Yet it is not entirely clear why these Russian Jews ventured beyond the eastern port cities while the vast majority of their fellow immigrants remained in New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. In interviews, descendants of coalfield Jews report that their parents and grandparents sought opportunities for self-employment that were not as available in large cities. Historian Ewa Morawska has suggested that Russian Jews who migrated to smaller towns were more likely to have a background in rural petty trade than the majority, who originated in the increasingly urban and industrial cities and towns of the Jewish Pale. Preliminary research into the old-country origins of coalfield Jews tends to support this thesis;

of the 110 immigrants whose birthplaces have been ascertained, 50 percent came from towns with populations less than ten thousand while another 20 percent came from towns apparently so small that their populations are not listed in standard sources.¹⁰

In any case, once the first Jewish immigrants established themselves in the coalfields, they encouraged relatives to join them, causing a chain migration that allowed Jewish communities like the one in Keystone to arise. Whether an early peddler or a later clerk in a coalfield store owned by an already-established relative, Jews arrived with connections to ethnic-based networks that facilitated their entry into commerce although most started out with little or no capital. With the notable exception of immigrants from the Middle East, who also arrived as peddlers and filled a similar retail niche in the coalfield economy, this economic role set Jews apart from other immigrants to the region, who promptly entered the mines.¹¹

While their cultural background and networks launched Jews into commercial pursuits, it was the particular nature of Keystone that determined what kind of commerce they would pursue. As the first local hub in an area overflowing with young, single, male workers, Keystone immediately assumed the characteristics of a wide-open town. A West Virginia attorney general and other observers have contended that the local power structure, composed of the area's coal operators, enforced this outcome in order to attract and retain labor which was often in short supply. While other local towns and hamlets had their share of unruly activities, Keystone became especially notorious, known far and wide as the "Sodom and Gomorrah" of the coalfields. Its red-light district, Cinder Bottom, was referred to as "a revelation of human depravity." Take away the hyperbole of the moralistic commentary of the time, and what is left is a rowdy, often unrestrained boomtown where drinking, gambling, prostitution, and other forms of "commercial exploitation of human weakness" played a significant role in the economy.¹²

Not that such exploitation was the town's only function. As a commercial center, Keystone supplied all kinds of retail services. Merchants, a few coal mining officials, and a small

professional cohort provided civic leadership and acted as typical small town boosters, promoting downtown and residential development, infrastructure improvements, and public services. The bulk of the population consisted of coal miners, railroad workers, and their families. Even the town's most vociferous critics took pains to point out that decent people lived there, although according to a well-circulated anti-Keystone tract written by an anonymous "Virginia lad," "the percent of good ones is mighty low."¹³

The liquor business may not have offered the only retail opportunity in Keystone, but the occupational history of the town's Jewish entrepreneurs suggests that it was probably the earliest. Half of the ten Jewish business owners listed in an 1898 Keystone business directory operated saloons. Jews operated five out of the seventeen saloons listed, while saloons constituted 40 percent of all businesses in Keystone, according to the directory. With their involvement in the liquor trade, Keystone Jews participated in a customary Jewish occupation that extended for centuries into the East European countryside. The limited opportunities available to Jews in the old country, their traditional role as "middleman" between producers and consumers, and Judaism's moderate approach to the use of alcohol—which discouraged over-indulgence but included wine as an integral part of Jewish ritual and celebration—made tavern-keeping and alcohol distribution an important path to economic survival and advancement. The Jews of Keystone were hardly unique in continuing to pursue this trade in America, although little has been written on American Jewish involvement in the liquor industry.¹⁴

However, as Keystone grew, it could sustain more diverse enterprises, and both Jewish and non-Jewish merchants moved with the demand. The percentage of Jews engaged in the liquor business decreased steadily after 1898, as did the ratio of saloons to other commercial ventures in town. A telling statistic is the advancement of retail clothing. In 1898 Jews owned all three clothing establishments; in 1904 they owned all eight. They evidently had the wholesale connections and previous experience to

establish a monopoly in this area once the demand appeared, and by 1904 more Jews owned clothing stores than any other type of business.¹⁵

Nevertheless, Jewish enterprise from the 1890s through the 1920s exhibited notable diversity. While clothing and dry goods stores predominated and saloons remained an important source of income until prohibition became law in West Virginia in 1914, Jews worked as butchers, plumbers, carpenters, mechanics, tailors, restaurant managers, theater operators, junk dealers, jewelers, and grocers. They were real estate developers, clerks, salesmen, and bartenders. In fact, they did just about everything, except participate in the industry that essentially controlled the local economy: the coal industry. Their almost total lack of involvement in the region's dominant activity reflects how their previously established networks and skills enabled them to forge a special niche in the economy, while the open nature of Keystone allowed Jews to fill a wide variety of different occupations within this niche.¹⁶

This openness extended to Jewish-gentile relations. In a milieu where newcomers from a variety of backgrounds gathered to advance themselves anyway they could, the social scene was fluid. The town conformed to a pattern evident from historical accounts of Jewish communities in places as far flung as Odessa, Russia, and Wichita, Kansas: "fledgling" cities, where entrepreneurial spirit runs high and the social hierarchy is not well-fixed, have been particularly welcoming to Jews. As in such other newly developing areas, the pre-existing commercial sector of the coalfields was quite small and its members needed the new arrivals to achieve the economic development they desperately sought. As one coalfield historian notes, "Longtime residents and newly established families could merge their interests and define an identity as local boosters." Also, Jews were only one of many different ethnic groups who flocked to the coalfields, and historians have noted a worldwide tendency that Jews are more accepted in heterogeneous places where their religion and culture do not provide as stark a contrast to accepted norms. Moreover, the

region soon developed a rigid social structure based on work hierarchies within the coal industry that overshadowed ethnicity and even race.¹⁷

Keystone's position as an integral yet singular part of the coalfield scene caused it both to share and diverge from emerging social patterns. The area's ubiquitous company towns quickly formed into stratified societies with coal company officials living along "Silk Stocking Rows" and coal miners, usually segregated by race and often also by ethnicity, relegated to less desirable locations. In the more economically diverse independent towns where coal companies had less complete control, ethnicity proved to be a less evident marker of social differentiation, and class divisions were not as sharp. Keystone, the most free-wheeling town of all, exhibited the most open social structure, although a broad distinction did exist between its large working class of coal miners and railroad workers and the much smaller yet occupationally varied group of merchants, professionals, lower-level white collar workers, and middle-to-upper level railroad and coal mining employees. The town completely lacked the uppermost level of coalfield society. Wealthy coal operators and the region's most prominent professionals, bankers, and political leaders resided in the millionaire town of Bramwell or in Welch, the nearby county seat.¹⁸

Jews played an active role in Keystone's social life. They developed close friendships with non-Jews, both black and white, who occupied their same socioeconomic position. They participated in fraternal clubs as members and leaders. A small town where everyone knew everyone else, Keystone was "a very close community . . . everybody was quite friendly," remembers one Jewish man who grew up there in the 1910s and 1920s. A non-Jewish woman who married a local Jewish man in the 1930s goes even further, recalling that, "In a little town like Keystone, the Jewish people and the other people loved each other. . . . We didn't think about [religion making people] any different—which we weren't."¹⁹

The fluid social dynamics in Keystone influenced racial interaction as well. Although the era's racial norms prohibited

anything approaching real equality, African Americans found the town relatively open to their advancement. Local black leaders referred to McDowell County as the "Free State of McDowell" and to Keystone as "the mecca of the coalfields." The town supported a small but vital black middle class of business people and professionals. For many decades, its only newspaper was the African American-owned *McDowell Times*, a typical small town newspaper promoting progress and development but also covering issues of national and local interest to African Americans.²⁰

McDowell County had the largest black population in the coalfields by the turn of the century, and Keystone had the largest black population of any town, a fact which added to its dubious reputation among the region's majority white population. Keystone was 40 percent black by 1900 and just over 50 percent by 1910. As a nominally southern town located less than twenty miles from the border with Jim Crow Virginia, Keystone was somewhat segregated residentially and socially, but, its critics charged, not nearly enough. These detractors seemed particularly agitated by the racial mingling that occurred in the brothels of Cinder Bottom, where white and black prostitutes served a mixed clientele. The town's critics probably overemphasized the degree of racial interaction in Keystone, since social life was for the most part racially segregated. Although whites and blacks maintained individual friendships, fraternal clubs were organized along racial lines and society columns show little evidence of black-white socializing. According to one former resident, the two races did not mix socially, but got along well nevertheless.²¹

As throughout the South, Jewish-black contact in Keystone could be found primarily in the economic realm. Historians of southern Jewry have described the close economic relationship that developed between Jews and African Americans in the post-Civil War era essentially as one of merchant and customer. The New South town of Durham, North Carolina proved an exception, as the rise of an African American middle class made interaction between the two groups more equal. Keystone resembled Durham in that the merchant-customer tie, though

important, was not the only type of economic contact between the two groups. Lacking a professional class of their own, Jews sometimes used African American attorneys for legal matters and were occasionally treated by black doctors. Jewish business people also worked with or contended against their African American counterparts in real estate and other transactions.²²

Articles in the *McDowell Times* indicate that Jews and blacks maintained generally good relations, although it should be noted that advertising revenue from Jewish merchants may have influenced the paper's coverage. A 1918 article praising leading Jewish businessman Wolf Bank stressed that there was "no discrimination between the races" at his café. Readers were urged to attend Israel Totz's theater because "Mr. Totz has on many occasions proven his friendship" to blacks. "Congenial" theater owner Louis Shore was hailed as "public spirited" after he invited a local black church to hold services in his theater free of charge until the church could rebuild after a disaster. Shore's Colonial Theater ads made a special pitch for black customers, telling readers that "poor, black or white, they treat you right," while one of Totz's Grand Theater ads in 1916 proclaimed that the pictures shown "do not tend to incite race hatred." The latter no doubt referred to the recently-released racist film *Birth of a Nation*, which sparked often-successful banning campaigns by African American groups throughout the state. Totz promised "courteous and impartial attention" at his theater, pointing out that "one man's money goes as far as the other."²³

Either intentionally or unintentionally, Totz's observation may have played on stereotypes of Jews that prevailed in the coalfields among non-Jews of both races. Jews were seen as overly interested in money, although this was not always viewed negatively. In discussing the impact of impending prohibition on the town's numerous multi-racial and multi-ethnic saloon owners, the *Times* singled out two Jews, snickering that "Hyman's and Hermanson's faces will look haggard and worn as if they had lost the last relative on earth." A glowing obituary of leading Jewish merchant Joseph Lopinsky of Welch proclaimed that "in the presence of his sunny generous disposition one forgot that he was a

Jew." The newspaper often chided Jewish merchants for internal "jealousies" that got in the way of the town's economic interests, while the white-owned Welch newspaper was not averse to printing ethnic jokes targeted at Jews, blacks, Irish, and Italians. In the multicultural coalfields, every group received its share of derision. However, both newspapers were just as likely to praise Jewish merchants as self-made men who succeeded through their diligence and perspicacity.²⁴

Jews and blacks comprised enough of the population to be a force in Keystone's political life. They participated in the leadership of the local Republican Party, which dominated the county's political scene, and held elected and appointed offices. In fact, in 1912 the five-member Keystone City Council contained two Jews and two blacks. This rather remarkable configuration shows that Jews and blacks could translate their numbers into a certain amount of political strength. However, local newspapers reveal little of substantive political controversy, making it difficult to assess the actual influence of the two groups. They undoubtedly had an impact on issues of race and ethnicity, contributing to an atmosphere of tolerance that made Keystone unusual for its time. In addition, prohibition seems to have garnered little support in the "Free State of McDowell" despite making inroads in other parts of the region. Even towns such as nearby Pocahontas, Virginia, which also had a flourishing liquor trade, saw temperance marches and efforts to shut down its "vice" district. Nationally, Jews and blacks showed little enthusiasm for prohibition and some Jews had in fact voiced opposition; perhaps the participation of both groups in civic life impeded the movement locally. When it came to economic issues, however, the reigning coal elite of McDowell County did an excellent job of enforcing consensus; members of the middle and upper classes, regardless of race, ethnicity, or religion, seemed firmly convinced that whatever was good for the coal industry was good for them. Moreover the county did not experience the labor unrest of nearby coal counties despite similar abuses.²⁵

Jews were involved in all aspects of the town's civic and municipal development. Merchant Charles Budnick was

instrumental in starting the town's bank and master mechanic Max Ofsa built the water tower. Jews and blacks helped to fight the chronic fires that were the bane of the town's existence; butcher Simon Ofsa served at least one term as fire marshal. Merchant S. L. Hermanson served on the police force and Isadore Katzen became a county prohibition officer whose exploits were eagerly chronicled in both the *Keystone* and *Welch* newspapers. Ironically, yet fittingly, Katzen had formerly worked for a liquor dealer.²⁶

Fittingly, because *Keystone's* respectable and less respectable sides existed in a symbiosis that often made it hard to differentiate the two. Leading Jews and non-Jews of both races engaged in the activities that made the town infamous. Between 1905 and 1909 at least two prominent Jewish merchants and real estate owners were convicted of renting buildings to women who ran "houses of ill fame." One of these men was cited on at least two separate occasions. The other, one of the town's wealthiest citizens, rented to a woman who ran "the cleanest and best-conducted house" in town according to the "Virginia lad," who noted, "This house is well patronized and I saw here merchants, clerks, railroad men and a few foreigners." The two landlords were fined twenty-five dollars for each occurrence. Jewish saloon owners frequently appeared in court to plead guilty to charges of selling liquor on Sunday or selling liquor to minors. Apparently court fines were considered part of the cost of doing business in *Keystone*. Sometimes the costs could be considerably higher: in 1901 Jewish saloon owner William Henry was shot in the leg while trying to eject an unruly coal miner from his establishment. The out-of-town newspaper reporting this incident characterized it as an example of *Keystone's* "usual payday pleasantries." Israel Totz kept a gun behind his saloon counter for just such emergencies.²⁷

It was common knowledge that the local brothels did not cater only to coal miners. A scandalous trial in 1915 involving an under-age black prostitute threatened to expose leading Jewish and non-Jewish white businessmen as clients of one well-connected African American madam. However, the only white

patrons hauled in to testify were a Jewish bartender and a gentile coal company bookkeeper, and only blacks were convicted, including the madam. The fact that the bartender stayed in town and later became a prominent coalfield pharmacist may say something about the forgiving climate of Keystone and its Jewish community.²⁸

That community was close-knit and active. Although Jews were full participants in the Keystone social scene, much of their social life revolved around their own communal activities. These activities were covered with approving interest by both the Keystone and Welch newspapers, which often informed readers when the Jews of the region were celebrating religious holidays. In 1911, for example, the Welch newspaper noted that Keystone's "Manhattan Social Club has announced its annual Purim Ball," and "all who attend are assured a most enjoyable time" at "the biggest dance of the year." The paper later reported that the event was "a decided success," with the spacious hall "crowded to the limit." Although the crowd was predominantly Jewish, some non-Jews also attended.²⁹

The existence of a "Manhattan Social Club" suggests a Jewish community that did not consider itself remote from the larger body of American Jewry. In fact, despite Keystone's location deep in the mountains of central Appalachia, the Jews who lived there were not isolated. The railroad carried them to and from Baltimore, where many had relatives and often stayed for extended periods, and it also brought their city relatives to the mountains to visit. Their businesses necessitated regular buying trips to New York, Baltimore, and Cincinnati. Some residents subscribed to Jewish publications. Through such means they retained their connection to the larger Jewish community, which undoubtedly helped them maintain a strong identity as Jews.³⁰

Not that they were in any danger of losing that identity, at least in the first generation. Paradoxically, rather than promoting assimilation, Keystone's wide open environment seemed to allow its Jewish immigrants to remain unselfconsciously Jewish. Their behavior does not match the descriptions of such noted chroniclers of small town Jewish life as Eli Evans in the

South and Ewa Morawska in the North, who emphasize how small, insecure Jewish communities attempted to fit into their surroundings by trying not to be too conspicuous. The Keystone synagogue, located along the main thoroughfare, was a highly visible statement of a Jewish presence (City Hall was later built next door). Jews conducted their business affairs in a mixture of Yiddish and English, suggesting that they were not in too much of a hurry to shed their old country ways.³¹

Although close-knit, the Jewish community was quite contentious and its members had no qualms about bringing their internal conflicts to the local courts. Mostly these cases involved business disputes, although other types of "dirty linen" were also aired, as when Sam Katzen sued Jake Shore for slander for spreading rumors that he was having an affair with Bessie Zaltzman, a married woman. Katzen eventually dropped the suit and paid all court costs, suggesting that the rumor had some truth behind it. Bessie Zaltzman subsequently divorced her apparently shiftless husband. She then carried on lengthy and heated court battles against her enemies, mostly members of the Totz and Shore families, in defense of her various real estate interests. Jews and non-Jews also tangled in the courts on a fairly regular basis, usually over business matters such as title disputes and debt payments.³²

Despite internal squabbles, three interwoven factors forged Jewish group cohesion: economic links, kinship, and religion. Since the founding of the community, established members provided jobs, loans, and other support to relatives or other Jews who had recently arrived. Many of the families were related by blood or marriage either before their arrival in the coalfields or after the first generation of children began to find mates within their own religious group. Weddings offered major opportunities for religious and communal celebration, with out-of-town Jewish guests from other parts of the coalfields and from Baltimore providing a larger Jewish collective presence. Such affairs were eagerly reported in the Welch newspaper, which commented on one occasion that "the

impressiveness and solemnity of the Hebrew . . . ceremony was quite pretty."³³

Keystone Jews persevered in maintaining the rituals of traditional Judaism under difficult conditions. In the 1890s the then-small group rented a hall for the high holidays and merchant Kopel Hyman, a rabbi, led services. By 1904, when the synagogue was built, the community had grown large enough to hire a full-time rabbi. Although not everyone in the immigrant generation followed traditional practices, all actively supported the synagogue. Many families kept kosher at least through the 1930s. According to one man who grew up in the adjoining town of Northfork, "The rabbi was also a shochet and he would come around and take orders for meat during the week. He would kill chickens." The Northfork native also recalls that the Northfork Jewish contingent refused to ride the train on the high holidays, and would walk on the railroad tracks for one mile to the Keystone synagogue dressed in their holiday best. The women would wear sensible shoes for the trek, carrying their fancier shoes with them (a less-than-satisfactory solution on Yom Kippur, since Jewish law forbids carrying as well as train-riding).³⁴

Keystone's synagogue remained Orthodox throughout its existence and supported a full-time rabbi until around 1940, unlike other coalfield congregations, which gradually moved toward Reform Judaism and often relied on student rabbis from Hebrew Union College. Nonetheless the congregation's determination to maintain a traditional Jewish society in the midst of the Appalachian mountains was doomed to failure. For one thing, the younger generation began to fall away. One man who grew up in Keystone recalls that the synagogue was "too Orthodox for me" and he eventually stopped attending. Internal strains became evident in the 1920s, when some of the young people began to marry outside of the faith.³⁵

Despite the ease with which they had integrated into their surroundings, Keystone's Jewish immigrants found assimilation and intermarriage in the younger generation just as hard to accept as other first-generation American Jews. The first child in the Ofsa family to marry a Christian (around 1920) found herself

banned from the family for some time, although younger siblings who followed in her footsteps did not have to undergo that ordeal. In her will, Bessie Zaltzman left only a small monthly sum to her disaffiliated son Abe and donated the money he would have received to national Jewish charities. However, she instructed her other son Louis to make sure that Abe never lacked "the necessities of life" and to set up a kaddish fund so that Abe would be properly mourned after he died. The Orthodox Keystone congregation had no mechanism for accepting interfaith couples into their religious community, and it appears that most intermarriages resulted in the Jewish partner leaving the religion.³⁶

Yet it was the decline of Keystone itself that spelled the demise of its Jewish community. One basic fact about boomtowns is that they often go bust, and although Keystone never became a ghost town like those in the fabled West, it lost its original spark after the state prohibition law went into effect in July 1914. The following year, the *McDowell Times* reported that property values had deteriorated by half. Some saloon owners stayed in town and went into other, often less profitable, lines of business. Others moved their saloons and their homes across the state line to Pocahontas, Virginia. (Unfortunately for them, Virginia enacted prohibition less than two years later.) Although Keystone's red-light district survived in somewhat reduced form, the decrease in activity had a ripple effect on the town's economy. The Keystone Jewish population in 1910 reached a recorded peak of 147 and probably continued to rise for the next few years; by 1920 the number was halved to seventy-two while the town's overall population dropped from two thousand to eighteen hundred. The Great Depression of the 1930s struck the coalfields hard, and Keystone did not rebound as well as other coalfield towns in the following decade.³⁷

However, most of the Jews who grew up in Keystone between 1900 and 1915 did not go very far away. Several moved to neighboring Northfork where they established their own families, and Jews in the two towns sustained the congregation into the 1940s. The synagogue building was finally sold to a church in

1952, when only two Jewish families remained in Keystone. Many other Keystone children grew up to become the founders and mainstays of Jewish communities in four nearby county seat towns, which took over as leading coalfield centers. Eventually, the transformation of the coal economy in the 1950s led to the decline of these communities as well.³⁸

Since the advent of the "new social history," immigration historians have observed that immigrants' pre-migration skills and resources substantially determined their economic progress in America besides shaping their social and cultural adaptation. This has led scholars to emphasize the continuities between the old country and the new. Certainly Keystone differed dramatically from the shtetls of eastern Europe. However, this small town in the Appalachian mountains provided an environment where Jews could fill many of the same roles as in the Jewish Pale, not only as merchants, but as tavern keepers and artisans. The broad retail and service niche carved out by Jews outside of the region's primary economic activity bears a striking resemblance to the Jews' centuries-old niche in rural and semi-rural eastern Europe, where they also performed a wide variety of functions for an agricultural economy in which they had little direct involvement. But whereas the marginal nature of Jewish enterprise in eastern Europe contributed to their status as outsiders, the boomtown environment of Keystone created a fluid social structure that allowed the Jewish community inside, even though their religion and lack of involvement in the coal industry separated Jews from the majority of Keystone's inhabitants.³⁹

Scholars in the field of Appalachian studies now question whether Appalachia was ever really a distinct region in social and cultural terms. Similarly, historian Mark Bauman questions how important "region" has been to the American Jewish experience. He suggests that other factors may be more pertinent, such as structural aspects of the particular local environment, background of the Jewish population, and demography. This study provides further reason to question assumptions about region and the ethnic experience. Keystone was hardly "typical" of the Appalachian South, much less the South as a whole. In many ways, it had

more in common with boomtowns elsewhere in the world than with its immediate surroundings. Yet it served an important function in the industrialization of the region and therefore needs to be seen as an integral part of the history of the Appalachian coalfields as well as the New South. Similarly, the Jews of Keystone do not quite match the prototype of the respectable small-town Jewish merchant. In some ways, their experience more closely suggests the rough-and-tumble life of New York's Lower East Side, where Jews often engaged in less-than-kosher activities to ensure their economic survival.⁴⁰

If neither Keystone nor its Jewish population seem to fit standard depictions of Appalachia or of American Jews, they seem to have fit each other very well. Although apocryphal, this story has the ring of truth: when Jake Shore stood before the judge at his citizenship hearing, he was asked, "in the event of war between Russia and America, which side would you fight for?" He did not hesitate to declare: "Keystone!"

NOTES

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¹ The standard histories on American Jewry all describe this pattern. For an example see the five-volume *The Jewish People in America*, edited by Henry Feingold (Baltimore, 1992). A short section of this excellent survey, however, does briefly note the existence of East European Jewish communities in smaller American cities and towns; see volume 3, *A Time for Building: The Third Migration, 1880-1920*, by Gerald Sorin, 153-169.

² Joel Perlmann points out the limitations of generalizing about Russian Jewish immigrants in "Beyond New York: The Occupations of Russian Jewish Immigrants in Providence, R.I., and Other Small Jewish Communities, 1900-1915," *American Jewish History* 72 (March 1983): 384-394. Southern and western Jewish historians have been among the leaders in recounting the experience of smaller and non-metropolitan East European Jewish communities in America. See for example Steven Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City: The Jews of Atlanta, 1845-1915* (Philadelphia, 1978); Louis Schmier, "We Were All Part of a

Lost Generation': Jewish Religious Life in a Rural Southern Town, 1900-1940," in *Cultural Perspectives on the American South*, 5, ed., Charles Reagan Wilson (New York, 1991); Leonard Rogoff, "Synagogue and Jewish Church: A Congregational History of North Carolina," *Southern Jewish History* 1 (1998): 43-81; Hal Rothman, "Same Horse, New Wagon': Tradition and Assimilation among the Jews of Wichita, 1865-1930," *Great Plains Quarterly* 15 (Spring 1995): 83-104; Norton Stern, "The Jewish Community of a Nevada Mining Town," *Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly* (October 1982): 48-78; *Idem*, "The Major Role of Polish Jews in the Pioneer West," *Ibid.* (July 1976): 326-344. However, as Lee Shai Weissbach observes, much writing on southern Jewish history has focused on German Jews, thus obscuring the impact and experience of East European Jewish immigrants. See his "East European Immigrants and the Image of Jews in the Small-Town South," *American Jewish History* 85 (September 1997): 231-262. Perhaps the most detailed study to date of East European Jews in small town America has been Ewa Morawska's *Insecure Prosperity: Small-Town Jews in Industrial America, 1890-1940* (Princeton, 1996).

³ Louis Zaltzman letter, in Abraham Shinedling, *West Virginia Jewry: Origins and History, 1850-1958* (Philadelphia, 1963), 986; Milt Koslow, interview conducted by Deborah Weiner, Charleston, WV, May 13, 1998; Nancy Brant, phone interview conducted by Deborah Weiner, October 6, 1998.

⁴ Gail Bank phone interview, conducted by Deborah Weiner, October 4, 1998; *West Virginia State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1898-1899, 1900-01, 1904-05, 1914-15* (Pittsburgh, 1898-1914); McDowell County, WV, Manuscript Census, 1900, 1910, 1920; *McDowell Times*, Keystone, WV, 1913-1918.

⁵ Ronald Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930* (Knoxville, 1982); Mary Beth Pudup, Dwight Billings, and Altina Waller, eds., *Appalachia in the Making: The Mountain South in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill, 1995); *West Virginia Blue Book* (Charleston, WV, 1928).

⁶ Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*; Pudup, Billings, and Waller, *Appalachia in the Making*. The acquisition of land by large holding companies was the first stage in the region's industrial development. These companies often used deceit, tricky legal maneuverings, and even force to wrest control of the land away from the local population. Deprived of an agricultural livelihood, many mountaineers had little choice but to enter the coal mines as part of the new industrial workforce. Eller provides a thorough description of this process.

⁷ Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*; Mack Gillenwater, "Cultural and Historical Geography of Mining Settlements in the Pocahontas Coal Field of Southern West Virginia, 1880-1930" (Ph.D. diss., University of Tennessee, 1972). Census figures indicate that Italians and Hungarians constituted the largest immigrant groups in the southern West Virginia coalfields, with Poles and other Slavic groups following. The vast majority of workers from these groups were coal miners, with a smattering of artisans and tradespeople. Manuscript Census, McDowell, Fayette, Logan, Mingo, and Raleigh counties, 1900, 1910, 1920.

⁸ Mary Beth Pudup, "Town and Country in the Transformation of Appalachian Kentucky," in *Appalachia in the Making*, 270-296; Gillenwater, "Cultural and Historical Geography of Mining Settlements"; Matthew S. Serel, "A Brief History of Keystone, West Virginia," 1988 (unpublished paper, West Virginia and Regional History Collection, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV); Mrs. Samuel Solins and Mrs. Paul W. Jones,

McDowell County History (Fort Worth, 1959); Manuscript Census, McDowell County, 1900.

The small city of Bluefield, West Virginia, located on the edge of the coalfield some twenty-five miles from Keystone, served as the region's primary economic center, while Keystone developed as the first sub-center within McDowell County's Elkhorn Valley, the heart of coal-mining territory. The first boomtown in the coalfields was actually across the state line in Pocahontas, Virginia. The railroad had reached Pocahontas in 1883, and Jewish merchants and saloon owners were also among the first citizens of this town, which like Keystone had a reputation for wildness. See Jack M. Jones, *Early Coal Mining in Pocahontas, Virginia* (Lynchburg, VA, 1983).

⁹ Shinedling, *West Virginia History*, 986; Rose Marino, *Welch and Its People* (Marceline, MO, 1985), 40; Lester S. Levy, *Jacob Epstein* (Baltimore, 1978), 15-17; McDowell County Manuscript Census, 1900. Descendants of at least five Jewish immigrant peddlers to the coalfields recall their father's or grandfather's involvement with the Baltimore Bargain House. Ken Bank interview, conducted by Deborah Weiner, Baltimore, November 6, 1998; Manuel Pickus interview, conducted by Deborah Weiner, Charleston, WV, May 18, 1998; Sylvan Bank phone interview, conducted by Deborah Weiner, March 4, 1998; Betty Gottlieb, interview conducted by Deborah Weiner, Parkersburg, WV, December 18, 1997; Gail Bank interview.

¹⁰ Bernard Gottlieb interview, conducted by Deborah Weiner, Clarksburg, WV, November 5, 1996; Sam Weiner interview, conducted by Deborah Weiner, Logan, WV, November 8, 1996; Jean Abrams Wein interview, conducted by Deborah Weiner, Beckley, WV, October 13, 1996. Morawska, *Insecure Prosperity*, 32, 36-37. To determine the origins of Jewish immigrants to the coalfields the following sources were used: Declaration of Intention and Petition for Naturalization records, McDowell, Fayette, Logan, Mingo, and Raleigh counties; *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (New York, 1972); Nancy and Stuart Schoenburg, *Lithuanian Jewish Communities* (New York, 1991); Chester Cohen, *Shtetl Finder Gazetteer: Jewish Communities in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Bowie, MD, 1989); *Rand-McNally Indexed Atlas of the World* (Chicago, 1905).

¹¹ Interviews, manuscript census rolls, congregational records, and local histories confirm that chain migration was a key factor in the growth of Jewish coalfield communities. These sources also show the numerous economic interrelationships that existed within these communities. Information on Middle Eastern immigrants was derived from the census, where they are listed variously as "Syrian," "Assyrian," and "Turk-Asian." Manuscript Census, McDowell, Fayette, Logan, Mingo, and Raleigh counties, 1900, 1910, 1920.

¹² Howard B. Lee, *Bloodletting in Appalachia* (Morgantown, WV, 1969); Anonymous, *Sodom and Gomorrah of To-day, or, the History of Keystone, West Virginia* (n.p., 1912) (first quote, n.p.); Jean Battlo, "Cinder Bottom: A Coalfields Red-Light District," *Goldenseal* 20 (Summer 1994): 60-65 (second quote, 60).

¹³ *McDowell Times*, 1913-1918; McDowell County Manuscript Census, 1900, 1910, 1920; Anonymous, *Sodom and Gomorrah of To-day*.

¹⁴ *West Virginia State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1898-1899*; Hillel Levine, *Economic Origins of Anti-Semitism: Poland and Its Jews in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven, 1991), 9-12, 67-69, 140-152; Hannah Sprecher, "Let Them Drink and Forget Our Poverty: Orthodox Rabbis' Reactions to Prohibition," *American Jewish Archives* 43 (1991): 135-179; Mark Bauman, "Factionalism and Ethnic Politics in Atlanta: The German Jews from the Civil War

through the Progressive Era," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 82 (Fall 1998): 533-558.

¹⁵ *West Virginia State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1898-1899, 1900-01, 1904-05, 1914-15*. For a more detailed analysis of the economic role of Jews in the region, see Deborah R. Weiner, "Middlemen of the Coalfields: The Role of Jews in the Economy of Southern West Virginia Coal Towns, 1890-1950," *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 4 (Spring 1998): 29-56.

¹⁶ Once established as prosperous merchants, a handful of Jews did become passive investors in the coal industry, and one or two even launched small coal mining operations. However, they were not notably successful; most appeared to have lost money on these ventures. As one descendant put it, "They didn't know what they were doing." *West Virginia State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1898-1899, 1900-01, 1904-05, 1914-15*; McDowell County Manuscript Census, 1900, 1910, 1920; *McDowell Times*, 1913-1918; Gail Bank interview; Sylvan Bank interview; Ken Bank interview; McDowell County Deed Book 76, p. 41, and Deed Book 77, p. 271, McDowell County Courthouse, Welch, WV.

¹⁷ Rothman, "Same Horse, New Wagon," 87; Steven J. Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa: A Cultural History, 1794-1881* (Stanford, CA, 1985); Robert E. Levinson, *Jews in the California Gold Rush* (New York, 1978); Earl Pomeroy, "On Becoming a Westerner," in *Jews of the American West*, ed., Moses Rischin and John Livingston (Detroit, 1991), 194-212; Pudup, "Town and Country in the Transformation of Appalachian Kentucky," 292 (quote). Gershon David Hundert notes that Poland's historical heterogeneity was a major factor enabling its Jewish community to thrive for centuries. See "Some Basic Characteristics of the Jewish Experience in Poland," in *From Shtetl to Socialism: Studies from Polin*, ed., Antony Polonsky (Washington, DC, 1993), 20-23. David Corbin discusses how class conflict in the coalfields submerged racial and ethnic divisions in *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922* (Urbana, 1981).

¹⁸ Gillenwater, "Cultural and Historical Geography of Mining Settlements," 39-40; Charles Kenneth Sullivan, *Coal Men and Coal Towns: Development of the Smokeless Coalfields of Southern West Virginia* (New York, 1989); Martha Jane Williams Becker, *Bramwell: Diary of a Millionaire Town* (Chapmanville, WV, 1988); *McDowell Recorder*, Welch, WV, 1911-1922.

¹⁹ Milt Koslow interview; *McDowell Recorder*, 1911-1922; Marino, *Welch and its People*, 75; Ken Bank interview; Mary Marsh Ofsa phone interview, conducted by Deborah Weiner, March 26, 1999.

²⁰ Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Coal, Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915-1932* (Urbana, 1990); *McDowell Times*, 1913-1918.

²¹ McDowell County Manuscript Census, 1900, 1910; Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*; Anonymous, *Sodom and Gomorrah of To-day*; *McDowell Times*, 1913-1918; *McDowell Recorder*, 1911-1922; Mary Ofsa interview.

²² Steven Hertzberg, "Southern Jews and Their Encounter with Blacks: Atlanta, 1850-1915," *Atlanta Historical Society Journal* (Fall 1979): 7-24; Louis Schmier, "'For Him the 'Schwartzers' Couldn't Do Enough': A Jewish Peddler and His Black Customers Look at Each Other," *American Jewish History* 73 (1983): 40-56; Leonard Rogoff, "Divided Together: Jews and African Americans in Durham, North Carolina," in *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s*, ed., Mark K. Bauman and Berkley Kalin (Tuscaloosa, 1997), 190-212; Milt Koslow interview; McDowell County Circuit Court and Criminal Court records, 1909, McDowell County Courthouse.

²³ *McDowell Times*, September 27, 1918; November 24, 1916; July 7, 1916; February 9,

1917; May 12, 1916.

²⁴ *McDowell Times*, May 15, 1914, January 23, 1914, August 25 1916; *McDowell Recorder*, January 3, 1913, March 3, 1916.

²⁵ *West Virginia Blue Book*, 1916–1934; Anonymous, *Sodom and Gomorrah of To-day*; cornerstone, Keystone City Hall; *McDowell Times*, 1913–1918; *McDowell Recorder*, 1911–1922; Jones, *Early Coal Mining in Pocahontas, Virginia*, 71, 76. On Jewish attitudes toward prohibition, see Sprecher, “Let Them Drink and Forget Our Poverty” and Bauman, “Factionalism and Ethnic Politics in Atlanta.” On how the hegemony of the coal industry prevented substantive political issues from being addressed locally in central Appalachia, see John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Urbana, 1980).

²⁶ Gail Bank interview; Marino, *Welch and Its People*, 25, 75; *McDowell Times*, March 6, 1914; *West Virginia Blue Book*, 1920. The *McDowell Times* reported on Keystone fires in the following issues: September 26, 1913; June 26, 1914; December 31, 1915; July 21, 1916; December 8, 1916; April 20, 1917; May 4, 1917; January 11, 1918.

²⁷ McDowell County Criminal Court records, 1894–1918, McDowell County Courthouse; Anonymous, *Sodom and Gomorrah of To-day*; “Pay Day Pleasantries. Two Men Wounded and One in Jail at Keystone,” *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, February 2, 1901, 4; Nancy Brant interview.

²⁸ “Mamie Flood Is Convicted,” *McDowell Times*, November 26, 1915; State of West Virginia vs. Mamie Flood, 1915, McDowell County Criminal Court records, McDowell County Courthouse; Manuscript Census, McDowell County, 1920; Nancy Brant interview.

²⁹ Shinedling, *West Virginia Jewry*, 983–988; *McDowell Recorder*, February 24 and March 7, 1911; *McDowell Recorder*, 1911–1922; *McDowell Times*, 1913–1918.

³⁰ Shinedling, *West Virginia Jewry*, 77, 983; Nancy Brant interview. The society columns of the *McDowell Recorder* frequently noted Jewish travel to and from Baltimore and New York for both business and pleasure.

³¹ Eli Evans, *The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South* (New York, 1997); Ewa Morawska, *Insecure Prosperity*; McDowell County Circuit Court records, McDowell County Courthouse. William Toll similarly found that for immigrant Jews in the American West social acceptance facilitated rather than undermined the maintenance of ethnic identity. See “Intermarriage and the Urban West: A Religious Context for Cultural Change,” *Jews of the American West*, 168–189.

³² Katzen vs. Shore, 1902, and Zaltzman vs. Totz, et al., 1909, McDowell County Circuit Court, McDowell County Courthouse; McDowell County Circuit Court Index, McDowell County Courthouse.

³³ McDowell County Manuscript Census, 1900, 1910, 1920; Gail Bank interview; “Lipman-Leventhal,” *McDowell Recorder*, January 8, 1915; “Wagner-Totz Wedding Brilliant Affair,” *McDowell Recorder*, April 7, 1922.

³⁴ Shinedling, *West Virginia Jewry*, 984; Ken Bank interview; Milt Koslow interview; Mary Ofsa interview.

³⁵ Shinedling, *West Virginia Jewry*, 986; Ken Bank interview; Gail Bank interview. For the movement of coalfield congregations from Orthodox to Reform Judaism, see the records of the B’nai El Congregation of Logan, WV, the B’nai Israel Congregation of Williamson, WV, and Temple Emanuel of Welch, WV, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH.

³⁶ Gail Bank interview; Mary Ofsa interview; McDowell County Will Book 6, 496,

McDowell County Courthouse (quote). Other Jewish congregations in the coalfields did manage to incorporate interfaith couples, and it was not unusual for intermarried gentiles (usually female) to become active participants in the congregation. See Deborah R. Weiner and Maryanne Reed, "Contradiction, Compromise, and Commitment: The Jews of Beckley, West Virginia," *Now & Then* 13 (Winter 1996): 3-6.

³⁷ *McDowell Times*, September 7, 1915, 2; Gail Bank interview; Sylvan Bank interview; *Polk's 1915-1916 Bluefield, W.Va., City Directory* (Pittsburgh, 1915) (includes Pocahontas, VA); Manuscript Census, McDowell County, 1900, 1910, 1920; Ken Bank interview.

³⁸ Shinedling, *West Virginia Jewry*, 984; McDowell County, Raleigh County, Mingo County, Logan County Manuscript Census, 1920; Marino, *Welch and its People*; records of the B'nai El Congregation of Logan, WV, the B'nai Israel Congregation of Williamson, WV, and Temple Emanuel of Welch, WV, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH. In the early 1960s Keystone had a Jewish mayor, Julian Budnick (*West Virginia Blue Book*, 1961 to 1963).

³⁹ John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington, IN, 1987); Thomas Kessner, *The Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City, 1880-1915* (New York, 1977); Morawska, *Insecure Prosperity*; Levine, *Economic Origins of Anti-Semitism*; Marc Zborowski and Elisabeth Herzog, *Life Is with People: The Jewish Little-Town of Eastern Europe* (New York, 1952); Salo Baron, *The Russian Jew under Tsars and Soviets* (New York, 1976).

⁴⁰ Pudup, Billings, and Waller, *Appalachia in the Making*; Mark Bauman, *The Southerner as American: Jewish Style* (Cincinnati, 1996); Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York, 1976), 96-101; Robert Rockaway, *But - He Was Good to His Mother: The Lives and Crimes of Jewish Gangsters* (New York, 1995).

