



THE CATSKILLS INSTITUTE

An Organization to Promote Research and Education on the Significance of the
Catskill Mountains for American Jewish Life

MOUNTAIN MEMOIRS

SPRING GLEN SYNAGOGUE HISTORY

by Dorothy Shapiro

The **Spring Glen Synagogue** is located in the hamlet of Spring Glen, in the Township of Wawarsing, in the County of Ulster, in the State of New York. It is situated on the county line between Ulster and Sullivan Counties and is approximately four miles south of the Village of Ellenville. Half of the hamlet is in Ulster County and the other half in Sullivan County.

Spring Glen is nestled in the Rondout Valley along U.S. Route #209 running parallel to the Shawangunk Mountains which are part of the Allegheny Mountain Range. Route #209 was formerly called the Queen's Highway and followed the route of the Old Mine Road from Kingston to Port Jervis. It is said to be the oldest road for wheeled vehicles in the country. Originally it was an Indian Trail. Spring Glen was originally named Homowack, an Indian name. It had been Homowack for 39 years when in 1891 the name was dropped. Some residents thought it would be important to change the name in order to attract more tourists. There are many springs in the hills on both sides of Spring Glen so the name was not without justification.

The Congregation was formed in 1908 and the building was erected in between 1916 and 1918 and incorporated in 1920. Over these many years, the congregation has taken the responsibility of maintaining the building in its original form. Members of the Congregation have preserved the exterior and interior of their house of worship displaying a deep sense of pride in its importance to the community.

Around 1900, legend tells that the first Jewish family came to the area. It was Sam Myerson who purchased land near the Homowack Lodge in the Sullivan County part of Spring Glen. The story told is that the community at the time, consisting of only Christians, gathered to decide how they would accept this Jewish family in their midst. Their collective decision was to welcome the Myersons and be good neighbors. (Years later the Myersons purchased land in the Ulster County part of Spring Glen and built a hotel called, The Robin Hood Inn).

Other early arrivals in the area were: Joseph Krieger, Meyer Lefkowitz, Louis Manpel. Later more names appear: Rosenblum, Spitzer, Lapidus, etc. Most attempted to farm the rocky land and took in borders in the summer. Many residents today are descendants of these families.

Subsequently, more Jewish families purchased land in Spring Glen and they needed a place to worship. The County Line Methodist Episcopal Church known simply as "The Methodist Church" was built in

1895 and located near the general store in the heart of the hamlet. The growing Jewish community was offered the use of the church for their services since they had no house of worship of their own at that time and they accepted the kind offer of their Christian neighbors. Soon more Jewish families arrived and sometimes they also held services in the homes of the late Nissenbaum and Lefkowitz.

According to the late Katherine Terwilliger, Historian for the Town of Wawarsing, the synagogue became a reality in July 1916 when a sacred service was held dedicating the Scrolls. First there was a great parade to the property of Manpel & Lefkowitz where the dedication ceremony was to take place. Just as it was starting, two Christians arrived, Wells C. Smith (*the stationmaster*) and John Thornton (*the postmaster*). They had raised money to buy the Jews a Bible. Mr. Smith presented it and made a warm speech in which he expressed the hope that a synagogue would be built soon which would honor the entire community.

The synagogue was built in about two years on land donated by Manpel and Lefkowitz. Services were held for the first time in the summer. The official incorporation papers are dated 1920. It was to become the community home for the Jewish population and the residents became members of the congregation.

Note: There came a time when the Methodist Church no longer had enough members to support it. But a very rewarding disposition was made of the edifice. Bellvale, New York, had lost its building by fire. That congregation purchased the one in Spring Glen for \$1.00, took it down carefully and re-erected it in Bellvale where it still serves.

The women of the congregation formed a Sisterhood and participated in the maintenance of the synagogue by holding card parties during the summer months and food sales during the rest of the year.

Anna Lapidus, a popular actress on the Jewish stage in New York City during that era, and who was a summer resident, deserves special recognition. She entertained guests with her talent for producing shows providing funds for the synagogue to be built and maintained during the early years. (There is a plaque in the sanctuary honoring her.)

In its heyday, during the summer months, when approximately 2,000 summer guests would swell the population of Spring Glen, the synagogue was available on a daily basis for morning and evening prayers. Throughout the rest of the year the winter residents used the synagogue for observance of Jewish holidays and celebrations such as weddings, Bar Mitzvahs and other special occasions.

After the turn of the century, with the wave of immigration from Eastern Europe, more and more Jews purchased land in Spring Glen and the resort industry began to flourish. Some were from what was called landsman organizations (individuals who came from the same city or town in Europe and who belonged to a social club).

Many of these people operated summer bungalow colonies, rooming houses or small hotels and it was customary for the entire family to participate in running the resort. There was rarely money available to hire help. Most families returned to New York City after the two-month summer season which ended on Labor Day in early September. Few resort owners lived in Spring Glen the year round. For those who did remain it was necessary to find employment in the area whenever and wherever possible.

During the winter months, many of the owners of the resorts had other jobs and professions. For example, Irving Slavin was a skilled jeweler, Sam Baumwoll was a plumber, Anna Lapidus was an actress on the Jewish stage, many were involved in the garment industry, etc. Usually they worked at their skills in New York City and brought their earnings back to Spring Glen to invest in building their resorts.

Money was scarce. Most of the people were immigrants who had come to America with nothing but

the dream of creating a new life in a new land where they would be free from the persecution of Eastern European regimes. It was difficult to obtain mortgages from the banks and often money was borrowed from family members or neighbors to finance the growing resort industry. It was a common practice to borrow money at the end of the summer to get through the winter and then pay back the loan at the beginning of the next summer when guests arrived and paid for their bungalow or room.

Along with the resort industry there were several farms in the production of eggs and chickens for the poultry industry. Some farmers had cows and delivered the fresh milk to their neighbors every morning.

Spring Glen was a community where neighbors helped each other in time of need. One story told is about a resident who needed a new well because her well could not provide enough water for an additional bungalow under construction. This was a Jewish woman and when she went into the post office/general store, the Christian Postmaster noticed how sad she was and asked what was the problem. She explained the need for money to drill a new well and there was no place where she could borrow it. Without hesitation, the Postmaster offered the funds needed and a 102 foot well was drilled. Of course, the loan was returned the next summer. This is an example of how people of different religions lived successfully together in the community.

If neighbors needed to go to New York City, referred to as "the city" and had to leave their children, neighbors invited the children into their homes while the parents were away. When one of the women needed to give birth to her third child, a neighbor took in her other two children and her husband for the week the mother was in the hospital providing them with food and lodging. A neighbor required major surgery in a New York City hospital during the summer and since his wife was unable to leave the bungalow colony during the "season", another neighbor volunteered to travel to the city to bring him home.

This history of Spring Glen needs to include the canal that came through the hamlet in the 1800's. The Delaware & Hudson (D&H) Canal was completed in 1828. The canal was built to transport coal from the mines of Pennsylvania and other goods from Honesdale, Pennsylvania to Kingston, New York, so that it could be loaded on barges and floated down the Hudson River to ports in New York City. Enormous amounts of coal were needed to fuel the furnaces of the tenements and factories in New York City at that time. The canal was 108 miles long and consisted of 108 locks. The lock was a device that was used to raise and lower the boats to different water levels since the Pennsylvania end of the canal was almost 1000 feet higher than the Hudson River end. Remains of the locks can still be seen in Spring Glen to this day. The canal was the creation of two brothers, William and Maurice Wurts, for whom the Village of Wurtsboro is named (Wurtsboro is located about ten miles south of Spring Glen.)

After many years of service the canal became too expensive to operate and the new Ontario & Western Railroad, also known as the O&W, was providing a faster means of transporting goods. The water was eventually drained from the canal in the early 1900's. What helped Spring Glen to grow was the Ontario & Western Railroad that came through on a regular basis. People used the railroad to get from community to community and particularly to and from the City of New York. In the summer months it brought the visitors to the area and was a necessary means of transportation since few people owned cars in those days. Spring Glen residents, for many years, had two favorite gathering places – the railroad station and the post office. People enjoyed meeting the seven o'clock evening train, then, when things quieted down, they would adjourn to the benches at the post office to discuss everything, and solve, for one night at least, such problems as needed attention. Many of these individuals lived, worked and played in the small hotels and bungalow colonies located in Spring Glen. They often rented bungalows from the residents during these times.

THE REGISTER OF HISTORIC SITES IN NEW YORK STATE AND THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

To be listed as a historic landmark is a time-consuming process. There is a great deal of paperwork that must be completed. Documentation must be provided to back up the facts. In all, the research alone takes many, many hours and documents are usually hard to find. Photographs of the interior and exterior of the building are required for the application as well. Then the building must be nominated and more applications filed. Once that is done, several agencies review it and Landmark Status is attained. Kathleen LaFrank, from the New York Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau, Peebles Island, P. O. Box 189, Waterford, NY 12188-0189, was extremely helpful in accomplishing the above. The Spring Glen Synagogue met the criteria for application to be named as a historic landmark and Ms. LaFrank guided Dorothy Shapiro every step of the way in order to place the Spring Glen Synagogue on the State and National Registers. The lists of State and National Registers contain the nation's official properties worthy of preservation and recognizes the importance of the Spring Glen Synagogue's existence, as well as other houses of worship, in the history of our country and provides them with a measure of protection. In New York State alone there are approximately 75,000 historic landmarks. In the entire country, there are about one million landmarks.

On Sunday, August 8th, 1999, nine synagogues in the Catskill Region were named to the New York State and National Registers of Historic Sites. Opening ceremonies were held at 1:00 p. m. at the Liberty Museum and Arts Center in Liberty, New York. There was an accompanying exhibit of the interiors and exteriors of the nine synagogues provided by local photographer, Laverne Black. "This event is clearly very important for this part of the state" commented J. Winthrop Aldrich, Deputy Commissioner for Historic Preservation in New York State, who presented the official citations to the representatives of the respective synagogues. "Jewish people founded and developed this area. These buildings have survived and are still in use. They should be enjoyed by all and I encourage everyone to accept them as important parts of Sullivan County's heritage."

This history was compiled by Dorothy Shapiro, who grew up on a bungalow colony in Spring Glen. It was called "Slavin's Bungalows". Dorothy's parents, Molly & Irving Slavin, came to Spring Glen in 1934. She currently lives in Liberty, New York. Much of the factual information is taken from the book entitled, "Where The Streams Wind" (published by the Roundout Publishing Company in 1977) written by the late Katherine Terwilliger, Historian for the Township of Wawarsing, in Ulster County, New York, and articles from local newspapers. Many names have been mentioned that documentation and memory have provided. Unfortunately, due to a lack of complete records Dorothy was unable to mention individually the many people who have each made unique contributions to Spring Glen's history. We ask for your understanding and hope that this limited overview of our history will spur everyone reading this document to add to it.

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