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# Jewish Settlers on Minnesota's Iron Ranges 1889-1924

*Marilyn J. Chiat*

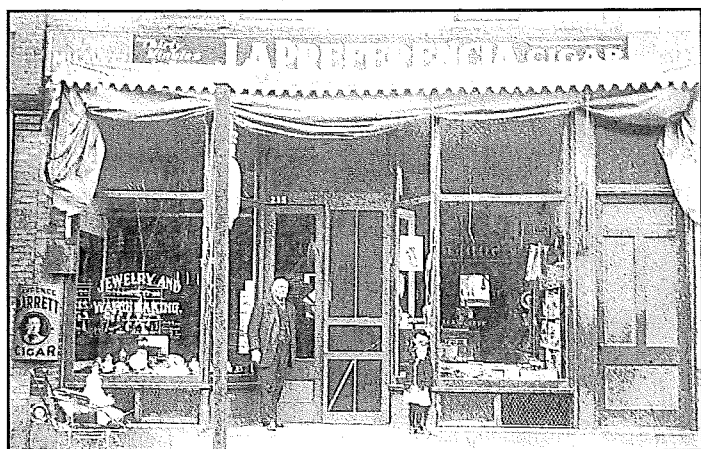
In 1882 the first miners arrived on the Vermilion Range and in 1885 the town of Soudan was founded. Tower, the business center for the Vermilion Range, was established seven years later, in 1889. One of Tower's first residents was a German-Jewish butcher who had arrived in the United States in 1881 and had moved to Brainerd, Minnesota in 1883. Recognizing the economic potential of the Range, he moved to Tower in 1889 and negotiated and received the contract to be the official purveyor of meat to the mining company stores. By 1900, Tower had a population of 1,110, including 53 Jews who comprised 4.85% of the town's total population. This information was obtained from federal census reports, newspaper articles, other documents and interviews with descendants of original Iron Range settlers.<sup>1</sup> The research on Range Jewry is part of a larger project to document the history of Minnesota's early Jewish communities. The project, under my direction, is cosponsored by the Minnesota-Dakotas Region of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, Inc. and the Ancient Near Eastern and Jewish Studies Department at the University of Minnesota. The larger project is on-going; therefore, this paper must be viewed as a preliminary survey of work-in-progress.

As background for the study of Jewish settlers on the Iron Range, it is necessary to recount briefly the history of Jewish emigration to the United States. The first Jews in America arrived with Christopher Columbus nearly five hundred years ago. Others followed during the subsequent years of exploration and settlement. By 1700 there were several hundred Jews in America; the number increased to 2,500 by 1776. Fifty years later, approximately 15,000 Jews were living in the United States, primarily in cities along the eastern seaboard.<sup>2</sup> Most were Sephardic, Jews of Spanish and Portuguese descent who had fled to the Netherlands and later Great Britain following their expulsion from the Iberian peninsula in the 1490's. Beginning in about the 1840's, a second group of Jews began to arrive in the United States; they were Ashkenazim, Jews from western and eastern Europe. By the 1880's, approximately 280,000 Jews were in the United States; most, like the Jewish butcher in Tower, were from Germany.<sup>3</sup> Factors that contributed to Jewish emigration from Germany included heavy taxes, conscription into the German army, and discriminatory inheritance laws affecting only Jews.<sup>4</sup> Jews of a German heritage in the United States were soon overwhelmingly outnumbered by Eastern European Jews who began to enter the country in large numbers in 1881. Between the years of 1881-1924 nearly 2.4 million Jews emigrated to the United States from Russia and other countries in eastern Europe including Poland, Hungary,

and Rumania.<sup>5</sup> These people were in effect refugees fleeing from the intolerable conditions imposed on them by the exclusionary policies practiced by these countries' governments. Another factor that contributed to their departure was one that affected other ethnic groups in Eastern Europe: the failure of earlier land reforms that were intended to free the peasant from bondage that, coupled with falling grain prices, resulted in impoverishment for most of the population.<sup>6</sup>

The majority of Eastern European Jews who emigrated to the United States settled in large Jewish ghettos that were established in cities along the eastern seaboard; in fact, three-quarters (73%) of all Jews who entered the country between 1881 and 1911 stayed in New York City.<sup>7</sup> Their desire to huddle together is understandable in light of what is known about their history in Eastern Europe. Unlike the rest of Europe, where by the end of the 19th century Jews were granted at least limited degrees of emancipation, Jews in Eastern Europe were allowed little semblance of civil rights. The vast majority were forced into designated areas, primarily the Pale, a narrow region between eastern Poland and western Russia where half lived in ghettos in towns and cities, and the rest in villages and hamlets that were often totally Jewish.<sup>8</sup> Except for a small minority, Jews were limited in occupational and educational choices, had marginal contact with non-Jews, and used Yiddish as their primary language.<sup>9</sup> Even though many came to the United States ill-equipped for most available jobs outside of sweatshops or petty trade such as peddling, there were still a number who, either out of choice or necessity, settled outside the large eastern Jewish ghettos.<sup>10</sup> They were aided in relocating by Jewish philanthropic agencies, usually under the aegis of already established German-American Jews, that were actively involved in moving Eastern European Jewish immigrants into the interior of the country in an attempt to relieve the squalid congestion of the ghettos. Minnesota was one of the state's where they were encouraged to move.<sup>11</sup>

Jews began to arrive in the territory that was to become Minnesota as early as the 1840's. By the 1870's, the state had an established Jewish community, German Jews who had settled mainly in St. Paul. Many were well integrated into the community and had achieved a measure of success in business and politics.<sup>12</sup> They were not overly anxious to welcome their Yiddish speaking, poorly educated Eastern European co-religionists into their midst. However, after receiving encouragement from prominent German-Jewish philanthropists such as Jacob Schiff, as well as from railroad magnate James J. Hill, German Jews began to make an effort to ease the adjustment of the newcomers to



Sam Milavitz Store, Virginia, 1906

Minnesota.<sup>13</sup> The opening of the Vermilion Range in the 1880's, followed by the Mesabi in the 1890s and Cuyuna in 1908, could not have been better timed for this effort. Here were new areas of the state that could readily absorb some of these immigrants and prevent what happened in the eastern United States from happening in Minnesota: the formation of crowded, poor, urban Jewish ghettos. Several German Jews were already on the Range, like the German Jewish butcher mentioned earlier, but they were soon to be outnumbered by the new wave of immigrants. The story of Jewish immigrants on the Range is primarily the story of Eastern European Jews and their adjustment to their new home in America; it is their lives this paper will study.

Research for this paper is based on three major sources:

1. **Census Reports:** Reports studied include the 1880, 1900 and 1910 federal manuscript censuses, the published federal census of 1910, and the 1895 and 1905 state manuscript censuses. The 1910 federal manuscript census proved to be the most valuable; it is the only census that requested respondents' mother tongue and that of their parents. Based on the number who gave Yiddish, it was possible to arrive at a fairly accurate population estimate for Jews on the Range by 1910.

2. **Material culture:** This source includes primary and secondary documents (other than census reports), photographs, and other relevant material stored in local, state, and national archives, plus material still in the possession of Range families, past and present. Within this category are ceremonial objects and folk art and the four synagogues and one cemetery founded by the Range's Jewish communities.

3. **Oral Interviews:** Nearly 100 oral interviews have been conducted with Jewish and non-Jewish Iron Rangers, some elderly first generation settlers. The interviews include recollections and anecdotes that illustrate data acquired from other sources, and, in addition, provide guideposts for future areas of research.

The 1910 published federal census indicates that 2,075,708 people were residing in Minnesota. Of that number, over 13,000 were Jewish, or approximately 0.6%

of the population. The majority of Jews settled in Minneapolis and St. Paul, where they lived in well defined neighborhoods.<sup>14</sup> Approximately 2,000 were almost evenly divided between Duluth and the Iron Range (1,200 and 800, respectively); they comprised approximately 15% of the state's total Jewish population.<sup>15</sup> In a period of ten years, from 1900-1910, the Iron Range experienced not only an enormous growth in population, but also a shift of population from the Vermilion Range to the much larger Mesabi Range. Tower experienced the greatest population loss, including half of its Jewish community.<sup>16</sup> Several informants recollected stories about their families leaving the Tower area because of a decline in mining operations and moving elsewhere on the Range. Few, however, appear to have abandoned the Range for life elsewhere.

The potential of the Mesabi Range not only attracted disillusioned Tower residents, but a considerable number of other settlers, including many who were Jewish.<sup>17</sup> By 1910, the population of Hibbing had increased from 2,481 in 1900 to 8,832, 2.5% or 219 of whom were Jewish. In 1910, Chisholm, a town founded in 1901 and destroyed by fire in 1908, had a population of 7,684, 1.5% or 119 of whom were Jewish. Virginia experienced the greatest increase in population of all the cities in Minnesota in the decade between 1900-1910: 254%. In 1900, Virginia had a population of 2,962; by 1910, the number had increased to 10,473, 1.2% or 121 were Jewish. Eveleth, several miles south of Virginia, grew from a population of 2,752 in 1900 to 7,036 by 1910, 145, or 2.1% were Jewish. The remaining 200 plus Jews listed in the 1910 federal manuscript census were scattered in at least ten other Range towns.<sup>18</sup>

Where did the Jewish settlers come from, and why did they decide to settle on the Range? These are two key questions that the project's research has begun to answer. Census data on country of origin verifies that the vast majority of the Range's Jewish settlers originally came from Russia and Poland, with only about 10% from Germany or the Austro-Hungarian Empire.<sup>19</sup> The first Eastern European Jews to settle on the Range began arriving in the United States in the late 1880s and came in ever-increasing numbers that peaked between the years 1900-1905.<sup>20</sup> Unlike most other ethnic groups on the Range, the Jewish settlers had neither prior mining experience, nor were they recruited by the mining companies to work in the mines. Therefore, the answer to why they decided to settle on the Range must lie elsewhere.

When Jewish informants were asked this question, two responses were most popular. Both are part of Jewish immigration folklore probably rooted in reality. The first answer suggests that an "older brother" or "uncle" originally settled on the Range, found employment, and then sent for the rest of his family. Unfortunately, most of the descendants of original settlers, like those of the butcher in Tower, are unable to tell us how their forebearers came to hear about the Range. This is particularly perplexing with regard to immigrants who evidently came directly to the Range from a ghetto in Eastern Europe. The second response, however, does offer one explanation for how some arrived in this rather remote region of America and decided to make it their home. This oft-told tale recalls the adventures of the relative who literally

walked his way west with a peddler's sack slung over his shoulder. He would finally settle down when he found a growing community that lacked a general store.

Research has contributed more verifiable reasons, beyond that of family legends, for Jewish settlement on the Range. Documents stored in the archives of the American Jewish Historical Society include considerable correspondence between two Jewish settlement agencies headquartered in New York City, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and the B'nai B'rith-sponsored Industrial Removal Office, and their representatives in Minnesota.<sup>21</sup> The correspondence indicates the two agencies were actively channeling new immigrants into the state, including the Range, and assisting them in their settlement. However, none of our informants recall either of these agencies being involved in their families' settlement. This may be an example of censored memory, an unwillingness to admit to an outside agency assisting the family.

The Jewish settlers, besides not being recruited for the mines, differed from fellow Iron Rangers in other respects. According to the published federal census of 1910, men on the Range outnumbered women by almost two to one. This is understandable as many of the miners were young men who were putting aside a nest egg in order to return to their "homeland" to resume their lives. The situation was quite different for the Jewish settlers; this is reflected in the ratio of Jewish men to women, one and one-fourth to one. Unlike most other immigrant groups, the Jewish immigrant had no "homeland" to which to return. Most had fled intolerable conditions and to them the United States was the "Golden Medina," a golden land of opportunity. America was to be their permanent home; therefore, many of the Jewish settlers were married men who either had come with their wives and children or sent for them as soon as they were able to save enough money. At times elderly parents, when healthy enough to pass immigration requirements, would also emigrate.<sup>22</sup>

The age of Jewish settlers on the Range, based on the 1910 federal manuscript census, illustrates the mature character of the Jewish immigrant. The Range's adult Jewish population eighteen years or older was almost equally divided between those over the age of thirty and those under that age. Most families consisted of four or more children, plus extended families that included grandparents and unmarried kin, brothers, sisters, and, at times, nieces and nephews.<sup>23</sup> The young singles were married off as soon as possible, usually to local Jewish men and women, but on occasion, potential spouses were "imported" from Duluth, the Twin Cities, and even eastern cities. However, as a result of the preference for marriage partners from local families, a number of Jewish people on the Range can trace their family trees back to two of the earliest families in the region.<sup>24</sup>

Census data, augmented by data gathered from published biographical sketches and oral interviews, provide additional insight into the character of Range Jewry. A number of the first Jewish settlers on the Range were not new immigrants; several had emigrated to the United States as young adults and for ten to fifteen years prior to their arrival on the Range had resided elsewhere

in the United States. Others were children when their families had emigrated; therefore, by the time they settled on the Range they were able to speak English and were familiar with American customs. Chicago and New York were named as first homes by several immigrants, as were mining towns in Pennsylvania and Michigan. The journey to the Range is understandable for those already living in mining communities, as they undoubtedly followed in the wake of the opening and development of new mining towns. Census data indicate that a number had also settled in Wisconsin, including Eau Claire and Superior, two towns near the Minnesota border, while others were living in Minneapolis or St. Paul when they heard "...of the wonderful opportunities in Virginia," to quote one 1913 biography, and made the decision to move to the Range.<sup>25</sup> A great many, however, appear to have come directly to the Range following their debarkation in one of the eastern ports.<sup>26</sup>

The mines were the main attraction for the Jewish settlers, not as potential employers, but as a source for potential customers. Census data confirm what many of our informants have indicated, that the majority of Jewish wage earners on the Range were merchants. Clothing and drygoods were the most popular stores, followed by grocery, furniture, hardware, and jewelry. A number listed their occupation as itinerant peddler. Others were in a variety of other occupations, such as teamsters, minor craftsmen, general laborers. Few actually worked in the mines.<sup>27</sup>

The Jewish settlers' concentration in merchandising parallels the experience of Jewish immigrants elsewhere in the United States.<sup>28</sup> As was noted earlier, many Eastern European Jews came to the United States without skills other than that of peddler or small shopkeeper. Employment restrictions in Europe prevented most Jewish wage earners from participating in many of the skilled occupations, particularly those that required guild membership or apprenticeship. They were also allowed only limited access into professions, such as law, medicine, teaching, or the higher ranks of the military. Thus, out of necessity Jews were usually forced into occupations considered unsavory by the general population, such as



B'nai Zion ca. 1920,  
Chisholm, MN



Jewish Women ca. 1910,  
Virginia, MN

selling secondhand goods, cattle dealing and moneylending.<sup>29</sup> In the United States, Jews were granted the legal right to enter or be trained for any occupation they chose. However, in reality for the majority of first generation Jewish immigrants, this was not to be the case. On the Range, as elsewhere, the Jewish immigrants' lack of experience, and at times lack of English, combined with remnants of hostility brought over by other immigrant groups from the old country, effectively prevented Jews from entering or being trained to enter many occupations. Most Jewish immigrants, rather than openly protest what was de facto job discrimination, chose to continue in their familiar occupations. This situation was to change dramatically for many of their children who took advantage of local educational opportunities to better their positions in life.<sup>30</sup>

Often overlooked when discussing occupations of Jewish immigrants is the number of Jewish women who worked outside the home. In Europe it was not considered unusual for a Jewish woman to combine her role as homemaker with that of wage-earner.<sup>31</sup> At times the woman worked in order to allow her husband to study *Talmud*, the Jewish Oral Law. To be able to study *Talmud* was and still is considered an honor although it would often force the woman to shoulder an unusually heavy burden of responsibility. The study of *Talmud* also served as a convenient and acceptable explanation to cover the fact that it was often easier for the wife to find menial labor

than the husband who was handicapped by various occupational restrictions. The pattern of the working wife was transferred to the United States, and on the Range in particular a number of our Jewish informants remarked about their mothers working in their husband's stores or in other jobs. Several Jewish women are listed in the 1910 federal manuscript census as a family's principal wage earner, but they like many employed married Jewish women on the Range, tended to occupy the same type of jobs they were limited to in Europe, including tending cows and producing kosher dairy products, running boarding houses, and house-cleaning for others. Several young, unmarried Jewish women are listed as shop clerks.<sup>32</sup>

Many who have written about the Iron Range have commented on the fact that each town and village appears to have developed its own cultural identity with the result there was limited social interaction between communities.<sup>33</sup> This can be understood in part by examining each town's ethnic mix that was controlled to a certain degree by the mining companies. However, a similar observation can be made about the Jewish communities on the Range, even though with the exception of Coleraine the mining companies had little control over where Jews chose to settle.<sup>34</sup>

Although some socializing did occur between Jewish communities, documents and recollections of informants suggest that it was of a limited nature. This is especially noticeable among recollections of Jewish residents who grew up in towns furthest removed from the Range's four major Jewish population centers, Chisholm, Eveleth, Hibbing and Virginia. Their lack of social interaction may have been due to the distances some of the smaller towns are from the larger communities. However, an extensive public transportation system that efficiently connected many Range towns was introduced at an early date, suggesting distance was not the only reason for the lack of socializing between communities.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, a similar sense of social separation has been expressed as well by those who did live in the larger towns. One of the factors that may have contributed to this phenomenon has become increasingly apparent in the course of the project's research — each of the four major Jewish communities had, like the community-at-large, developed its own distinctive character. At this point in the project's research, the causes for the distinctions can only be suggested, but several can be proposed.

A preliminary analysis of data indicate that at an early date more Jewish settlers in Virginia and Eveleth became active in civic affairs than their co-religionists in Hibbing and Chisholm. For example, Virginia had its first Jewish alderman in 1896-1897, and Eveleth had one shortly thereafter.<sup>36</sup> The explanation for this phenomenon may be found in the composition of Eveleth's and Virginia's Jewish populations. The majority of German or Austro-Hungarian Jews who moved to the Range settled in these two towns.<sup>37</sup> Our informants, Jewish and Christian, have described these early settlers as being very active in civic affairs and mixing with "upper-class" non-Jews. Most German Jews were religiously less observant than their Eastern European counterparts and did not speak Yiddish, preferring instead

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English or German. Their acculturation may have made them acceptable to the powers who controlled the mining towns. Some Eastern European Jews also established themselves as leaders in these two towns, but these were mainly immigrants who had been living in the United States for a number of years. An example is a man who emigrated from Russia as a child, married a German-Jewish woman, settled first in Virginia, and then Eveleth, where he became very active in civic affairs. In a front-page newspaper story following his death in 1927, he was described as "Eveleth's most prominent pioneer and leading citizen." A small town located sixteen miles south of Eveleth is named after this man.<sup>38</sup>

Hibbing and Chisholm produced Jewish community leaders as well, but few of the early Jewish settlers in these two towns became actively involved in community affairs. Preliminary analysis of data suggest that fewer Jewish men ran for public office or were appointed to town boards. However, one Jewish immigrant is still remembered for his part in Chisholm's "backroom" politics.<sup>39</sup> The reluctance on the part of Jews in these two towns to become openly involved in politics may be due to the fact that many were recent arrivals in the United States and were unfamiliar with English and the American political system. Unlike the majority of German-Jewish immigrants, most Eastern European Jews had little if any prior political experience outside their own internal form of governance in the ghettos of Eastern Europe; therefore, their attitude toward this new responsibility was understandably ambiguous. Most viewed political responsibility as important, but were wary of it. Their precarious position as middlemen in the community, as merchants to the miners while being dependent upon the good will of the mining companies, usually found them squarely in the middle of the Range's heated labor and political disputes. Many felt it was in their best self-interest to keep a low political profile. Several of our informants acknowledged their fathers were "closet" Republicans, but sympathetic to the miner's plight. One man commented that his father firmly believed "what was good for US Steel was good for the country." US Steel encouraged this attitude by donating money to the construction and remodeling of the four synagogues on the Range.<sup>40</sup> But in contrast to this view, other informants recall their parents' open support for miners and their plight. One such individual was a Russian Jewish immigrant who had settled first in Boston prior to moving to Duluth. He became an active socialist and traveled throughout the Range during the labor strife in 1907, setting up workers' cooperatives on behalf of the American Socialist Party. Newspaper articles published in Bemidji in 1917 confirm his Socialist sympathies; the articles relate how he was almost run out of town for aiding Wobblies (the Industrial Workers of the World or IWW) during their unionizing activities against the lumber companies.<sup>41</sup> Other Jews are known to have been active in Range labor causes, but their visibility in such endeavors was often frowned upon by many of their co-religionists.<sup>42</sup>

Differences between the Jewish communities on the Range extended beyond the realm of politics; it was also evident in their practice and maintenance of religious

traditions. The majority of Jews who settled on the Range considered themselves orthodox; that is, they followed the most observant form of Judaism, although because of the demands of earning a living, certain traditions and laws had to be bent or abandoned. For example, merchants found it impossible to close their stores on Saturday, so the injunction against Sabbath labor was often ignored. But a number of informants recalled that their fathers attended Sabbath services in the synagogue prior to opening their shops. Others, particularly the *schochet*, who was responsible for slaughtering cattle following orthodox dietary laws and was often the community's religious leader and teacher, would strictly observe all Jewish laws, at times to a degree that was remarkable under the circumstances. An example is the rabbi in Chisholm who refused to walk on freshly fallen snow on Saturday because of the Jewish law against disrupting nature on the Sabbath. Needless to say, in northern Minnesota, this could present a real dilemma. Through his example, this rabbi vainly tried to impose on his congregation what he maintained on a personal level, the preservation of the customs and traditions of his Eastern European "*shtetl*" (an all Jewish village) in a small town in northern Minnesota.

Each of the four major Range towns had a synagogue. The first was established in Eveleth in the summer of 1900 with an original membership of twelve families. At first the congregation met in private homes. Then a house was purchased that was used until 1909 when a frame Catholic church was acquired, moved to a new location and remodeled to be used as a synagogue. The congregation did not have a regular rabbi, but at least two men in the community were ritual slaughterers who could conduct services. Sunday School was held on an irregular basis dependent upon the availability of teachers. The congregation disbanded in the early 1970s and the building was transformed back into a church.<sup>43</sup>

The second synagogue on the Range was established in Virginia on October 21, 1905 with eighteen families; the congregation's first meetings were also held in private homes.<sup>44</sup> One of the congregation's founders was a German-Jew who personally was not particularly observant. In fact there is evidence to suggest he may have belonged to the Reform Temple in Duluth that in its liberal interpretation of Judaism was the opposite pole from orthodox.<sup>45</sup> However, this man was instrumental in the financing and building of the beautiful, small brick synagogue in 1909. A rabbi, hired when the synagogue was built, remained with the congregation until 1915; after that, rabbis were hired on an irregular basis. The Virginia synagogue is by far the most beautiful on the Range; it is obvious that a great deal of time, effort, and money went into its planning and construction. Its stylish architectural design and stained glass windows would indicate that the building committee was aware of contemporary urban synagogue architecture and tried to emulate it on a small scale in Virginia. It is the only synagogue on the Range that does not look like a transformed church. Even the Chisholm synagogue, the only other synagogue that originally was not a church, bears evidence of a church designer's hand. The Virginia synagogue had an active Sunday School, but from the

recollections of our informants, it was not as strict as the one in Chisholm. The Virginia synagogue is still in operation and has been placed on the National Register of Historic places.

There is some question as to whether the Chisholm or Hibbing synagogue was founded next. According to Works Progress Administration records<sup>46</sup> the Hibbing synagogue was "established" in 1921, but the synagogue's records indicate that it was granted its charter on May 11, 1907.<sup>47</sup> The Hibbing congregation, originally consisting of thirty members, did not have its own building until 1922 when a Lutheran church was purchased, moved and remodeled for use as a synagogue. Before this date, the congregation met in various halls, including a large Finnish Workers Hall. It is unknown why Hibbing, the largest Jewish community on the Range, was the last to obtain a building for use as a synagogue. It may be related to the moving of the town; the Jewish community may not have wanted to invest in a building until they were assured that it would not have to be later sold or moved. The congregation had a succession of rabbis and teachers. The last rabbi left Hibbing about a decade ago. He still speaks in awe of the orthodoxy of many of the members, although by the 1950's the congregation had departed from being strictly orthodox and had joined the middle of the road Jewish Conservative Movement. The synagogue remains in operation.

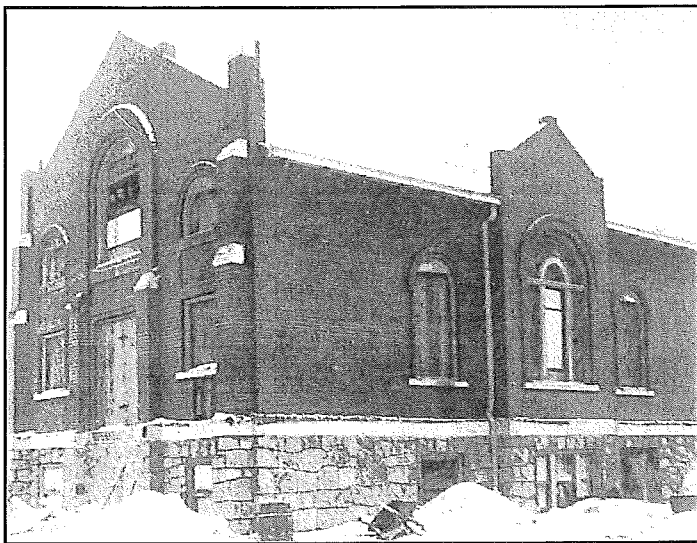
Chisholm was the last of the four towns to be incorporated and apparently the last to establish a synagogue; one source, however, indicates the congregation was organized in 1904.<sup>48</sup> Works Progress Administration records show that the synagogue was founded in February 1913, with twenty members; in August of that year the congregation dedicated their new frame synagogue.<sup>49</sup> This synagogue was the only one on the Range that had a *miqvah*, a Jewish ritual bath that, according to orthodox tradition, was to be attended once a month

by married women and prior to the Sabbath by men. This fact, plus the role of the orthodox rabbi noted earlier, would appear to indicate that Chisholm's Jewish community was ostensibly the most traditional on the Range. Not all Jews in Chisholm, however, appreciated the rabbi's efforts to enforce orthodoxy on the entire congregation; there is still contention over his efforts. The controversy is really an indicator of a common dichotomy confronting immigrants, Jewish and non-Jewish: the desire to become Americanized while still retaining religious and cultural values and traditions. The rabbi continued in his controversial role in the community until his death in 1934. The synagogue was demolished in the early 1960's.

The four synagogues were the focus of activity, social and religious, for most Jews living on the Range. Except for a small number of German Jews, the majority of Range Jews did not mingle on a personal level with non-Jews. It is doubtful this was due to organized discrimination on the part of non-Jews, although it is known that originally few Jews were allowed to join the two country clubs run by the mining companies.<sup>50</sup> Rather the lack of socializing was part of a common pattern that can be attributed to first generation immigrants — the desire to be with people with whom they share a common heritage and language. Almost all our informants said their parents' social friends were other Jews; rarely did they invite non-Jews into their homes and rarer still were they invited to the homes of non-Jews. Contributing to the lack of inter-ethnic socializing was the fact that the great majority of the Jews on the Range tried to maintain the tradition of *kashruth*, which meant they would not eat at anyone's home (Jewish or non-Jewish) which was not kosher.

Range Jewry's almost total commitment to orthodox Judaism, under at times difficult conditions, is unmatched elsewhere in the state. The first synagogues founded in Minneapolis, St. Paul and Duluth were Reform congregations catering to the needs of the state's first Jewish settlers — German Jews.<sup>51</sup> The Reform Temples soon attracted increasing numbers of Eastern European Jewry who saw them as acceptable vehicles for acculturation. Although German Jews were among the first Jewish settlers on the Range, there is no evidence to suggest they tried to establish a synagogue or encouraged their co-religionists to adopt Reform Judaism or any of its tenets. Instead most elected to support their local synagogue, without making the same personal commitment to the orthodoxy it represented.

In light of the high percentage of observant or orthodox Jews on the Range, it is surprising to note that a Jewish cemetery was not organized until 1950.<sup>52</sup> According to Jewish law, Jews are not allowed to bury their dead in unconsecrated ground, that is, land that has not been blessed by a rabbi. Thus, they could not use any of the existing Range cemeteries for burial. Instead Range Jews would transport their deceased to Jewish cemeteries in Duluth and Superior. This involved not only additional expense, but additional effort. Another complication was that Jews do not embalm; therefore, special permission was required to transport the body across state lines for burial in Superior, Wisconsin. Adding to the puzzle is evidence that suggests there were Jews in the community familiar with burial customs and capable of establishing



B'nai Abraham, 1909,  
Virginia, MN

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a cemetery. For example, a mortician in Virginia and one of the founders of Eveleth's Protestant and Catholic cemetery, was Jewish.<sup>53</sup> It remains unknown why the Jews on the Range were so reluctant about founding a cemetery, but this attitude is in sharp contrast to their successful efforts to establish synagogues and their often noble efforts to observe **kashruth**, the Jewish dietary laws.

The study of material objects cherished by a family and passed down from generation to generation tells a great deal about their value system. It contributes to our understanding of the maintenance and transmission of cultural and religious traditions. A great number of Jews who settled on the Range arrived with only the few bags they could carry. In many of those bags were heavy brass ceremonial objects that are so meaningful in maintaining Jewish tradition. Almost every Jewish family on the Range has special candle holders for candles to be lit on the Sabbath and festivals; **hannukah menorot**, eight branched candle holders used for the Jewish festival of lights; **kiddush** cups, for the wine to be blessed on the Sabbath and festivals; and other ceremonial objects used in the home and synagogue that were brought from Eastern Europe. One family brought a **Torah** Scroll for the new synagogue they hoped to establish. Others brought books — prayer books, over-sized editions of the *Talmud*, Bibles — many of which found their way into the libraries of the new synagogues where they have been used for three generations.

Jewish immigrants, no different than immigrants from other cultures, found themselves caught between two worlds. Their desire to become Americans was great, as was their desire to see their children become American citizens with all the benefits that were due them. But, they did not want to see all their cherished traditions and beliefs fall by the wayside. The Range schools attempted to create the proverbial melting pot, to blend all cultures into one called "American." The synagogue, the religious school, and the home tried to instill a sense of cultural and religious identity. In effect, all succeeded. Jews on the Range have made important contributions to the region's culture, while at the same time maintaining the unique traditions and customs that identify them as Jews. They have been elected to public offices and appointed to town library, school and park boards. They were and are leaders in business organizations, active in community groups, commanders of American Legion Posts. They fought for better roads and utilities, to bring new industry to the Range, and to increase tourism. They were postmasters, postmistresses, and firemen. Contrary to the gloomy predictions of those who saw small town life as a threat to the maintenance of Jewish identity, the Range's Jewish communities flourished while at the same time maintaining important links to the community at large.

The one enemy threatening the Range's Jewish population is one that neither they nor any of the other ethnic groups on the Range can control — economics.<sup>54</sup> Many have reluctantly left the region to seek their fortune elsewhere, yet as we speak to them it is obvious that in their hearts they remain Iron Rangers. But with their departure we regrettably must close one chapter in the history of Minnesota's Jewish communities — the Jewish settlers on the Iron Range.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>U.S., Census, 1900, Tower, pp. 105a-212b; *Iron Ranges of Minnesota: Historical Souvenir of Virginia Enterprise*, 1909; oral interview with settler's granddaughter. Because the Project to Document Jewish Settlers in Minnesota is ongoing, names of informants will not be cited in this paper. All tapes of interviews are in the possession of the project and will be made available to researchers following the project's completion.

<sup>2</sup>*Encyclopedia Judaica* (hereafter *EJ*), 1972 ed., vol. XV, pp. 1586-1595.

<sup>3</sup>*E.J.*, p. 1596; Jacob Lestschinsky, "Jewish Migrations, 1840-1946," in *The Jews: Their History, Culture and Religion*, ed. Louis Finkelstein (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1949), pp 1220-1221.

<sup>4</sup>David Bronsen, *Jews and Germans from 1860 to 1933* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1979), p. 11. Forces which triggered emigration and migration among the general German population in the nineteenth century, such as bad harvests and high food prices, also contributed to the uprooting of the nation's Jewish population. A factor that affected only Jews was restrictive inheritance laws such as the *matrikelzwana* law in Bavaria that allowed only the eldest son of every Jewish family the right of residence with the result that the remaining children had no choice but to migrate or emigrate.

<sup>5</sup>*E.J.*, p. 1608.

<sup>6</sup>Bernard D. Weinryb, "East European Jewry," in *The Jews: Their History*, ed. Louis Finkelstein (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), p. 362.

<sup>7</sup>*E.J.*, vol. XII, p. 1077.

<sup>8</sup>Howard Morley Sachar, *The Course of Modern Jewish History* (New York: Dell Publishing, Inc., 1958), pp 188-189.

<sup>9</sup>Sachar, pp. 189-191, 197; Weinryb, p. 369.

<sup>10</sup>Weinryb, p. 326. 65% of all Eastern European Jewish immigrants stayed in cities along the eastern seaboard.

<sup>11</sup>Weinryb, p. 316. Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (hereafter HIAS) was founded by already settled Russian Jewish immigrants; Henry L. Feingold, *Zion in America* (New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc., 1981), p. 154.

<sup>12</sup>W. Gunther Plaut, *The Jews in Minnesota* (New York: American Jewish Historical Society, 1959), pp. 39-53.

<sup>13</sup>James J. Hill, Letter to Jacob Schiff, 8 August 1891. Great Northern Letterpress Papers, Archival and Manuscript Division of the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota (hereafter MHS).

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<sup>14</sup>Hyman Berman, "The Jews," in *They Chose Minnesota*, ed. June Drenning Holmquist (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981), pp. 491, 493.

<sup>15</sup>1910 U.S., *Census*, 1910, St. Louis County.

<sup>16</sup>According to the U.S., *Census*, 1900, there were 53 Jews in Tower; in 1910 the census indicates the number had diminished to 26.

<sup>17</sup>Plaut, pp. 124-125, 127-128.

<sup>18</sup>U.S., *Census*, 1910, Population. II:981; U.S., *Census*, 1910, St. Louis County excluding Duluth.

<sup>19</sup>According to the U.S., *Census*, 1910, of the approximately 477 foreign born Jews on the Range, only 41 list their country of origin as being Germany or Austro-Hungary.

<sup>20</sup>According to the U.S., *Census*, 1910, 133 Jews arrived between 1901-1905, compared to 60 between 1896-1900 and 87 between 1906-1910.

<sup>21</sup>\*191, Box 48. Industrial Removal Office Records, Archives of American Jewish Historical Society, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts; Sachar, p. 316.

<sup>22</sup>Feingold, p. 121. Jews as old as 80 are listed on the U.S., *Census*, 1910. A extant photograph (in project's archives) dated ca. 1910, taken at a family gathering in Eveleth includes several elderly individuals. Paul Henry Landis, *Three Iron Mining Towns* (New York: Arno Press, 1970), pp. 19-20, provides reasons for the disproportionate number of males on Range. Statistics in U.S., *Census*, 1910, *Population*, II:1019-1016 indicate there were 21,702 males and 12,323 females in Chisholm, Eveleth, Hibbing and Virginia.

<sup>23</sup>Approximately 216 Jews gave their ages as over thirty and 195 between the ages of 18-30.

<sup>24</sup>This conclusion is based on a series of oral interviews and family trees collected by the project.

<sup>25</sup>"History of the Jews of Mesaba Range," *The Reform Advocate*, October 25, 1913, p. 14.

<sup>26</sup>According to the U.S., 1910, *Census*, of the Jews eighteen years or older, approximately 141 appear to have come directly to the Range and 143 stopped off elsewhere first; 30 were born in the United States. Except in instances where data are confirmed by other sources, the westward migration patterns of Jewish immigrants to the Range are only approximate.

<sup>27</sup>According to the U.S., *Census*, 1910, 162 Jewish wage earners were merchants, and 121 were in other occupations, including mining and farming.

<sup>28</sup>Feingold, p. 131; Anita Libman Lebeson, "The American Jewish Chronicle," in *The Jews: Their History*, p. 518.

<sup>29</sup>Sachar, pp. 108-191.

<sup>30</sup>On the Range the network of Junior Colleges provided a vehicle for Jewish youth to enter into the professions. Many continued their educations elsewhere. This phenomenon was repeated by Jewish youth throughout the United States. Feingold, pp. 266-267.

<sup>31</sup>Feingold, p. 196.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*; U.S., *Census*, 1910. The role of Jewish women on the Range has yet to be fully studied; it is a top agenda item for the project.

<sup>33</sup>Landis, pp. 23-24; John Syrjamaki, "Mesabi Communities: A Study of Their Development," Diss. Yale University 1940, p. 462.

<sup>34</sup>David A. Walker, *Iron Frontier* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1979), p. 234.

<sup>35</sup>Walter van Brunt, ed., *Duluth and Louis County Minnesota: Their Story and People* (Chicago and New York: The American Historical Society, 1921), I, p. 567.

<sup>36</sup>The same individual; "Death Claims one of Eveleth's Leading Citizens," *The Eveleth Clarion*, 11 April 1927, p. 1. Type-script in project's archives listing achievements of deceased.

<sup>37</sup>According to the U.S., *Census*, 1910, over 50 of the Jews from Germany or Austro-Hungary on the Range lived in Virginia and Eveleth; the remainder were scattered in six Range towns.

<sup>38</sup>See above note 36.

<sup>39</sup>Oral interviews with descendants of individual and with a non-Jewish former resident from Chisholm.

<sup>40</sup>Several informants remarked about United States Steel's willingness to assist various religious groups in building and remodeling their places of worship, including Jews. With regard to the "middleman" position of merchants on the Range see Loomis, pp. 97, 111.

<sup>41</sup>Interview with daughter; unpublished manuscript, an autobiography of subject, "A Small Town Merchant," in project's archives; "Citizens Deport IWW," *Bemidji Weekly Pioneer*, 26 July 1917, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup>Oral interviews with past and present Range residents.

<sup>43</sup>BC8.1.W956 Works Project Administration Historical Records Survey. Churches. St. Louis County, May 19, 1939 (hereafter WPA Survey), MHS Division of Archives and Manuscripts, St. Paul, Minnesota; Eveleth WPA Survey #443; oral interviews with former congregants.

<sup>44</sup>WPA Survey #498, Virginia; oral interviews with past and present congregants.



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<sup>45</sup>Temple Emanuel, Duluth, based on interviews with the man's descendants.

<sup>46</sup>WPA Survey #461, Hibbing; oral interview with past rabbi.

<sup>47</sup>The synagogue's history is preserved in a "Golden Book" written in 1968 and stored in the synagogue; according to this book, the congregation was founded on the earlier date.

<sup>48</sup>*The Reform Advocate*, 25 October 1913, p. 2.

<sup>49</sup>WPA Survey #426, Chisholm; oral interviews with past congregants and descendants of rabbi.

<sup>50</sup>Interviews with Jewish and non-Jewish Range residents; Syrjamaki, p. 435.

<sup>51</sup>Mount Zion, St. Paul incorporated February 12, 1857. Temple Israel, Minneapolis (originally named Shaarai Tov) incorporated on October 8, 1878; Temple Emanuel, Duluth, incorporated on February 26, 1896.

<sup>52</sup>The cemetery, called the Range Hebrew Cemetery, is part of the ecumenical Greenwood Cemetery in Virginia. It was founded on May 2, 1950 and dedicated on September 10, 1950. However, apparently there was still opposition at this time from some Range Jews to the idea of a Jewish cemetery. Evidence of this is a notice sent out for a meeting to be held on August 8, 1957 to decide whether "you are for or against having our own cemetery." Copies of papers in a file entitled Range Cemetery Association in project's archives.

<sup>53</sup>See above n. 36; the same individual was one of the founder's of Eveleth's cemetery; according to the U.S., *Census*, 1900, the second individual had a furniture store. However, based on oral interviews, he apparently also functioned as a mortician.

<sup>54</sup>Another reason alluded to in interviews for Jewish migration from the Range is fear of inter-marriage. This factor is cited in other studies made of small town Jews. "The most important reason for either remaining or moving was the economic one. More than 4 out of 10 [interviewed] gave poor economic prospects as their main reason for 'moving.' Next most important reasons were inadequate social life for Jews as a group, and poor marriage prospects for young adults. These reasons were given by over one-fourth of all respondents." Robert Shosteck, *Small-Town Jewry Tell Their Story* (New York: B'nai B'rith Vocational Service, 1953), p. 54.

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