The main shul as seen from the men's section.

Chelsea, Massachusetts

Chelsea is located about five miles northeast of Boston, Massachusetts and occupies an area of 1.8 square miles. It was settled in 1624 by the British and named the Wissunissemet trading post, because it is near the Wissunissemet River. According to local historical records, Nathan Morse, the first Jewish resident of Chelsea, lived here in 1684. In 1809 there were eighty-two Jews living in Chelsea. Some of the many Jews from Russia and Eastern Europe who immigrated to the United States between 1890 and 1920 settled in Chelsea. By 1918 the number of Jews had grown to 11,225, nearly one-third of the population of the city. In 1918 there were about 20,000 Jewish residents in Chelsea out of a total population of almost 46,000. Given the area of the city, Chelsea may well have had the most Jews per square mile of any city outside of New York.

History of the Walnut Street Shul

In 1847, Jews gathered in the home of Monis Baris to daven on Shabbos and Yom Tov. In time the minyan moved to a new quarters. It was called Congregation Ohabei Shalom. By 1919 the growing congregation had enough funds to purchase a property and carry on daily davening and a larger one, where Shabbos services usually took place. The men's section of the main shul is one flight up. The aron of the main shul stands 37.5 feet high and is made of solid oak with carvings of animals and symbols from the Torah. The women's gallery is a trompe l'oeil-curtained one flight up. The ceiling is decorated with a fresco of the Chumash.

The main shul was and is still located at 145 Walnut Street. It is almost always referred to as the Walnut Street Shul. Rav Miller served the congregation until November 1944, when he left Chelsea to assume the position of mashgiach at Mesivta Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin in Brooklyn, New York.

Harav Avigdor Miller’s First Rabbanus

By Dr. Yitzchok Levine

Harav Avigdor Miller was born on 2 Eilul, 5608 (August 29, 1948). On the week of his birthday, Hamodia review the history of the magnificent shul in which Rav Miller began his illustrious career.

Harav Avigdor Miller, z’t’l, studied in the Sha’alav Yeshivas in Lithuania from 1932 until 1938. Upon his return to the United States, Rav Miller and his family lived with his parents in Bialystok, Hungary, until the early spring of 1939, when he became the Rav of Congregation Agudath Sholom in Chelsea, Massachusetts. This magnificent shul was and still is located at 145 Walnut Street. It is almost always referred to as the Walnut Street Shul. Rav Miller served the congregation until November 1944, when he left Chelsea to assume the position of mashgiach at Mesivta Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin in Brooklyn, New York.

Chelsea Jewry in the 1930s

During the 1930s the Jewish population of Chelsea was large enough to support fourteen Orthodox synagogues. Each of these shuls catered to specific groups. For example, most of the Jews who had come from Lithuania davened in the Walnut Street Shul, as it was often called the “Litvish” shul. On the other hand, the Orange Street Shul was known as the “Russshe” shul. During the Yom Tovim and Yom Yisroel in Chelsea, there were so many Jews walking in the streets to attend shul that certain streets were cor- doned off from traffic to accommodate the large crowds, and police were called in to direct traffic.

What was Yiddishkeit like in Chelsea dur- ing the thirties? When I asked someone who had spent his boyhood and teens in Chelsea at that time, his face lit up. “Yiddishkeit was beautiful then,” he replied. “Friser Aviva lat there were so many Jews walking in the streets to attend shul that certain streets were cor- doned off from traffic to accommodate the large crowds, and police were called in to direct traffic. The result was that he came under the influ- ence of Rav Miller. How far did that influence extend? At one point Henry, who is a kovin, was with us and mentioned how Rav Miller pointed out to him in no uncertain terms that he could never dissect a cadaver, he abandon- ed plans to study pathology and became a pharmacist.

Harav Avigdor Miller, z’t’l, was the Rav of Agudat Yisroel in Chelsea, Massachusetts, and is believed to have been the largest shul in the United States at this time. There were no yeshivos or Bais Yaakov schools in Chelsea. The children attended the public school in the morning and early afternoon, and then went to the Chelsea Hebrew School. However, this school primarily taught Jewish culture. Students learned to read and write Hebrew, some Jewish history and a bit of Chumash. The education offered by the Chelsea Hebrew School was virtually devoid of religious con- tent.

Rav Miller enters the Scene

When Rav Miller came to Chelsea in the early spring of 1939, he immediately set about doing whatever he could to stem the tide of young people’s defection from Orthodoxy. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, Rav Miller founded an yeshiva in Chelsea, called Mesivta Mesivta Theology College at Brooklyn, N.Y. The exercises were conducted under the auspices of the Chelsea Yeshiva. Among the guests were Rabbi Jacob M. Lesin and Rabbi Yitzchok Miller. The yeshivah was held at 142 Orange Street, Chelsea.

However, not all was well Jewishly in Chelsea. Morde Isaacoff grew up in Chelsea, was a monk and was a shock to many. He was strictly observant. “There were only two or three families living near us that were strictly shomer Shabbos,” he told me. “The shuls were full, but 90 percent of those attending were sixty or older. Of the remaining 10 percent, half were between the ages of twenty and six- ty and half were under twenty years of age.” Young people in general were not interested in living their lives as Orthodox Jews.

Rav Miller in Chelsea

With great difficulty Rav Miller founded an afternoon Yom Tov with that focused on teach- ing Yiddishkeit as opposed to teaching Jewish culture. Following is an article from the No- vember 22, 1941 issue of Hamodia: Yiddishkeit

Yeshiva Academy Dedicated During Impressive Rites

The new building of the Yeshiva Or Yis- roel in Chelsea was currently dedicated with ceremonies in the Hebrew school, where Rabbi Isaac Hutter, dean of the Beth Medrash Geekol, delivered an address in which he pointed out the spiritual potentiality of American youth.

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Chelsea Boys Enter School of Theology

A crowd of 300 persons thronged the vestry of the Walnut Street synagogue last night to bid farewell to two Chelsea boys, Abraham Kramer, 16, and Harold Shapiro, 14, on the eve of their departure for the Mesivta Theological College at Brooklyn, N.Y. The exercises were conducted under the auspices of the Chelsea Yeshiva. Among the guests were Rabbi Jacob M. Lesin and Mendel Wolfe of Dorchester. Moshe Isseroff grew up in Chelsea.

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today with that of 1942. Who today would ever think of transporting the youngsters in a shul to mark the fact that two boys were being trained to study in a yeshiva? Rav Miller, how- ever, would have left for Boston, if at that event which was most uncommon at that time. He therefore knew that such events and such younger- ers might follow these boys and study in Chaim Berlin themselves.

Herbie, one of the two first boys from Chelsea whom Rav Miller sent off to study in yiddish became known as Aaron Shapiro, when he attended Misrissa Rabbi Chaim Berlin, where he studied from 1942 until 1950. In that year he received his diploma. He then served a Rab- bi in shuls in Washington, D.C., Linden, N.J., Plainview, Long Island and Queens, N.Y. He earned a PhD in economics and became a professor at St. John's University. Rabbi Dr. Shapiro is now retired from both the rabbinate and teaching college. He told me that in the ear- ly 1940s, when he was still the chief of the Orthodox in Chelsea who spoke English, "Rav Miller was the most influential person in my life," he went on to say. "He sent me to yeshiva, and because of this I became a Rabbi. He had a great impact on me!"

It is worth noting that the Talmud Torah Or Yisroel that Rav Miller founded eventually be- came the Hebrew High School of the Hebrew Acad- emy. This school was run by Israel Kaufman, one of the young men with whom Rav Miller learned. In the late 1960s and early 1970s day school continued to educate the youth of Chelsea and is included in the sixties due to insufficient enrollment.

The November 30, 1944 issue of the Chelsea Record had a daily minyan. Rabbi Lichtenstein re- mained the synagogue director. In the early 1980s the Walnut Street Shul was doing. Rav Miller would then en- courage him by saying, "Keep it going! Keep going!" That was the message of the sanctuary. Rav Miller's leaving did not, of course, mean the end of the Walnut Street Shul. How- ever, during the Thirties the first exodus ofSynagogue members took place. In 1945, the synagogue was packed with commuters. Rav Miller's leaving "Notify the youngsters who are on their way to the first house, where some of the youngsters had been. Moshe watched the youngsters every step and saw her going slowly between the houses as she thought about someone. He was unaware of his own lips whispering of Tehillim. The words simply flowed from his mouth without a sound, in an old habit of praying for Heaven's help when there was danger. He knew well the type of boys who had been gathered and brought here: wild and savage, filled with hatred and murderous rage. It had not been so long since his own group of boys had had to come, one by one, back at the lodge around the great fire. They were being taught that they had to be much dif- ferent from these creatures. They crept closer to the house that Sara had decided to enter and put their ears to the wall. Boguslaw took his stance at the head, his rubber truncheon in his hand, but Moshe thrust him back. "There's no need for the stick," he whispered. "We'll manage without it. We're three adults, aren't we? Just take it easy." "Sh..." they heard Sara's warning. She moved along past all the windows, glancing furtively through them, then turned back and went to the door. Opening it, she strode in, feeling completely calm. "They're Jewish children," she whispered to herself, and kept on repeating. "Jewish children, Jewish child- ren..."

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The main shul as seen from the facade section.

In Prague, a young man named In Prague, a young man named Amos Moishe and Sara's wedding, the children from Chelsea are transported. They stop over in Prague on their way to France, after which they will travel to Kivity Yisroel. Moshe and Sara are to travel with a different group of children, who are not religious. In Prague, a young man named Boguslaw helps them make their way through the red tape so they can continue on their journey. The transportation of the children is terribly difficult to manage.

By Rabbi David Zartisky

The Walnut Street Shul After Rav Miller's Departure

Ray Miller left Chelsea at the end of 1944. The November 30, 1944 issue of the Chelsea Record reported that "Rabbi Avigdor Miller, spiritual leader of the Walnut Street synagogue, has resigned his post. He will leave for Brooklyn, N.Y., at the end of the year. "Rabbi Miller has accepted a position as supervisor of the Chaim Berlin College of the city. Rabbi Miller came to Chelsea in the early spring of 1939 and founded the Yeshi- va together with Rabbi Jacob Lein of Dorchester. The officers and members of the synagogue will hold a reception for Rabbi and Mrs. Miller Tuesday night, De- cember 12."

Rav Miller's leaving did not, of course, mean the end of the Walnut Street Shul. How- ever, during the Thirties the first exodus of Jews from Chelsea to the suburbs began. By the 1950s the Jewish population had decreased to about 8,000. The construction of the Tobin Bridge near the shul in the 1940s led to con- cerns over the shul's building. For a time there was even fear that the synagogue might be torn down. Fortunately, this did not happen.

Rav Miller had succeeded Rabbi Phillip Philip- pucciarelli as Rav of the shul and was succeed- ed by Rabbi Kalman Lichtenstein. In addi- tion to serving as Rav, he was the director of the Chaim Hebrew Day School. In 1963, Rabbi Lichtenstein was appointed Pesach Misrissa of the Lubavitch Visitation School. In the 1970s the membership of the shul continued to decline, even though it still had a daily minyan. Rabbi Lichtenstein re- tired in the late 1970s, after which the shul became a "ship without a captain."

The Jewish population of Chelsea contin- ued to dwindle, and in 1979 the Chelsea He-ブ scool closed its doors. By 1980 only three of the fourteen shuls that had once been packed with miqvei kelalah were still holding on. In the early 1980s the Walnut Street Shul combined with the Elm Street Shul, and Rabbi Nachum Chayman of Brooklyn, N.Y., took over. In 1982, the chairman of the Elm Street Shul, the spiritual leader of the Walnut Street Shul. By 1998 the Walnut Street Shul was the only function- ing Orthodox synagogue in Chelsea. Rabbi Cywiak recently moved from Chelsea to Brookline, but he assured me that he will be back during the Yomim Nora'im and other Yomim tovot to lead the congregation.

The declining number of miqvei kelalah at the Walnut Street Shul took its toll on the building. In 1989, Herb Kuperanav, a former Chelsea resident and member of the shul, noted that while the exterior of structure was in fine con- dition, the interior was in a state of disrepair. Windows were boarded up, the ceiling murals were fading, and the magnificent aron avot needed to be restored. Kuperanav, with the assistance of Rabbi Cywiak, embarked on a campaign to raise funds for the restoration of the shul. In time Herbie, as he is known to many, raised $100,000, enabling the completion of needed repairs that brought the shul back to its former magnificent state.

In 1993 Congrega- tion Agudath Sholom was listed in the Na- tional Register of Historic Places. This means that the shul can never be torn down. Howev- er, funds are required to defray the costs of the regular maintenance needed to keep the shul from again falling into disrepair (Donations to maintain the shul may be sent to Congrega- tion Agudah Sholom, Walnut Street Syna- gogue, P.O. Box 550256, Chelsea, MA 02150) Rabbi Cywiak told me that whenever he would meet Rav Miller during a visit to Brooklyn, Rav Miller would ask him how the shul was doing. Rav Miller would then en- courage him by saying, "Keep it going! Keep it going!"

Dr. Witschak Levin is a professor at Stevens In- stitute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey. He can be contacted at levins@surrey.edu. Photos were taken by Rehder Photography, Inc. of Brookline, MA. The author wishes to express his thanks to Aaron Shapiro, and they had allowed him to repro- duce them for this article.