

ARPIN JEWISH SETTLEMENT

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July 28, 1968
Stevens Point, Wis.

A community of orthodox, immigrant Jews, dedicated to dairy-farming, settled on the edge of a small central Wisconsin town. Truly this seemed something so unique as required further^e investigation. That a group of people long prohibited from owning land, unaccustomed by tradition to rural life, unskilled in the techniques of clearing land, animal husbandry, and crop-raising, should be able to sustain themselves and a synagogue for even a short time, seemed amazing. That one of the Jews should become a leader of the entire community in cooperative agriculture efforts and in politics is remarkable. That relationships between this small Jewish group and its varied neighbors should on all sides be remembered as cordial and cooperative, even during the Ku Klux Klan era, is surely a tribute to all involved.

To trace the genesis of this interesting experiment one needs to go back to the last years of the 19th century when conditions in Russia and eastern Europe--pogroms and the forced conscription into the army--made life unbearable for the Jews, who generally made their living as furriers, tailors, peddlars, and small businessmen. As a consequence of the difficult times, hundreds of Jews fled to the United States. Since many had friends and relatives in the New York area, they settled there and found work in the growing industries of the time. But life in the East was not without problems, so various Jewish organizations conceived the idea of encouraging Jews to settle in other parts of the country and to get out of the kinds of employment traditionally held. In 1891 the Baron de Hirsch Fund was organized by a group of well-to-do New York Jews with the purpose of "agricultural

colonization and vocational training of immigrants to draw Jews away from tailoring and peddling to the countryside."¹

The Industrial Removal Organization, a branch of the Baron de Hirsch Fund came into being in 1900; the Milwaukee Bnai Brith was one of the first groups to respond to the call for action.² From 1901-1903, 800 skilled and unskilled Jewish workers were brought to Wisconsin, to be joined later by their families; most of these people stayed in the Milwaukee area.³ As a part of the all-over plan, the Milwaukee Agricultural Association, under the leadership of A.W. Rich, sought to encourage Jews to leave the cities. (Rich had come with his parents from Hungary in 1853 and had become successful in shoe and clothing manufacture. He died in Milwaukee in 1918.)

In 1904, the M.A.A. bought a tract of 720 acres of cut-over land near Arpin in Wood County, from the Arpin Lumber Company.⁴ The motive for purchasing that particular piece of land seems to have been the rather exaggerated claims of the lumber concern's agent and the fairly reasonable price. In later years, Mr. Rich told Max Leopold that if he had known what the land was really like, he would never have bought it.⁵

¹Louis J. Swichkow, and Lloyd P. Gartner, The History of the Jews in Milwaukee, the Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1963.

²Ibid.

³The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle, Sept. 8, 1961.

⁴George O. Jones and Norman S. McVean, The History of Wood County Wisconsin, H.C. Cooper Jr. and Co., Minneapolis, 1923.

⁵Max Leopold interview, 1968, Wisconsin Rapids, Wis.

Arpin, a small community, had had a rough and ready past as a lumber town, but dairy farmers were already beginning to clear the cut-over land to plant hay and to graze their cattle. A number of small cheese factories in the area bought most of the milk produced. Most of the land purchased by Rich lay about a mile northeast of the village, with a few scattered forties in other locations. Twelve Jewish families were brought from Milwaukee. Each was sold forty acres.⁶ At first the settlers lived in the abandoned shacks of the millworkers, but soon the association cleared two acres on each allotment and hired Ed Schroeder, a local carpenter to build a small dwelling. During the first year each family received \$5 per week as well as three to five cows. Among the first farmers were Max Leopold, his father and a cousin, who had left Roumania some years before. The younger Leopold had lived in Milwaukee for a time where he studied law by means of a correspondence course from the LaSalle Academy. However, he recalls that he had already been interested in agriculture in Europe and "...like a bulldog, I've hung on to it..." through all the years since then.⁷

Conditions in Arpin were not propitious for farming, and much less so for settlers who had no rural experience. The first activity, generally, was to cut and saw cordwood. The Association hired an agriculture student from Pennsylvania to give advice and assistance. But the work was hard and many of the newcomers wasted money and effort because they did not know the proper

⁶The Tribune article, referring to the Wood County History quotes a price of \$1000 per 40 acres, which seems quite high. Leopold remembers it as \$5 to \$7 per acre.

⁷Leopold interview.

tools and techniques. Seven families left in the early days, but their places were soon taken by ten more.⁸ Those who persevered began to be able to support themselves and gradually the Association withdrew its help. Some bought more land as conditions improved. One of these was Max Leopold, who eagerly sought advice from the Agricultural Agent. The year 1909 was exceedingly dry and all farmers in the Arpin area were badly in need of hay. Under Leopold's leadership they combined their resources and efforts and bought hay together. Because of the success of this venture, they expanded their undertaking through the years, buying in carloads and establishing warehouses in Arpin, Vesper, Rudolph, and Junction City. In this way the farmers were able to avoid the high prices charged by storekeepers and local business. Mr. Leopold's interest in cooperative effort continued. When the Federal Land Bank Association was created by an act of Congress in 1917, he was instrumental in its service to Wood County. In July, 1968, he returned to Wisconsin Rapids to receive a medal from the F.L.B.A. for 50 years of work with the group.

The Production Credit Association, another federal plan to aid farmers, also counted on Leopold as a staunch supporter. He was co-founder and first president of the Wood County Farm Bureau and managed its supply business at Vesper for many years. Max Leopold says that because his family was not farm-oriented, he had no old ways to unlearn nor the farmers' traditional isolationism, and was therefore able to make use of new agricultural ideas as they came along and was not suspicious of government programs.⁹

⁸Bob Burns, "Arpin Site of 'Antipoverty War' 60 Years Ago," Wisconsin Rapids Tribune, Aug. 5, 1965.

⁹Leopold interview.

It is apparent that at least one of the Jewish community was well-received by the people of Arpin. Both Mr. Leopold and Garber have only positive comments to make about the relationships between the two groups. Leopold explained the good feelings by pointing out Arpin's heterogeneous nature: Norwegians, Germans, Swedes, Hollanders, a few Greeks of various religions, a Seventh-Day Adventist group, and, on Power's Bluff, a settlement of Indians. Besides, he said, there was more cooperation than competition among the farmers, who helped each other with threshing, barn-raising and other large projects. He contrasted this with the intense competition between two stores on the same city street--such rivalry might easily give rise to anti-Semitism.¹⁰

Even the efforts of the Ku Klux Klan in 1922 till 1924 proved unsuccessful in stirring up trouble among neighbors in Arpin. Meetings of the klan were held at various homes out in the surrounding country especially at Richfield (Ridgefield?) Leopold considered it a "fad of the time--trying to sell a nightgown and white cap for \$20." In spite of seemingly small response to such agitation, there was a cross-burning next to the Dutch Christian Reformed Church, although few thought it of any consequence. As Leopold commented: "...that propaganda did not germinate in Arpin."¹¹

Religion played a large part in unifying the Jewish settlers who clung to the practices of the Orthodox faith. Although work

¹⁰ Leopold Interview.

¹¹ Ibid.

was strictly prohibited on the Sabbath, necessary tasks such as milking cows and feeding animals was permitted. At first the Jews met at each other's homes for weekly services, but in 1916, through cooperative effort, a small synagogue was built on an acre of one of the farms. Various men of the community took turns leading the services. Although the History of Wood County refers to a Rabbi Rakita, both Garber and Leopold deny there was ever a rabbi.¹³ Garber served as cantor and slaughterer.¹⁴ Any of the Jewish men could conduct the ritual, since they were all well-schooled in Hebrew and religion. However, no religious classes were held for children, all of whom received such training at home. The wine needed for holiday celebrations was either purchased or made by the farmers from dandelions. The synagogue also served the needs of the men who did not have to work as a place for meditation and Bible-reading. At the close of the Sabbath on Saturday evening, the building served as a social center. The young Pittelman boys played Jewish tunes on the violin, trumpet and drum and everyone danced. A pony of beer (which could be bought for a dollar in those days) added to the gaiety and the ladies baked cakes and other goodies. Once Leopold counted sixty-five people assembled at such a gathering--all the families of the group, plus some traveling peddlars who often dropped in for the services and fun. Yiddish, common to most European Jews, was the language used.¹⁵

Several marriages were performed in the synagogue with Mr.

¹⁴Garber interview, Leopold interview.

¹⁵Garber interview.

Garber officiating. A number of children were born with the help of midwives, since there was no doctor in the early days. When deaths occurred, burials took place in Wausau.¹⁶ Until 1921, there were enough men among the Arpin Jewish families to hold services, however in the era from 1921 to 1931, the community relied on the attendance of outsiders to make up the requisite minyan of ten men. After 1931, only Leopold remained of the Arpin Jews, and when he could no longer gather the necessary number, the land and building were sold to a neighboring farmer. The Torah was given to the Hillel Foundation at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Somewhat nostalgically, Mr. Leopold recalls that in the early 1930's, an extremely heavy snow proved too much for the 24 foot-wide, insufficiently-supported roof and the building collapsed.¹⁷

Alvin Garber had left his family behind in Russia when he immigrated to the United States, hoping to earn enough to send for them later. World War I intervened, making the family's separation much longer than expected. While living in Wisconsin Rapids, he heard about the Arpin venture and went out to help with the construction of the synagogue in 1916. Impressed with the friendliness of the people and hopeful of the possibilities of dairy-farming, he bought a farm in 1919. Soon after, his wife and some of his children joined him. When someone asked him how he expected to make a success of dairy-farming when he had always lived in a city, he replied: "Well, I'm a married man!"

¹⁶ Garber interview.

¹⁷ Leopold interview.

His abilities as cantor and slaughterer made him an asset to the community, but falling milk prices discouraged him and in 1924 or 1925 he returned to Wisconsin Rapids where a relative had a business. Mr. Garber is 89 and had retired to California, but now resides in Milwaukee.¹⁸

Max Leopold played a much larger role in the larger community. Since he already had had the idea of owning land and farming before coming to this country, he was perhaps best able to adapt to a rural life. A strong social philosophy made him understand the need for cooperative effort among the farmers, who showed their esteem for him by electing him to a number of positions. When the justice of the peace, Charlie Practer, moved away in 1920, Leopold was elected to the job at a town meeting, and held the position until 1952. Crime was not a problem in Arpin, he said, his services were called upon only when neighbor-disputes or a little stealing occurred. He performed a few marriages including some at the Indian community on Power's Bluff. In addition, he obtained certification in 1919 for Alvin Garber so that he could perform marriages at the synagogue. (Leopold recalled that a few years ago in Milwaukee, he met a Sarah Lerner, whom he suddenly recognized as one of the young girls who had been married at the temple, fifty-five years before, "...the girl I kissed on her wedding." She said he hadn't changed a bit. "No," said Leopold,^{to her} "you've got grey hair and I've got grey hair and that's about all.")

Also in 1920, Max Leopold ran for assemblyman and in 1940

¹⁸Garber interview.

for state senator, losing on both occasions although his work in farmers' organizations made him widely known. He received "quite a big vote--didn't make it by 6000 to 7000 votes in three counties. His activities with the Farm Bureau, the cooperative, Production Credit Association and Federal Land Bank has already been mentioned. In addition, he was secretary of the Wood County Baseball League and president of the Wood County Basketball League for many years.

Max Leopold continued to farm until 1952, when he rented his farm and went to San Diego to live. He kept an eye on his land by occasional visits and finally sold his farm in June 1968. He is still widely known in rural areas and in agricultural organizations in Wood County. In Arpin he is welcomed now by children and grandchildren of former neighbors. He is somewhat sad to see how Arpin has declined--four grocery stores have diminished to one and even taverns from four to three. "We used to call Arpin the million-dollar town," he said. "A town is just like a human being. If you dress up and are presentable, people think of you." "Arpin was one of the finest communities in the state," he reminisces, citing the good feelings between the various groups who settled there. "I still consider Arpin my home." Mr. Leopold is now 82 and lives in San Diego with his second wife.¹⁹

Many circumstances led to the decline of the Arpin Jewish community. Farming in the cut-over area was no easy task for any farmer, much less so for people unskilled by tradition or

¹⁹Leopold interview.

education for agriculture. A number of years of farm depression and unfavorable weather discouraged those who had not already left in the earliest days. As the Arpin Jews learned English, they were easily persuaded to go to the cities where relatives often found work for them. A contributing factor was the preponderance of girls born to the families--Jewish husbands for them could only be found in the larger cities in the state.

In this way a unique experiment in intercultural life in Wisconsin has ended. Surely the welcoming, helpful attitude of the original Arpin farmers helped the Jews stay as long as they did. Surely the leadership of Max Leopold and Alvin Garber helped a town prove that, if people are involved in constructive, cooperative effort, differences of nationality, language, and religion become of minimal importance.

On the Otto Zieher farm in present-day Arpin remain the scattered foundation stones of the old synagogue, a location deserving a memorial to the success of a small experiment that epitomizes the American dream of brotherhood.

A Personal Note

While Mr. Jack Karp rummaged among old papers in his shoe store, he came across an old copy of the Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle which gave a brief resume of the history of Jews in the state, in which the Arpin Jews merited a paragraph. The name of the town attracted my notice because I had seen the name of Max Leopold, Arpin, Wis., in an old Bnai Brith membership book which Mr. Karp had in another drawer. I did not know where Arpin was nor could I imagine where to find any further information. One day my husband happened to mention my researches to a Mr. Rudnick, a member of the Stevens Point congregation. He happened to ^{know} Alvin Garber whose son Ben lives in town. When I called the latter, I was immediately encouraged to hear that his father was about to arrive from San Diego for a visit. A few days later, my husband and I were invited to their home to meet the older Mr. Garber. I was struck by this 89-year-old man's erect carriage, alert mind, twinkling eyes and marvelous sense of humor. Truly he seemed the personification of one of the Biblical patriarchs, and so much more so when we saw a photograph of him in prayer shawl and skull cap. Until very recently he served as cantor to a congregation in San Diego. His reminiscences were mingled with jokes and anecdotes that made for a really memorable evening.

But this one interview, plus a few facts gleaned from the History of Wood County were not enough. The principal character in the Arpin story was quite inaccessible in California. Mr. Garber had mentioned an article about Arpin in the Wisconsin Rapids Tribune some two years previously, but without the precise

date, it was lost. I seemed to have reached a dead end in my quest, no matter where I looked.

Then one day the telephone rang; it was Ben Garber: "I just want you to know that I'm bringing Max Leopold to Stevens Point so that you can interview him. In reality, he's coming to receive a medal from the Federal Land Bank. I'm going to pick him up at the airport and if you can be here on Sunday night, I'll bring him to our house so you can interview him before we go to Rapids." I could hardly believe my good fortune. I was at the Garbers' before the caravan arrived, accompanied by the official of the Association, who was to hurry Mr. Leopold to Wisconsin Rapids. Mr. Leopold is a vigorous, strongly-built man of medium height, who looked much younger than his 32 years. He greeted the Garbers, introduced his wife, chatted rapidly with the roomful of people present, interspersing his conversation with comments to me about Arpin history. After a quick cup of tea, he was off, promising to call me. The Garbers consoled me on my lost opportunity. On Monday I took matters into my own hands and called the traveler at his hotel and made an appointment for Tuesday afternoon. Without raising my hopes too high I collected Kathleen Gumm (my fellow Arpin enthusiast), her tape recorder, tapes, camera, notebook, pencils and drove to Wisconsin Rapids.

We arrived promptly at two, only to be told by Mrs. Leopold that her husband was in Arpin! Fortunately he appeared a half hour later and, after a quick lunch, put himself at our disposal. In the motel room he responded to all our many questions most graciously, assisted by comments and questions from his wife.

Miss Gumm and I were both impressed with his truly humane and kindly attitude toward all people, his positive, optimistic outlook and his real love for farms, farming and Arpin. Mr. Leopold was really to happy to hear that my companion was from Arpin and knew of her family. Before we knew it we had filled two tapes and it was five o'clock. After many cordial good-bys and an exchange of addresses, we walked out, satisfied with having learned a great deal and with having met a truly remarkable person.

I can easily see that I have but touched the surface of my topic; I know that my report lacks a great deal in terms of factual data, and that it contains many human (and inhuman) errors, but I have learned much. I have found how difficult historical research is, I have met some good people I would not have known otherwise and I have had my eyes opened to a small slice of Wisconsin history that gives me a better comprehension of the panorama of my state. Perhaps these accomplishments are more important to a kindergarten teacher than the most awesome array of facts and dates. Without the unselfish help of the Garber family, Mr. Jack Karp, Mr. Max Leopold and many others, this paper would not have been written. My hope is that some day a real historian will investigate and write up the Arpin Jewish Community and perhaps find the site of the old synagogue, a worthy ~~idea of~~ a historical marker.

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A Partial List of People Who Lived at Arpin Jewish Settlement

Sam Leopold (died at Arpin)
Max Leopold (San Diego, Calif.)
Sam Pittelman and Katie
Max Barazofsky
Joe Rifzis (Chicago)
Jake and Lena Cohen
Louis Rakita (Milwaukee)
Robert "
Julius "
Alvin Garber (Milwaukee)
Ben Garber (Stevens Point)
David Wolf (Milwaukee--San Diego)
Louis Rader
R. Morris
M. Seigl
D. and M. Winneberg
David Weinberg
Meyer "