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Touring Jewish Philly

by Joe Sugarman
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"Most people have no idea about Philadelphia's rich Jewish history," guidebook author Linda Nesvisky is telling me over bites of overstuffed brisket and turkey sandwiches from Hershel's deli in the Reading Terminal Market. "Tour groups think of New York and Washington, but Philadelphia is just a halfway point, a watering hole between the two."



The lights from Philadelphia's skyscrapers illuminate the sky.

Photos by Joe Sugarman

I'll admit, I'm from Philadelphia and all I know about my hometown's Jewish legacy is that there's a nice suburban synagogue designed by Frank Lloyd Wright (Beth Shalom in Elkins Park) and that Louis Feinberg, aka Larry Fine, my favorite of the Three Stooges, was born in town.



The metropolitan area's 215,000 Jews don't live in a central community like in Baltimore, and its delis are few and far between.

The Liberty Bell is on guidebook author Linda Nesvisky's tour of Jewish Philadelphia because it is inscribed with a verse from the Hebrew Bible, (Leviticus 25:10): "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof."

(Heck, our local deli was called Madre's, which always sounded to me like they should've specialized in paella, not pastrami.)

But Nesvisky, author of the recently published *Jewish Philadelphia: A Guide To Its Sights And Stories* (History Press) is here to set me straight. "With the opening of the National Museum of

American Jewish History, people are asking, 'What other Jewish sites are there in the city?' I say, 'Plenty.' "

Nesvisky, a 60-something bundle of energy at barely 5 feet tall, with graying hair and bright light blue eyes, has led tours - both in English and in Hebrew - of Jewish Philly for more than 11 years, and her book is an outgrowth of her experiences. Visitors to Philadelphia can book a personal or group tour through her Shalomphillytours.com website or simply buy her book, which includes a self-guided tour.

So, with coleslaw stains on my shirt and guidebook in hand, I bid shalom to Nesvisky and set out to discover the Jewish heritage of my hometown.

Kabbalists & Quakers

Late 19th- and early 20th-century Jewish immigrants to Philadelphia mostly settled in the city's Queen Village and Society Hill neighborhoods, south of downtown, before scattering to the city's suburbs.

South Street, a mecca for Philadelphia nightlife since the 1960s, was once lined with Jewish-owned businesses. But Nesvisky's tour mainly concentrates on the city's earliest Jewish settlers: colonists who not only helped shape the city but also the fledgling nation, so you can take in Philly's major historical sights while learning of their Jewish connections.

The first stop along Nesvisky's tour takes me to Welcome Park, the former site of William Penn's Slate Roof House, where the founder of Pennsylvania lived with his wife, Hannah (no, not a Jew), between 1699 and 1701. The park contains an outline of Penn's house, a giant grid of Philadelphia's streets, which he designed, and a statue of the man himself.

So what does a Quaker with a tricornered hat have to do with the Chosen People? As Nesvisky explains in her book, Penn's most important contribution to the New World was his "Charter of Privileges." Drafted in 1701, it guaranteed religious freedom to all members of his colony. This gave Jews a reason to settle in Philadelphia, versus, say, Boston, which was a hotspot for the Puritan set - and where you couldn't find a good pastrami sandwich for nearly 200 years.

Penn apparently liked the Jews and saw parallels between their religious persecution and that of the Quakers. There were also similarities between the Quakers' pursuit of "inner light" through silent prayer and the mysticism of kabbalists, whom, Nesvisky speculates, may have influenced Penn's own thinking.

Still, Penn was a Christian through and through and he hoped to get Jews to accept Jesus. He was also a natural-born promoter as I read his description of Philadelphia on one of Welcome Park's placards: "The air is sweet and clear, the heavens serene, and like the south part of France, rarely overcast."

It's the first time I've heard Philly compared to the south of France. Still, my 10-minute walk to the next site through the Old City neighborhood, with its outdoor cafes and art galleries, isn't

entirely without Parisian charm.

Soon, I'm standing near the Delaware River waterfront, across from the site of the former London Coffee House. The 18th-century exchange building is long gone, but Nesvisky wants me to imagine it in all its glory when the most famous Jew of the Colonial era, Haym Salomon, held court.

Salomon was a financial broker and when it came to financing the American Revolution, his efforts were unequalled. Salomon helped raise more than \$800,000 for the cause, or a staggering \$49 billion in today's currency.

My favorite Haym Salomon story covered in Nesvisky's book relates the time when George Washington sent Robert Morris, the better-known of the country's early financiers, to find Salomon. Unfortunately, Morris showed up in Philadelphia on Yom Kippur and found Salomon worshipping at Mikveh Israel Synagogue (which we'll get to later in the tour).

As the story goes, an oblivious Morris knocked on the door of the shul to speak with Salomon, who to the amazement of the congregation stood up and held an impromptu fundraiser in the middle of the service. According to Nesvisky's book, in less than 15 minutes, he raised \$20,000. (Really, what synagogue or temple couldn't use a guy like that around the High Holidays?)

Salomon, unfortunately, was a little too generous with his shekels and died deeply in debt, with not even enough money for a proper funeral. (His remains lie in an unmarked grave in Mikveh Israel Cemetery; his great-grandson helped erect a memorial plaque years later.)

Boone's Buddy

From the riverfront, I head back to Second Street and make a brief stop at Christ Church, where its impressive Palladian window - identical to the one that adorns Independence Hall - was a gift from a member of the Gimbel Department Store family in honor of the "lasting friendship" between Congregation Mikveh Israel and Christ Church, whose members gave financial support to the synagogue over the years.

From the church, it's a several block walk along Second Street to Elfreth's Alley. Dating to 1702, the remarkably preserved neighborhood is the oldest continuously inhabited residential street in America, and the entire alley is a National Historic Landmark. Its 32 neat, brick houses and cobblestone roadway boasts enough "ye olde" charm to have been used as the backdrop for dozens of period films.

I quickly notice a mezuzah on the doorpost of 135. According to Nesvisky's book, two significant Jews lived on the street: Jacob Cohen and Mosses Mordecai. Cohen was a fur trader and a friend of pioneer Daniel Boone. He was also supposedly the inspiration for Jacob And The Indians, the 1939 novel by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Stephen Vincent Benet. Cohen's home, No. 124, is currently a museum dedicated to the street.

Mordecai, who lived at No. 118, was one of the founders of Mikveh Israel Synagogue and a

signer of the nonimportation resolutions of 1765, which opposed British taxation. He died in 1781, but several years later his wife remarried a neighbor - Jacob Cohen. The marriage was scandalous at the time, but mainly because Cohen, as a descendent of the kohanim, the priestly caste, was forbidden to marry a widow.

Still, Haym Salomon himself signed the ketubah.

Franklin & Franks

I depart the colonial oasis of Elfreth's Alley, amble up busy Arch Street, past the Betsy Ross House and end up standing in front of Ben Franklin's grave at Christ Church Cemetery.

Before World War II, the Nazis tried to paint Franklin as an anti-Semite, but he was actually a supporter of early Jewish settlers. He procured land for what would become the city's first Jewish cemetery when his friend, Nathan Levy, couldn't afford a burial plot for his child. He also loaned 5 pounds - the equivalent of \$800 today - to help fund the construction of Mikveh Israel.

Franklin's grave is the one that gets the most attention here (you'll note the hundreds of pennies that visitors toss upon his gravestone), but the cemetery's most unlikely inhabitant is a Jew - Maj. David Salisbury Franks.

Franks was the highest-ranking Jewish officer in the Continental Army, and also, unfortunately, an aide-de-camp to Gen. Benedict Arnold. When Arnold decided to switch sides and help the British, Franks was found guilty by association. Eventually, George Washington had him acquitted and reinstated in the army, but the traitorous stigma continued to follow him throughout his career.

When a yellow fever outbreak hit the city in 1793, the 52-year-old Franks died and his body was piled onto a coroner's wagon for burial in a potter's field. A neighbor and member of Christ Church recognized Franks, wheeled his body to the cemetery and convinced the church that such a distinguished citizen deserved a proper burial place.

His exact resting spot remains unknown, but an American flag and memorial plaque lie just inside the cemetery, less than 20 paces from Franklin's grave.

Reminiscent Of Baghdad

I've been reading so much about Mikveh Israel Synagogue, it's almost a relief when I finally arrive there. Established in 1740, it's the third oldest synagogue in America.

Its current redbrick building was built in 1976 and is the shul's fifth building on four different sites in town. Outside, there's a sculpture dedicated to Yonatan Netanyahu, the only Israeli soldier killed in action during 1976's Operation Entebbe in Uganda and who attended school in suburban Philadelphia with his brother (future Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu) while their father was a visiting professor in town.

There's also a statue of Uriah Phillips Levy (1792-1862), the first Jewish commodore in the U.S. Navy, who went off to sea at 10 years old, but returned to celebrate his bar mitzvah at Mikveh Israel in 1805. (A constant target for anti-Semitic remarks, Levy was court-martialed six times and killed a man in a duel. He was later known for purchasing and restoring Jefferson's Monticello.)

Inside the shul, I meet docent Mary Jane Bension, an enthusiastic guide who's been a congregant since 1955. Bension leads me into the simple sanctuary, with seating for men in front and women in the back.

"A Muslim man came in here not long ago and said, 'Now this is a proper synagogue - like you'd see in Baghdad!'" she says, referring to the traditional Sephardic layout, with the bima sited across the room from the ark.

My guide tells me that the synagogue has had its share of notable leaders over the years, but only one of them - its first, Gershom Mendes Seixas - was American. (The shul's current chazzan, Albert Gabbai, hails from Egypt.) In fact, Seixas was the first native-born head of a Jewish congregation in America, having overseen the pulpit at New York's Shearith Israel at the age of 23.

He arrived in Philadelphia after fleeing the British during the war and was vital in organizing services for the young synagogue. Known as the "Rabbi of the Revolution," Seixas often spoke out in support of the Colonists' cause and was invited to Washington's second inauguration. (He also had 26 children between two wives.)

Bension also fills me in about the congregation's most influential leader, Isaac Leeser, an instrumental figure in shaping American Judaism. Among other accomplishments, the German-born Leeser founded America's first Hebrew Sunday school, the first Jewish theological seminary and the Jewish Publication Society. He also introduced English prayers into services and translated the Bible and prayer book into English. Pretty radical stuff back in the 1830s.

Mikveh Israel also has a small collection of historical Jewish artifacts on display in its lobby, but most of its collection now resides at the nearby National Museum of American Jewish History, which is my next stop along the tour.

Proclaiming Liberty

Up until its opening in 2011, the museum was actually housed in overflowing rooms at Mikveh Israel. But when a radio station nearby decided to move its offices, it provided the perfect opportunity to expand into a new space.

And what an expansion it was.

You could easily spend an entire day browsing the museum's 1,200 artifacts spread over four stories and 350 years. The exhibition starts literally with the first Jews in the New World - 23 souls who arrived from Brazil in 1654.

I note artifacts affiliated with some of my old friends from the tour, including displays on Isaac Leeser and a reproduction of Haym Salomon's ketubah, his tin mezuzah and several business receipts.

There are some displays dealing with Maryland's Jews as well, including an original copy of "the Jew Bill," an 1826 law that modified the state constitution requiring public office holders to recite a Christian oath. The law allowed Jews and other non-Christians to substitute a declaration of belief in a Creator instead.

Another floor covers American Jewish History from 1880 to 1945 and features immigration at Ellis Island, Yiddish theater and events leading up to World Wars I and II. On the second floor, which covers everything from the founding of Israel to the joys of summer camp, I watch a hilarious clip from "Saturday Night Live" of the late Gilda Radner lamenting the plight of Soviet "jewelry." "That's Soviet Jewry, not jewelry," Chevy Chase finally corrects her.

All told, it's an incredible display of the history of a people and their impact on America.

As I depart the museum at closing time, there's only one more stop on Nesvisky's tour: the Liberty Bell.

What's the world's most famous bell have to do with Jews? As Nesvisky explains in her book, the bell, which was commissioned in 1851 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of William Penn's "Charter of Privileges," is inscribed with a verse from the Hebrew Bible, (Leviticus 25:10): "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof."

Not only that but the bell, originally known as the Pennsylvania State House Bell, arrived from its London foundry on a ship named the Myrtilla, which was part of a fleet owned by Jews named David Franks and Nathan Levy.

Unfortunately, the Liberty Bell Pavilion is already closed by the time I cross Independence Mall from the Jewish museum. I press my face to its glass window and peer inside the building. Coincidentally, a man wearing a kippah is standing next to me doing the same thing.

"Did you know there's a Jewish connection to the Liberty Bell? I ask him.

"No," he says. "What would that be?"

"Well," I say, "you'd be surprised at some of the Jewish history around here. You really would."