

# Jacob Bibo and the History of Woodbury's Beth Israel Synagogue



Jacob Herman Bibo

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## **WOODBURY'S FIRST JEWISH RESIDENT ARRIVES IN WOODBURY IN 1867 AT THE AGE OF 14**

In 1867, German born Jacob Herman Bibo had a burning desire to come to America.

Fourteen-year-old "Jake", with 50 cents to his name, had been energized by the oratory of the steamship and railroad company agents who would travel through Europe, enticing residents to begin a new life in the United States.

The youth found his way to Woodbury, NJ, a city that was formerly established only thirteen years before.

Bibo's ability to speak perfect English (reportedly the result of "generations of rabbis in his ancestry") was his most tangible asset to help him assimilate into the new world.

Interestingly, he was the first Jewish resident recorded in Woodbury's history. It would not be until 1904 when Harry Polsky arrived (Polsky's store, est. 1906) and became the city's second Jewish family, followed by the Herman family in 1906 and the Cohen family, who would later open a "Tea House" on Broad and Delaware Streets.

About thirty other Jewish families arrived in Woodbury between 1915 to 1930.

Jacob Bibo methodically paved his own version of the American Dream.

Twenty-three years after his arrival, Jake had saved enough money to purchase a building on Broad Street to manufacture his "Jumbo" cigars. A clever marketer, the slogans "Smoke Bibo's Jumbos" and Bibo's Jumbos are better than ever" were often seen on local billboards and in the

newspaper. Jacob would travel along the country roads by horse and buggy selling his cigar and cigar products.

Ironically, though the entrepreneur made his money through his cigar sales, he drew the line at smoking “cigarettes,” declaring they were “coffin nails.”

With his business established, Jacob Bibo set his sights on love. In 1892 he married Miss Caroline Firetag in New York City. They would have seven children and Bibo would live in Woodbury for a total of fifty years before the family moved to Brooklyn.

## **JACOB BIBO HELPS WITH MEDIATION AS PROBLEMS ERRUPT IN ZIONTOWN**

### **HEBREW SETTLEMENT**

Jacob Bibo was a social man who made fast friends and didn't discriminate based on religious preference.

It is noted that he often was spotted in deep conversations with other religious leaders. They often quipped, “If you want a minister in Woodbury, try Bibo's Smoke Shop first!”

His level head and mediating skills were enlisted when trouble erupted at the Hebrew settlement, Ziontown, that was founded in Gloucester County in the early 1890's.

A group of developers, including Israel Zion had ambitious plans for an industrial settlement with Zion's three-story shirt factory as the anchor and main employer. The investors all signed their name on the lease in Hebrew.

The vision was a town with wide boulevards, a hotel, school, and a theater interspersed with the homesites that would be sold as standard lots of 25 feet by 150 feet for \$75.00. The master plan included inviting New Jersey Railroad to run a line though the town. The residents lived in adobe huts, anticipating their fate to change for the better as the town thrived.

The optimism didn't last long.

In 1892 there were 78 people employed at the factory. By the summer, when Israel Zion couldn't make payroll, angry employees raged against their employer and rioted in the streets. Fights broke out and the local authorities had to enlist the help of the Woodbury police Department to keep order.

The hopeful promise of the Jewish settlement had deteriorated to having the residents starving from lack of provisions and wages.

Jacob Bibo was enlisted to function as a mediator.

He assisted the settlers in securing groceries and supplies to meet their most desperate needs. The Philadelphia Jewish community came through to aid the fifty families in the Ziontown settlement.

The next year saw many of the residents moving to nearby Malaga to farm the land and the post office was closed. Though some Jews stayed in Ziontown into the early 1900's, it was the children of these early pioneers who ultimately sold the last of the lots to the newly arriving Italian immigrants.



Jacob Bibo

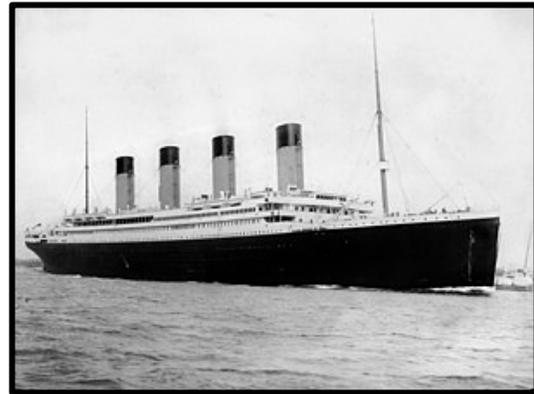
### **BIBO VISITS HIS HOMETLAND IN GERMANY AND MAKES A FATE-FILLED DECISION**

In 1912, Jacob Bibo returned to tour Europe and visit the German countryside of his homeland. For all of his affection for the land of his birth, Bibo was known to be an American patriot who was ever grateful for his "special dream come true."

His sentimentality may have saved his life.

At the steamship office, he was given two choices for his return journey.

He was offered transit on the newest British steamship afloat or passage on a slower vessel called the "President Lincoln." He chose the latter and that made *all the difference*. Had he opted for the first option, the maiden voyage of the U.S.S. Titanic, he may have perished. Days after its departure from England. The "unsinkable ship" descended into the North Atlantic Sea after hitting an iceberg.



*"Two roads diverged in a wood and I,  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference."*

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

## **Woodbury's Jewish Trailblazers: BETH ISRAEL SYNAGOGUE**

*We must remember that one determined person can make a significant difference.*

*and that a small group of determined people can change the course of history."*

Sonia Johnson

A group of fourteen passionate and prayerful Woodbury Jewish residents met, beginning in the early 1920's, at various local homes. The Torah was housed in the cupboard of Benjamin Snyder's kitchen.

By the 1930's the small congregation began looking for a permanent structure for its faithful. They leased the second story of a building on Broad Street and Aberdeen Place.

When the congregation expanded to twenty-two families in 1938, they broke ground on their own house of worship at W. Center and Harrison Street. The oldest Jewish Woodbury resident, Louis Rosen, ceremoniously broke the ground with the Jewish leaders surrounding him.



At the groundbreaking ceremony, Camden Rabbi Phillip Lipis of the Bethel Congregation of Camden, referenced the dissension in the world stating, “We tremble at the persecute ion in the world today and once again remind ourselves of our creed and belief – the tings of the spirit are the things that endure.”

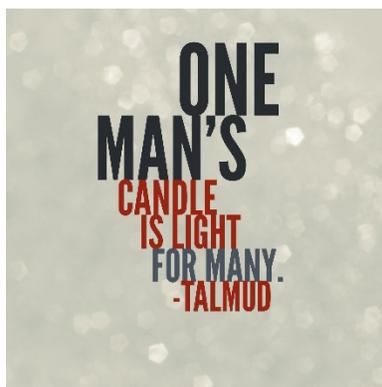
On May 28, 1939, the new building was dedicated.



In spite of the congregation’s joy with their new house of worship, the members were acutely aware and troubled by the anti-Jewish sentiments that were emanating from Germany. Just months after the synagogue’s dedication, Germany invaded Poland and the tragic fate of its Jewish residents would forever be told in historical accounts and stories. WWII and America’s involvement in that conflict was only a few years away.

The Jewish congregation strengthened and grew. Friendships were forged, religious education was available, the first confirmation service was held in 1959 when five boys would “pledge themselves to live a life of dedication.

As participation increased in the synagogue, expansion was discussed. In 1954, land was purchased for the new house of worship at the corner of S. Warner and King Street. By 1962, the new building was dedicated. At its height, there were close to 150 families pledged to the congregation.



Time took its toll. Over the next decades the numbers dwindled and the synagogue's leadership considered their options. By the beginning of 2000 the membership was down to 58 families. Lifelong member of Beth Israel, Marc Kamp, explained, "it's a traditional congregation, but it has become a lot more liberal." Older members were dying off and the younger families were part of the suburban sprawl. The building, expanded in 1972 to accommodate the faithful, was now too large to provide an intimate setting in which to worship.



ROSE HOWERTER / Inquirer Suburban Staff  
**Rabbi Robert Tabak** (fourth from left) and others from Beth Israel toss bread into Bell Lake, symbolically shedding their sins.

Philadelphia Inquirer, September 23, 2001

A decision was made. Woodbury's Beth Israel congregation would now join with a Jewish congregation in Turnersville who had outgrown their synagogue. Both properties were sold and a new 'home' was purchased at 115 East Holly Avenue in Sewell. The building was updated to accommodate the handicapped with an elevator and handicapped accessible restrooms.

Currently, close to 150 families call Congregation B'nai Tikvah Beth Israel their spiritual home. They welcome other Jewish families in the Gloucester County to be a part of their community.



**To life, to life, l'chai-im!  
L'chai-im, l'chai-im, to life!**

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***Donna Clementoni***

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