Brynmawr's Jewish Community and "The Lion of Judah"

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The Jewish communities in South Wales really started during the growth of the heavy industries and there was a mass immigration into Wales especially to the coastal areas and the Valleys. Many had come from Eastern Europe aboard ships that brought pit props for the expanding coal mines from Lithuania via the Baltic ports. They saw that a good living could be made and they stayed.

Most of the valley towns had a small Jewish community; Brynmawr had the third largest per head of population in Britain behind Leeds and Manchester and at its highest level there were 135 Jews living in Brynmawr. Michael Wallach says that "*Brynmawr, according to the statistical unit of the Board of Deputies, at one time had the largest concentration of Jews in proportion to the British Isles*".

In most of the valley towns, used to all the different nationalities moving in, the Jewish community tended to be respected. Not all the Jews ran businesses that made lots of money, many were teachers, some were pack men and some were coal miners. Harold Pollins in his article about the Jewish Community of Brynmawr records a puddler, farmer, coal hewer, master builder and an electrical engineer. There was even a Jewish butcher in the town. In December 1916 the Brecon Times had this little snippet of information:

> *The only Jewish Butcher in Brynmawr. A Jewish butcher, on behalf of an assistant slaughter man, aged 18, said he had been with him for three years. He was the only Jewish butcher to the county, and he had brought this boy up to the business necessary to supply the community. The butcher was named Isaiah Gibbor.*

The so called anti Jewish riot of Tredegar is very well documented but it also happened in Cwm and Ebbw Vale. In Brynmawr the situation was different; when the riots started many men from Brynmawr rushed to be sworn in as special constables and under the leadership of Sgt. Price defended the Jewish community.

So why did Brynmawr become such an important centre for the Jewish Community? Brynmawr had developed as a dormitory town for the three main iron works in the district, Clydach, Beaufort and Nant y Glo. The arrival of the railway to Brynmawr, the link from Big Pit and finally the missing link from Nant y Glo made the town a very important centre for moving coal etc to the markets. It was still a small town but between 1891 and 1911 it was estimated that 50 Jewish families settled here. (This data was taken from the book by Hilda Jennings). She goes on to suggests that Brynmawr's situation right at the top of the valleys with the new railway network and good roads providing good communication to the other valleys coupled with Brynmawr "possessing what was said to be the best hotel in the district" made it an ideal centre for visiting salesmen. The Jewish Drapers followed what the Scotch Drapers had been doing, (or pack men if you prefer). Using the hotel as a base (*which would have been the Griffin Hotel which is now the Brynmawr Social Club*) they were able to ply their trade through the valleys.

By 1888 a strong Jewish Community had been established in the town (as reported in the Jewish Chronicle in 1889) and members gathered to worship in houses. Bailey Street may have been the site of one of the earliest houses used; it was often called Jews Row because of the number of Jewish businesses that were there. There was once a small stone lion on the roof of one of the houses, "the Lion of Judah" as it was called. Sadly a new roof was built and we lost the lion but we do have a photograph.

The lion was on the roof of what used to be Pauline's hairdresser; the shop became the Framing Shop now it's a take away on Bailey Street. ©Eifion Lloyd Davies.

Where the Jews congregated to worship, be it someone's house or a hall would be called a Synagogue. The Jewish family of Barnett Isaac put his house up to be used as a synagogue and at the first religious service held in the house a number of Christians stood outside in respectful silence and at the end of the service gave a sympathetic cheer.

Soon there was a need for a stable synagogue. Mr. William Weeks was approached to offer a piece of land in Bailey Street for the site of the proposed synagogue. Mr. Weeks was a cattle dealer and the synagogue was erected next to his premises. It was reported that *"a plot of land for the synagogue has been granted by a Christian friend".* It was also built by a Brynmawr firm, that of Messrs Jenkins and Sons.

With the congregation settled it was time to consider a suitable burial ground as previously Jews were buried at the Jewish cemetery in Merthyr. It seems the Brynmawr Jews fell out with the Merthyr congregation so a new cemetery was essential. A piece of land was purchased from Brynmawr Urban District Council in 1919.

Sadly the Tredegar synagogue was demolished in 1953, the Ebbw Vale synagogue was also demolished and the Brynmawr synagogue closed in 1965 and is now a private house. It's the first house up from the Fire Station.

There is much more to this story, visit:
"The Jewish Community of Brynmawr." by Harold Pollins.
"HOW 'GREENERS' CAME TO THE VALLEY." by Michael Wallach

The photograph was taken many years ago before the roof was altered

(The Lion of Judah is the symbol of the Hebrew tribe of Judah (the Jewish tribe). According to the Torah, the tribe consists of the descendants of Judah, (Yehuda) the fourth son of Jacob. The association between Judah and the lion can first be found in the blessing given by Jacob to his son Judah in the Book of Genesis and he gave that symbol to his tribe when he refers to his son Judah as a Gur Aryeh "Young Lion". The Lion of Judah is also mentioned in the Book of Revelation, as a term representing Jesus, according to Christian theology. (Information taken from Wikipedia).