

Forces Influencing Our History

One hundred years have elapsed since the official inception of Congregation Beth Israel. Seventy-five years have passed since the completion of the present synagogue. Judaism has been profoundly disturbed and cruelly tried in the seething cauldron of history from time immemorial to the present era. Jewry has known exalted dreams and bitter frustrations. In some measures our founders and loved ones also have suffered the ordeals that have been Israel's lot through the ages. They also have tasted the grapes of success and felt gratification in their efforts to establish a tabernacle to the service of God, both for themselves and for generations to follow.

The story of our congregation is part of the epic of the westward flight of Jews in search of freedom. These Jews brought to this continent along with their scars and memories of persecution their priceless baggage of ideals and practices. These have had their decided impact upon the ever-evolving American heritage, but their own way of life and culture were also profoundly influenced by what they found here.

The first permanent settlers in what is now these United States were 23 hardy souls who came in September 1654 to New Amsterdam, now New York City. They were permitted to make their homes in the new land on the condition that they would never permit their poor to become a burden to the general community. This order became an unflinching ideal for American Jewry throughout its history.

However, facts about early Bangor Jews are scarce. The research efforts of Professor William Otis Sawtelle of Haverford, Pa., indicate that Jews from Spain and Portugal settled in the area prior to the Revolution and the name of Lowe or Levi is mentioned by historians. The American Historical Society has brought to our attention that "Susman Abrams (b. Hamburg, Germany) is known to have settled in the area during the period of the Revolutionary War. First he lived in Waldoboro and Thomaston, but later he moved to Union, where he conducted a tannery for many years."

Though there were a few scattered Jewish individuals of Sephardic descent in the Bangor area, there was no "community" of Jews until the early 1840s. As late as 1849, the Jewish population of Bangor was estimated to consist of 12 families.

When the first meeting of the group of Bangor



Jews who formed the Beth Israel Society was held in October 1884, Jews had been living in Bangor for at least 40 years. And Bangor itself had existed as a settlement for more than 100 years.

One reason why the Jewish community of Bangor is relatively younger than that of many other cities of the Eastern Seaboard is that the Portuguese Jews, who formed the earliest Jewish settlements in most American cities, did not venture farther north than Rhode Island. Even the Sephardic congregation which existed in Boston in the early 1800s contained only a few Portuguese Jews, and was composed principally of families of German and English descent. These families, upon settling in America, had affiliated themselves with Portuguese congregations because they were accustomed to the Sephardic ritual, rather than the Ashkenazic, as practiced in the congregations established by the German Jews.

Hostility toward Jews began to increase in Germany; the period of enlightenment and tolerance was, alas, brief. The brotherhood of man, so eloquently proclaimed by Goethe and Lessing and fervidly echoed by the Jews of the ghetto, was confined to a few choice spirits. Germans were seeking a scapegoat for their frustrations and for the ignominious defeats lately heaped upon them by Napoleon. The Jews were at hand as usual. Obsolete discriminatory laws were revived. Baptism was demanded as the price of admission to the army or to any profession. Only the eldest son in each Jewish family was permitted to marry. Jews were allowed to deal only in second-hand merchandise. Again, with a streak of clarity that flashes through the most warped brain, the Germans recognized the Jewish spirit as alien to provincialism, militarism and bigotry. The masses as well as the leaders became anxious to exercise the leaven of Jewish conscience and reasonableness from their midst.

So, from the Germanic States, Jews came to America, bringing few worldly goods, but much courage and hope. Most of them remained on the Atlantic Coast where the mass production industries, especially the clothing trade, greedily absorbed all newcomers. More intrepid spirits and those who preferred the smaller village communities to which they had been accustomed in Germany, pushed farther north.

Bangor, an important river port in this period became host to a group of these "Deitchuks" in the early 1840s. This period marks the beginning of a Jewish community in Bangor. Jews came at a time of economic expansion. New England merchants were sending their merchandise to the new Western cities of Chicago and Cleveland, St. Louis, Savannah, and Memphis, to be distributed through the local territory. To these new trade centers also went the Yankee lad, who previously was initiated in business through peddling. This left a vacuum in New England, which Jewish peddling filled. Arriving in New York from Germany, Austria and Poland, young Jews started in American life through itinerant trade. With the passing of the Yankee peddler, they came North, to settle in New England and the Bangor area.

Congregation Ahawas Achim, founded in 1849, was the first Jewish organization established in Bangor. This group rented a hall for religious services and purchased a tract of land for a cemetery. Their language and the language they taught to their children was German. It was not the destiny of these Jews to build a lasting house of worship, and by 1856 most had either moved away or became assimilated with their gentile neighbors.

Origins Of The Founders

The transfer of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to the Russian Empire involved its Jews, not only in a change of government but, what was much more serious, in a change of treatment. It inaugurated a period during which the Jews were seldom left in peace by the government. Thereafter they were subjected to oppression, until, after more than a century of tyranny and misrule, czarist Russia itself was brought to an end by the first World War.

The czars were, in the main, fanatical foes both of Judaism and the Jewish people, resolved to stamp out the one and either to annihilate the other or else by various so-called reforms to bring about their gradual amalgamation with the general population.

Soon after the signing of the Peace of Tilsit (1807), however, a peremptory order was issued to the local authorities to carry out the decree of expulsion—one-third of all those affected to be driven out of the villages in each of the next three years, and the total evacuation by the end of 1810.

Napoleonic invasion immediately affected the Jews in Lithuania. The Jews displayed a remarkable loyalty to the Russian cause and rendered whatever practical services they could to the Russian troops. All these endeavors of patriotism were brought to the cognizance of Alexander I, who acknowledged them with satisfaction and promised that, after the return of peace, he would take steps to ameliorate the position of the Jews. After his spectacular victories over Napoleon, he abandoned whatever liberal outlook he had hitherto cherished. His successors did little more to ease the lot of their Jewish subjects and it was from this atmosphere that the Jews sought to escape to seek the freedom of spirit as well as economic betterment.

The exodus of the Jews to the lands of liberty in the West, especially to America, had begun in the previous reign; but from the pogroms of 1881 it assumed ever growing dimensions and poured forth in different directions. These pogroms were designed to implement the formula which called for the emigration of a third of the Russian Jews; they were to all appearances accomplishing their purpose. Shortly after the first outbreaks, Jews in large numbers began streaming toward the borders. The government of Spain, we are told, eager to atone for the expulsion of 1492, offered to receive the fugitives, but despite their distress, the offer failed to attract them. The great majority looked west toward the fabulous land across the ocean where, as they knew, many of their people already had found refuge and new life.

In May 1882, when the violence had run its course, the czar's government replaced it with a "cold pogrom," which had the merit of lasting longer and producing fewer repercussions in the world outside. It took the form of the infamous "May Laws," which barred Jews from the villages in the Pale of Settlement and forced Jewish traders in the town to keep their shops closed on Sundays and Christian holidays. The congestion and destitution in the towns increased and the Jewish tradesmen who competed with non-Jews received a staggering blow.

Although there were some Polish Jews among the earlier immigrants, it was not until the 1880s that mass immigration from Eastern Europe started. The brutal persecutions of Russian and Polish Jews, the bloody pogroms, and the Russian "May Laws" drove whole communities en masse to America. Within 20 years this wave of Eastern European immigration made the German Jews a minority in New England, as elsewhere throughout the United States. In only two or three generations, Bangor was able to develop an integrated Jewish community, one that was able to overcome religious, economic and social rivalries which originally existed between the immigrants from the Baltic states and those from Poland.

It is with this setting that the curtain rises on the first act of the Beth Israel story.

The beginning of the influx of Jews in the early 1880s from Lithuania and Poland found a few German Jews already established in Bangor. However, it soon developed that the two groups of Jews had many differences—so many, that it seemed for a time that there were more points of issue than there were ideas and ideals in common. The language barrier was another handicap to mutual understanding. These

Litvaks regarded Yiddish as their national language; they referred to it as "Jewish," and believed that it was spoken by Jews everywhere. Imagine their consternation on arriving in Bangor to find that their fellow Jews, for the most part, spoke no Yiddish—only German and English. True, the more learned of both groups were familiar with the Hebrew of the Scriptures and rabbinic books, but as a medium of everyday communication, Hebrew had about as much practical value as speaking classical Latin to a shopkeeper in Naples.

During that period, the established Jewish charitable agencies established by these German Jews became inadequate for the problem of the new group, and as successive waves of terror-stricken and penniless Jews arrived, the Lithuanian Jews formed their own relief organizations. Mr. and Mrs. Israel Frank rendered inestimable services in sympathetic understanding as well as financial aid. It was the Franks who took the initiative in organizing the first benevolent aid society in the community.

Furthermore, there was an entirely different background of feeling about the place of Jewishness in daily life. To the German Jews, civil, business and religious activities fell into entirely separated spheres; to the Lithuanian Jews, coming from self-contained Jewish communities, Judaism was much more than a religion—it was a complete way of life that governed the individual's secular, as well as his religious, actions. Probably, the greatest source of discord was the size of the new group. In 1897, the Jewish community of Bangor numbered about 50 families of which less than five families were of the German-Jewish community. The older community felt itself engulfed. Inter-marriage and self-isolation finally wiped out the last vestige of the German entity.

CHAPTER 2

The Founders Of Congregation Beth Israel

Maine in the early 1880s was quite different from the rest of the United States. Almost entirely concerned with the lumber trade and farming with barely a hint of industrialization, Maine was a generation behind the other sections of the country in its mode of life. It was a quiet, unhurried life, undisturbed by the noise of factory motors, unaffected by booms and depressions, isolated from America by an economy and a harsh winter climate that made for the retention of old Yankee customs and habits which other places were even then beginning to discard.

Into such a setting there had come a group of Jews from the small villages of the provinces of Kovno, Grodno and Vilna. They were the ordinary humble Jews, poor, and some of them not very learned in things Jewish, but all of them animated by a strong passion for preserving that Jewish life and those Jewish values they had cherished in the Old World. In the early years the few Jewish families in the city were like one family—there existed a neighborliness, an intimacy, a passion for mutual aid that were extraordinary.

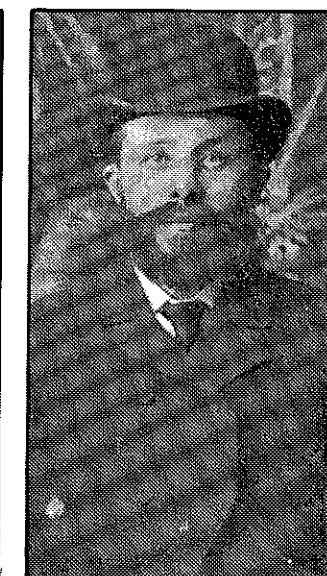
Ezriel Lemke Allen, the first of Beth Israel's founding fathers, arrived in Bangor in 1882. A "Grodner landsman," Ike Wolper, was peddling in the Old Town area and induced Allen to leave Boston and seek his fortune in the more sparsely settled regions of Maine. These pioneers were followed by Jacob Altman, Harry Cohen and Israel Goldman. Joe Byer, who was to become a vigorous leader in the Jewish community found his way to the Allen abode and here the nucleus of Orthodoxy and Zionism was established. A short time was to transpire with the arrival of Joe Bernstein, Marks Goldman, Philip Hillson and Simon Kominsky. These men constituted the first congregational group that numbered the traditional minyan of 10.

They were lonely, uprooted, displaced persons of their day. Coming together, they sought to find among themselves something of the familiar and spiritually secure life they had once enjoyed. The beloved Jewish ritual and ceremony, the body of tradition and practice which they had known in Eastern Europe, were precious to them. Hence they kept their records in Yiddish and adopted the ritual of the Jewish communities from whence they had sprung.

With increasing numbers, Jewish life began to take on a communal aspect, with Lemke Allen and Joe



Lemke Allen



Joseph Bernstein

Bernstein playing leading roles as the observant Jews banded together for worship. Tradition holds that they held religious services in their respective homes until the group became numerous enough to require larger quarters. They had no hazan, nor even a shohet, at the outset. With the arrival of Morris Golden ritual practices became formalized, for he was a highly qualified mohel and shohet.

It should be stressed that although this group of Jews joined together for worship, and probably were augmented on special occasions and high holidays by their co-religionists, travelers and solitary Jews from nearby towns, they did not establish a congregation in any formal sense. Beth Israel grew out of this loose association, but its regular life as a congregation did not begin until 1888. The early Bangor minyan had no name, no rules or constitution, and no officers or clerical leader.

Gradually, however, a degree of formality did enter into the religious life of the Bangor community, even though they had no house of worship of their own. For the High Holy Days in 1884, Lemke Allen, Ike Wolper and Joe Bernstein, in a formal note, acknowledged that they had "borrowed and received a Scroll of the Law" from Ohabei Shalom of Boston. They borrowed it "in order to fulfill the biblical injunction 'The Book of the Law' shall not depart from thy

It would be of great interest to write about each of the founders. Unfortunately, the facts are not available. Some of the founders no longer have any descendants among the present congregation. Others probably left Bangor and all that is known of the rest are dates of their birth and death from the cemetery records.

Of some, however, we do have accurate information and from the brief character sketches which follow, a pattern emerges which enables us to see the founders of the congregation as living human beings, rather than faded names on a dusty record.

Marks Goldman, the first gabbai, was born in Lithuania in 1862. He came to this country with Ezra Sarhazy and Yechiel Cooperstach and the three became friends and companions.

He was known as a strict disciplinarian, but had his moments of relaxation, particularly at weddings, at which the trio of Goldman, Cooperstach and Sarhazy consumed record amounts of liquid refreshment.

Grandchildren of Cooperstach relate that their grandfather ran a "private distilling business" and kept his boon companions well supplied with his product — which must have been one of merit, for Goldman lived to 89 and Sarhazy to 87.

Goldman served as gabbai from 1888 until 1897 and then moved to the Midwest. He was married twice and had eight children; three daughters by his first wife and three sons and two daughters by his second.

Ezriel Lemel Allen, affectionately known as "Lemke," was born in 1858 in a small town on the outskirts of Grodno. He arrived in the United States in 1882 and soon made his way to Bangor. Steamship records indicate that Mr. Allen booked passage to Bangor on the steamer Penobscot along with a "suitable stock of wares of all descriptions." All the pioneers had much in common. Most of them were all young

men, under 30. All but three were unmarried and all began their careers by peddling from town to town within a radius of 100 miles. In less than three years Lemke Allen was able to open a clothing store on Exchange Street. He had brought his wife, Julia, to the new land and here his first son was born. Arthur was the first offspring of the Beth Israel founders to be born in Bangor. He followed in the footsteps of his father and became a director when he was 21. He also served on the Building Committee in 1912. Lemke and Julia had four more children: Minnie, Sarah, Henry and Harry. Harry was a member of the Chevra Kadisha and was active in synagogue affairs.

Grandson Edward, son of Minnie, carried on the Lemke Allen tradition by serving on several committees and the board of directors. Edward also was active in civic and fraternal affairs.

Edward and Florence Allen had three children: Merrill, Max and Richard. Richard Allen still lives in Bangor, Merrill lives in Cape Elizabeth, and Max moved out of state. Florence, who is still a member of Congregation Beth Israel, has 11 grandchildren.

Israel Goldman was still in his teens when he came to America and helped organize the congregation. He was born in Grodno and was orphaned at a very early age. He engaged in a profitable peddling venture and later became associated with Hyman Lait in the "Yankee Clipper" door to door enterprise. He was a successful retail clothier and was known for his sharp wit. The story is told that when he bought a place of business in Washington County from a local financier, the former owner complained that he was selling only to get away from Jews who had begun to infiltrate into the area, and he didn't know where to move to be sure there wouldn't be any Jews around him. "That's easy," Goldman was supposed to have replied, "move to prison — you won't find any Jews there!"

CHAPTER 3

Building Of The First Synagogue

Hazan Goldenkopf, when he arrived in Bangor in 1895, brought with him an additional Sefer Torah on loan from Temple Ohabei Shalom in Boston. He noted that the rented synagogue quarters in the Granite Block on Park Street were quite small, but it was the energetic laymen who actually stimulated the reorganization of the Beth Israel Society and the construction of the first synagogue on the lot at 114 Center St. Indirectly, too, the arrival in New York of a compatriot, the renowned preacher and Talmudic scholar Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Vilna, spurred religious life by inspiring the communal leaders to organize themselves in a more definite manner. The outcome, a new synagogue and a congregation with formal rules and regulations, was of a national character rather than a purely local accomplishment. In 1897 the necessity for a new building became apparent. The minutes of the congregation record a memorandum signed by Max Cohen, Joseph Byer, Israel Goldman, Lemke Allen, Joe Bernstein, Harry Cohen, David Snyder and Simon Kominsky, as the board of directors, stating that they thereby formed themselves into a "congregation to be known and distinguished by the name of Congregation Beth Israel in the city of Bangor." Marks Goldman who had served as gabbai of the informal group known as the Beth Israel Society is no longer mentioned in the minutes. We must assume that he moved away as several itinerant peddlers already had done. Max Cohen, Harry Cohen and Simon Kominsky were immediately authorized to negotiate the purchase of the lot "not to exceed \$200."

These founders, drawing upon their experience with synagogal matters, recognized that at this juncture a formal organization had to be created. With Harry Cohen as acting presiding officer, a meeting was held at the home of Lemke Allen, to receive the report of the committee appointed to secure the site. Before that pressing business was presented, Cohen observed that, although it had been decided to buy a piece of ground, the congregation had no legal powers and their determinations were not binding on the members. To correct this situation he offered a resolution that those present should agree "that in order to promote our Holy Religion, and establish a proper congregation in this city," they form themselves into a legally constituted congregation, and bind themselves "one to the other that we will assist if required, to form a constitution, and strictly abide by same." The president was

instructed to consult with "lawyer Cook." Harry Cohen thereupon suggested that new officers be properly elected, and he forthwith divested himself of his own office. The other members of the committee followed suit. The people at the meeting proceeded to elect Max Cohen, president; Joe Byer, vice president; Morris N. Golden, secretary; and Harry Cohen, treasurer. At the same time two gabbaim were added to the officers: Simon Kominsky and Joe Bernstein, first and second gabbaim in the order named.

However, all did not proceed smoothly after the brave beginning. The Jews then in Bangor were far from affluent. The funds did not pour in overabundantly, although the membership subscribed nearly \$1,500. This sum reflected their ability and a genuine spiritual interest in the project, which as a start seemed to promise success. Almost as soon as the project had gotten under way, notice came from the owners of the Park Street building where the congregation was occupying a rented second-floor room, giving them notice to vacate immediately. The short notice compelled Max Cohen to apply for an extension, which in view of the positive building program, was granted.

The congregation was called together and informed that further funds were required before the Veazie National Bank would grant a mortgage loan. Max Cohen spurred efforts to raise \$1,000 within a few days. It was decided that, in order to secure the funds, the four cornerstones and the two doorposts would be sold to the highest bidder in return for synagogal honors, following the old Jewish custom. Simon Kominsky bought the first cornerstone for \$150, Harry Cohen the second for \$100, Max Cohen the third for \$85, and Morris Rosen the fourth for \$75. Israel Goldman bought the right-hand doorpost for \$50, and Joe Byer the left-hand doorpost for \$50. A total of \$510 was thus subscribed and the balance was raised by the general membership as part payment on seats.

At last the work on the building could proceed. On the west side of Center Street, about midway in the block from Cumberland Street to Garland Street, adjacent to the lot now occupied by the United Jewish Chapel, the first synagogue building in Maine began to rise. On Aug. 22, 1897, the cornerstones were laid with blessings asked for the generous men in whose names they were dedicated.