

... the story

of

Beth Israel

FORCES INFLUENCING OUR HISTORY

Seventy five years have elapsed since the official inception of Congregation Beth Israel. Fifty years have passed since the completion of the present synagogue edifice. 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 have also suffered the ordeals that have been Israel's lot through the ages. They have also tasted of the grapes of success and gratification in their efforts to establish a tabernacle to the service of God, both for themselves and for the 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 twenty-three 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 three hundred years of history.

However, facts about early Bangor Jews are scarce. The research efforts of Professor William Otis Sawtelle of Haverford, Pennsylvania, 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 Waldborough 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 1840's. 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 a hundred 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 further north than Rhode Island. Even the Sephardic congregation which existed in Boston in the early 1800's 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.

Reaction had set in 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 little of worldly goods, but much of 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 communi-

ties to which they had been accustomed in Germany, pushed further north.

Bangor, an important river port in this period became host to a group of these "Deitchuks" in the early 1840's. 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 peddlers 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 BETH ISRAEL 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, tsarist Russia itself was brought to an end by the first World War.

The tsars 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 an atmosphere such as this did the Jews seek to escape and 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 towards the borders. The government of Spain, we are told, anxious 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 towards the fabulous land across the ocean where, as they knew, many of their people had already 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 towns to keep their shops closed on Sundays and Christian holidays. The congestion and destitution in the towns increased and 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 1880's that mass immigration from Eastern Europe started. The brutal persecutions of Russian and Polish Jews, the bloody pogroms, and the Russian "May Laws" of 1882 which imposed new and grimmer civil and economic disabilities upon the Jews, drove whole communities en masse to America. Within twenty 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 has been able to develop an integrated Jewish community, and has been able largely 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 1880's 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 many 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 every day 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 sheer weight of numbers of the new group. In 1897, the Jewish community of Bangor numbered about 50 families of which less than 5 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.

