

Rabbi David Berent

The rabbi and his tall, fashionable wife were preparing to leave Lewiston for Florida when he granted me the interview I requested early in the summer. He was seventy-eight years old, going on fifty—alert, brisk, yet polite and very helpful. He opened the Universal Jewish Encyclopedia to the page showing his article, so that he could continue packing. His information showed that in 1942, of the 35,598 people in Lewiston, 1,100 were Jews. He selected Ehrenfried, Greenberg, and I. Isaacson as successful merchants in the 1800s from the old census records. I. Isaacson became a member of the Board of Trade, the city council, and the state legislature.

In the 1880s and 1890s immigrants from Russia made their way as peddlers to Auburn and Lewiston by way of Boston and New York City. By 1900–1910, many immigrants came directly from Russia to relatives and friends in Lewiston.

Religion came with the early settlers, but not until 1895 was a religious social center established on a main street. Congregation Beth Jacob, an Orthodox synagogue, was organized in 1907, but not until 1925 was a synagogue built. Dr. Morris Sprince served as rabbi until 1910; Rabbi Grau served from 1910 to 1930; Ralph B. Hershon was the rabbi from 1937 to 1940; and David Berent served from 1940 to 1975.

During these thirty-five years, Rabbi Berent became president of the Association of Rabbis; mediated between labor

and management; lectured for the Jewish Chautauqua Society; and lectured at University of Maine in Orono, St. Joseph College in North Windham, and at St. Francis College in Biddeford. He traveled the whole state, even to the Etskovitz home in Ft. Kent, where the automobile dealers had a mikva (holy bath), as well as a dairy kitchen and a meat kitchen. He also broadcast a weekly radio program over WCOU. Governors appointed him to various committees.

During his rabbinate, a twenty-four-voice choir and women participated in services, and families sat together. Some belonged to Beth Abraham in Auburn as well.

After he retired, Rabbi Berent served a synagogue in Deerfield, Florida, as a volunteer.