

Beth Israel Congregation



862 Washington Street • Bath, Maine 04530 • 207-443-4606

Beth Israel Congregation on its 50th Anniversary

by Dorice Povich Mensh - October 15, 1972

(References to Solovich have been bolded)

In the beginning there was Bath, then in came a few Jews to settle here in this city called Bath and this is where our story begins.

Back in the late 1880s Bath was still a completely gentile city. Everyone here was a staid and solid Yankee in the true sense of the word. Then in the very last years of the 1880s and early 1890s a few Jews found the path that led into this small city. Some came to stay, others with a pack on their backs came to sojourn, and soon those who came just to sojourn remained. Here they settled, opened their own businesses, married, begat children. Now a small step was made toward a Bath Jewish community.

Then came the turn of the century and slowly other Jews began to infiltrate Bath, at least a dozen families. And so it was until suddenly the country was faced with the World War I. Bath, with all of its shipbuilding yards, was hiring men by the scores. More housing and other places to live were in demand due to the influx of all these people. New businesses opened to cater to the demand, of various types and abundant merchandise. And who better to supply this than the acumen of our own people. And Bath Jews swelled to the glorious number of over 30 robust families.

Prior to this time there was always the problem of keeping kosher and of obtaining a simple place in which to conduct services. But perseverance and determination are some of our people's characteristics, so in the very early days they traveled to Portland. No three and four lane highways did they have, not even a one-way macadam lane, just an old dirt road over which they hooked old dobbin to the shay with all their baggage, their eyes seeking their port of destination to praise the Almighty.

Then came another plateau. Enough Jews had migrated into Bath that now they could have their own minyon. Gone were the dusty roads, the old horses, the bundles, the long ride, and the staying with friends who kindly took them in. Now was just the problem of finding a suitable place here in which to worship. Consider the skepticism evident by these Yankees to a new kind of people. Yet there were a few who showed compassion to this group who lived modestly and only wanted to pray. The YMCA was available and that was offered but with a stipulation, to have the services early because there was a meeting scheduled for the same day. Needless to say our people gratefully agreed. That was still a small step forward. Later another place was located: the hall of the Eagles. That was a small place in the building that is over the shop now occupied by Louie Couture called the Swett Building. From there another place was found and that was the Redmen's Hall over **Joe Solovich's** Standard Dry Goods Store, now known as the Mademoiselle Shop.

It was in this little hall that the momentum began with the realization that it was now time for Bath Jews to have their own home in which to worship. In view of the knowledge that there was strength in numbers and that now there was a preponderance of Jewish families than ever before, meetings were called to discuss the possibility and the probability of having a building of our own. There was at that time a row of small business buildings on Front Street that was later torn down to make the parking lot for the A&P and Sampson's Grocery Stores. On the second floor of one of these buildings was a small tailor shop owned by a young man named Harry Arenstam who with his wife and four small children were newcomers to Bath.

It was in this tailor shop that the first meeting was called and the embryo stage was started. This was in 1919. All was not smooth. The house was divided. Many were the skeptics and just as many were the optimists. Pros and cons were battered around. Today we would call them debates and discussions. Then they had other words for it. Matter over mind prevailed and the aye's had it.

Then one day I remembered, when I was a little girl at the time, I was sitting in the kitchen and my mother, Mrs. Nathan Povich, suddenly exclaimed. And when my mother exclaimed she was positive. "We have got to have a ladies society." She immediately called my sister Eva on the phone, told her of her brainstorm, and then and there they proceeded to call all the women and in a few days they all met in the Redmen's Hall.

My mother baked, made a fancy pillow cover which she prepared to raffle, and did. Then and there the ladies people's society was formed with a membership of twenty-six loyal souls. Naturally my mother was made president and my sister Eva was secretary. Since the hall was not always available and not very bright, plans were made to meet in one another's homes. The twenty-six who were the original attendants at that very first meeting and who therefore became charter members, were Madams C. Aric, H. Arenstam, H. Abromson, A. Bloom, H. Brown, M. Cohen, S. Green, B. Gediman, J. Goldstein, M. Goldstein, S. Gordon, S. Greenblatt, H. A. Isaacson, S. Levine, A. Miller, J. Mack, N. Petlock, M.S. Povich, M. Povich, S. Povich, H. Persky, **J. Solovich**, L. Small, S. Shanbausm, H.L. Savage, and M. Weinblatt. Within a few months others joined including Madams L. Avalon, H. Mack, I Smith, M. Singer, J. Davis, and D. Rosen from Brunswick. The first home to have been offered in which to hold the meeting was that of Mrs. Sam Levin. Shortly afterwards Bell became president.

The men's group forged ahead. A name was decided upon: Base Yisroael, Beth Israel Congregation, the house for the Jewish people. A site was located on which to build, the present one on which Beth Israel now stands.

Then came the big F (funds). By that time my father Nathan was the owner of the music hall building which had a large hall on its top floor. The problem of a temporary home was over. Never again did Bath Jews have to look for a place to pray. There they continued with their meetings and discussions and all methods of entertainment. At that time they were a young and vigorous group. The 2 oldest men were Mr. Isaac Mikelsky and my grandfather Mr. Simon Povich. The family men were the Povichs, the Millers, the Petlocks, the Browns, the Gedimans, the Greenblatts, the Weinblatts, the **Solovichs**. The sires of the groups, some of whom you see here today, had just turned 50. The others were the younger groups who were in their early 20s and 30s. These were the founding fathers.

A builder was then selected and fundraising was started in earnest. Each one pledged to the fullest extent but that was not sufficient. It was then decided that there must be other means of solicitation. However, it was decided that at first no more than \$2000 was needed for a start. Bath was very fortunate at that time to have had a young man from Boston related to Neiman Mikelsky by the name of Harry Cohen who was the next thing to a professional. It was through his efforts of campaigning around Bath to the gentile population that \$2400 was raised. The largest single contributor was Rupert Baxter of the Bath Trust Company who personally donated \$250.

Then it was suggested and followed through that the neighboring communities were to be contacted. A committee of 3 consisting of Morris Povich, Sam Levin, Sam Mack, and oftentimes Morris Cohen were appointed. Every Sunday they would ride to the various neighboring towns to present this situation. Success was varied. The records show that others donated their services. Rockland and Thomaston were solicited by Mr. Greenblatt and Mr. Petlock who brought back the total sum of \$43. Morris Cohen and Morris Povich rode to Gardiner and returned with \$23 and so it went on every Sunday. It was not easy; there were some refusals giving the reason that they had their own shuls to support as was the case of Old Orchard, even after Morris Cohen offered to conduct one of the religious services. Rebuffs had to be accepted with a smile. Undaunted these pioneers pushed onward.

And now for the lighter side: we had the hall (the music hall), we had the will, we had young people, we had prosperous times, and we had children, so why not fun. Entertainment was the forte of the day. We had singers and we had musicians. I will never forget Mr. Gediman and his guitar, an almost unheard of instrument of that day and especially from a European. We had dramatists, we had a toastmaster, and we had dancing, and then lots to eat, and we made money. Everyone had a good time and all looked forward to the next meeting.

The congregation proceeded with their meetings. A promissory note was made for \$3300 with 6% interest and signed by all of the members. And thus the Slavin property with a house and extra lot was finally in our possession. A motion was made and passed that the house be rented and revenue realized and so it was done. A charter was made and again everyone's signature was attached for a price depending upon the placement of the name. The bidding for name placement was spirited. I remember when my father came home with all of the details. We all were entranced. This was big politics. He had just paid \$52 so that his father's name (Simon) could head the list on the charter. The dickering continued. There were forty-two members and forty-two conflicting ideas on how to build a building, how far back, how close to the side, where to place the entrance, and variety of other suggestions. It is a good thing the builder, Mr. Tripp, was a patient man. Even the ladies, whose society was flourishing, were interjecting their opinion as to the contents of its interior.

Low and behold one day someone came by Washington Street to find my father out on the site with a couple of carpenters and some wood. When asked what he was doing he replied, "They are talking too much and not doing anything and we'll never get anywhere so I decided to go ahead and build" and he did and here we are. If he had not maybe we as decendents would have inherited the indecisions and not be seated here today to celebrate our 50th year.

A very detailed building contract was drawn up. Soon the frame was up. We had a building. Only money enough to finish the downstairs was available but we were happy. To us it looked like a palace. Then came the great day of the move to our permanent home. No march, no parade has ever excelled that day. Our good Lord must have been very happy for us for on that winter day of January 29, 1922 he smiled on us and gave us a sunny, clear, warm afternoon on which to conduct our all important, highly eventful ceremonies. Invitations were sent out all over the State and together with our own population, 250 people gathered there at the home of Mr. Charles Arik, our spiritual leader, to begin the march from the music hall and there on to the shul.

The festivities started with an auction at the hall. The key to the new synagogue was bid on and given to Samuel Povich who gained the honor of opening the door for the exercises. The right to have the honor to carry the Torah from the music hall to the synagogue was bought by Nathan Povich and at 5:00 o'clock pm, the processions started up Washington Street led by military veterans Samuel Povich, Henry Gediman and Solomon Greenblatt. The Holy Bible was carried at the head of the procession by Max Singer of Brunswick under a canopy carried by **Joseph Solovich**. The holy ark was carried by 4 men, one of whom was Max Kutz. A large American flag was carried by some of the men from the congregation and followed by the women with lighted candles. How impressive, how thrilling, at that time to have been able to hold our heads so proud without the status that the Jews enjoy today. The door was opened and all assembled inside. Morris Cohen sang the 30th psalm. Mr. Arik followed with a prayer and a chapter from the Torah was translated into English by Bessy Brown. The 91st psalm was read by Mr. B. Gediman and the national anthem was sung led by Henry Gediman. Three rabbis attended and spoke and a fine banquet was served by the ladies. The interior was beautiful. The feeling was ethereal and we were home. Monday morning the Hallow was read. Minyons were held every night and we had made our giant leap for Bath Jews. This was the beginning of our very first year.

If anything was ever started on shoestring, this was it. The men's group of the congregation managed the financial, religious, and cultural aspects while the Hebrew ladies society planned and executed the money-making activities. At first folding chairs had to be borrowed then later purchased. There was no heat except for a wood stove that stood in the corner and fed when the occasion arose. Many a cold morning one of the men had to come real early in the morning to start the fire so that it would be warm when the men for the minyon began to arrive. The kitchen was small and very inadequate: no hot water, no dishes of any kind. I remember one winter night when each family brought their own dishes to serve on for an affair, and late at night my brother Shirley and I dragged them home on a little cart so that we could wash them. We walked in those days for only three or four people had cars and they had them stored for the winter.

The ladies met twice a month. After the business meeting and the collection of about anywhere from about \$4 to \$8 for dues and raffles, once in awhile my mother would give a reading in Jewish. Then they would make and execute a plan for the next money-making event. One of the very first was the hanging of drapes for the mantle for the Torah. This was to take place for purity. The records show that the honor of hanging each drape was sold for \$1 to the following: Morris S. Povich, Morris Petlock, Morris E. Povich and hung by Nathan Povich, also to Morris Cohen, Samuel Povich, Horatio Mikelsky, Jacob Petlock, and Samuel Levin and hung by Mr. Arik. The winding and setting of the new clock brought \$1.75. Mr. Abromson gave \$1, Mrs. Sam. Levin 50 cents, and Jacob Petlock 25 cents. Then Mrs. Petlock wound and set the clock. Mrs. Nathan Petlock and Mrs. Morris Cohen made and donated the blue satin

mantle. The honor of hanging this mantle on the Torah was purchased by Morris S. Povich for \$10 and hung by Mrs. Povich. I remember how proud everyone was on that day.

Every month after that something was planned to raise money. There were whist parties, hot dog suppers, auctions, chicken dinners (a complete dinner for 75 cents), and entertainment which could have very well been the origin for the talent shows that came on television many years later. One can never forget the beautiful voice of Marsha Petlock, the dramatic recitations, the dancing, the singing and piano playing of the versatile daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Green and of course the Gediman family.

True, the money made was, compared to these days, not much. But to this little group it was very gratifying and everyone was happy. As the holidays rolled around it was a natural thing for the children of the congregation to put on the traditional Hanukkah and Purim plays. How well I remember Bessie and Sophie Greenblatt, Minnie Brown, Addie Gediman, Raymond Green, Louie and Dorice Miller, Evelyn and Jake Petlock, my brother Bernie, and me. We strung up a rope from one side of the hall to the other, hung a big strip of material over it, and we had a curtain. We made a stage, improvised some props, and produced a play. It was like playing the Palace. We were great.

In the summer picnics were planned. Thomas' Point, where they were most often held, was at that time admission free, but the tram charged 35 cents for adults and 10 cents for children and you brought your own lunch. That was high financing. However, we had all kinds of races and prizes and everyone enjoyed the day. How fortunate we were to have had Morris Cohen to lead us in our religious services. His beautiful voice was not only a gift from the omnipotent to him but also to our little congregation for it was soon afterwards that plans were forging ahead to finish the upstairs. Soon the plans were completed and we were in. Nor shall I forget how elated Mr. Cohen was for he said when he chanted the acoustics were so much better that he could feel a better lilt and range to his voice. How true were these words, for in our own way we all felt an inner lift.

Then came the exodus. Comparatively speaking, percentage wise, the Jews who left Egypt were not as many as those who left Bath. Prosperity was over. There were no jobs. Business was in a slump and those families who rode the bandwagon in, drove their moving vans out to from where they came. The Jewish population dropped to about a dozen families. Times were rough but undaunted, the congregation carried on and so did the Hebrew ladies society. Nothing was called off. Everything was continued as usual. Of course the money for all of these efforts was very little, and many times it was the complaint from the families that the support was coming from the same pocket, but the group persisted and continued.

Time sure does fly and soon it was 12 years later and a great day had arrived. Pennies for Shabbas candles sold by the ladies, passover orders made, suppers, parties, picnics, and entertainment had brought in enough money to pay for the building and on that great day of September 23, 1934, the mortgage was burned. With the aid of the Davenport Fund, to which we applied only for repairs, all money was now expended for the improvement and finishing of the edifice.

By this time some of the original members were not here any more and memorials were given by their families. The Ner Tamid, the eternal light, was given by my sister Eva in memory of our father, Nathan Povich. The center light was donated by the Petlock family in memory of their parents, Mr. and Mrs. Nathan Petlock. Later the Povich family gave the memorial plaque in memory of their parents, Mr. and

Mrs. Nathan Povich and their brother Morris E. Povich. This was given so that all could memorialize their loved ones.

Today times have changed. No longer do our gentile neighbors have to ask, "Do you have a Jewish church and where is it?" Now they know it is a synagogue and where it is. To me, as I look inside with nostalgia, I see my father in one corner with his boys around the table; in the other corner Mr. Petlock and his boys; Mr. Greenblatt and his boys; my mother standing in the back reading aloud to some of the other women huddled around her who could not read; Mrs. Greenblatt with another group. I can only think this: to me it is a shul, my shul, and coming back after so many years and looking at this sanctuary I can only see beauty and how it has endured. It looks like it is only one year old instead of fifty. I am reminded of the story of the two young Swedish men from Phippsburg who were hired to do the painting. There was much controversy at the time that the blue trim on the ceiling would not last. It has. It has never been painted and looks as fresh as when it was first done. Perhaps that is symbolical of our history. We have struggled, we have persevered, we have endured, and we have been blessed.

NOTE:

Dorice Povich Mensh was the daughter of Nathan Povich. Nathan's sister, Jenny Povich, married Joseph Solovich.

