The following draft narrative is made possible with funds awarded to Mt. Carmel Cemetery Association by Maine Humanities Council. Maine Historical Society provided a 1:1 in-kind match. The Project Manager and developer is Susan Cummings-Lawrence.

The purpose of the project is to tell a story about Anshe Sfard, a congregation that was located on the Portland peninsula from 1917-1983. The narrative below is just one part of the project. Susan is desperately seeking information about Anshe Sfard and any images, documents or ephemera of which you aware. Please e-mail her at slawrence1@myfairpoint.net .

References/notes are available on request.

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ANSHE SFARD: PORTLAND'S FORGOTTEN CHASSIDIC CONGREGATION

Although not much is commonly known about the United States presence of pre-World War II *Chassidic* Jews, there were many communities of Chassidim all over the country. Portland, too, had such a community, with its own synagogue in the Bayside area of the city. *Bas HaKnesses Anshe Sfard* members coalesced around traditions slightly different from those of their Maine Orthodox contemporaries. These practices were associated with their homes of origin, in this case Poland, which had been influenced by Jewish diaspora populations, originally from Spain, as they moved into and through Arab countries and beyond. As is typical of many religious practices, it is also likely that that certain communities of Chassidim sought to differentiate themselves further from other Jews by adopting the *Sephardic nusach.*

The prayer book used by this congregation is the same type that is still used by the Chabad Lubavitch, but it actually contains only a few minor differences distinguishing it from a typical Modern Orthodox *siddur*. The Chassidic group, Chabad Lubavitch, was founded in the late 18th century by Shneur Zalman of Liadi and takes its name from Lyubavichi, the Russian town where the group was based until the early 20th century. (Steinbock)

So, what is the connection to Sephardic practice? Chassidism owes much to *Kabbalah* and to 16th century Jewish mystic of Sephardic descent, Rabbi Isaac Luria.(note from Steve) He is considered the father of contemporary Kabbalah, elemental in Chabad thinking and practice. Because of their mystical background and outlook, some Chassidim follow the liturgical rites taught by classical Kabbalistic rabbis such as Luria. *Nusach Ari* is a liturgy based on Luria's custom, and *Nusach Sfard* is a similar liturgy based on Sephardic custom. For the most part, however, rather than having been descendants of Spanish Jews, both Anshe Sfard members and the Lubavitch community were Eastern European Chassidim, not Sephardim.

Early Days

The original Portland Chassidic group, most of whom either came directly from Poland or had Polish or other Eastern European ancestry, met before the turn of the century in different locations in the India Street area, including *Bet HaMidrash HaGadol* (Abrams' Shul) on the corner of Hampshire and Fore Streets, and after 1904 when it was built, in the basement of the old *Shaarey Tphiloh* on Newbury Street. Led by Abraham Siegal, Abraham Isenman and David Finkelman, in 1917, they constructed their own synagogue at 216 Cumberland Avenue designed

by the well-known and prolific architectural firm of Francis and Edward Fassett, located on Exchange Street. Unfortunately, drawings and blueprints have been lost, but the City of Portland building permit offers the most basic information.

The fifty years of reconstruction following the Portland fire of 1866, coinciding with European immigration in Portland and WWI, made for an exciting time of change and variety on the Portland peninsula. Architects, builders and investors were busy designing and erecting hundreds of new buildings to replace and improve upon those that were destroyed. According to the *Portland Directory*, by 1917, there were approximately seventy churches and synagogues in the city. The year before Anshe Sfard was built, Vaughan's Bridge over the Fore River, connecting South Portland and Portland, was replaced by the mile-long Million Dollar Bridge, making travel safer and more accommodating of the increasing number of motorized vehicles**.** During the boom that came with WWI, rail carriers such as the Grand Trunk Rail Road, with its terminus on Commercial and India Streets, were working non-stop carrying millions of bushels of grain for export and both American and Canadian soldiers during the call up of troops.

Maine Jews were predominantly Orthodox during this dynamic period of growth, immigration and early assimilation. Many, though, had other thoughts and plans even while attending an Orthodox synagogue. The year that Anshe Sfard was built, the Modern Synagogue Society, led by Elias Caplan and a few other men, worked with the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary of New York and obtained the services of a rabbi. They called themselves Temple Israel and met at the Young Men's Hebrew Association hall. But internal conflicts and outside pressures from the Orthodox were too powerful to overcome and the group's efforts subsided in 1919. They remained relatively quiescent until the mid-1940s when Conservatives gained strength and numbers and were thus able to make the transition from marginality to provisional acceptance.

Even before 1920, the assimilation process was well underway. The nation-wide Americanization movement, intended to mollify citizens feeling threatened by foreigners and to boost immigrant assimilation, begun in post-war 1922 and continuing through 1945, manifested itself in Portland through classes offered at nearby North School at the foot of Munjoy Hill. Many Jewish businesses and mission-driven organizations for both men and women were being established at this time. Synagogues, including Anshe Sfard, developed sisterhood groups and various *chevrei kadisha*. Membership in non-Jewish civic groups came later, but the groundwork was being laid for the nearly full integration of the 1960s.

Portland Orthodox communities struggled, as others did nationally, to negotiate the territory between traditional religious practice and adaptation to new societal demands and influences. In spite of the energy required to achieve and maintain this balance, they continued to expand, reaching high levels of institutional affiliation and activity through the 1970s. Also continuing to grow during this period, and to establish itself as an active congregation striving to meet the needs of its members, Anshe Sfard purchased property on Hicks Street in Portland, and in 1924 it had its own cemetery. Years earlier, the *chevra kadisha* of the founding Chassidic families had purchased a small plot in the same location; it was later incorporated into the larger cemetery. Mt. Carmel Cemetery, adjacent to Mt. Sinai Cemetery founded in 1894, shares part of its eastern boundary. It currently has over 300 burials, the latest in 2013. Longtime trustees, cousins Gerald and Arthur Cope, still maintain oversight.

Hard Times

Anshe Sfard's arc was brief, however. The synagogue, erected in 1917, was closed for good in only fifty years. In the 1940s and 1950s, the thriving Jewish communities of Bayside, Munjoy Hill and India Street began to disperse, making their way off the urban peninsula to the Woodfords area. Temple Beth El, a Conservative congregation a long time in the making, formed in 1947 and met briefly at 509 Forest Avenue before moving into its permanent location on Deering Avenue in 1950. Recognizing the need to keep up with his own members' move to the suburbs, and in the hope of forestalling any Conservative affiliations, Rabbi Bekritsky of Shaarey Tphiloh urged the construction of a new building on Noyes Street in 1954. Furthermore, Rabbi Bekritsky's response to Conservative Judaism in the community was swift and sharp. He was dedicated to thwarting the creation of this community and no doubt hoped that proximity to Beth El would have a salutary effect. The Jewish Community Center stayed at the old Pythian Temple building at 341 Cumberland Avenue, acquired in 1938, until it also moved to Ashmont Street in Woodfords in 1985. It was preceded by the Portland Jewish Funeral Home which moved from Locust Street to Deering Avenue in 1974.

Anshe Sfard remained for several more years at its spot where Franklin Street and Cumberland Avenue met. As the Portland Jewish community suburbanized, Anshe Sfard fell on hard times. Members left to join synagogues in locations more convenient to their new homes or for other reasons. Records and Judaica were rescued by Morris Isenman and stored in his garage for forty-five years, until they were donated in 2010 to Maine Historical Society. The three *Torahs* were given to local synagogues and to one in Israel. Thus far, it has not been possible to identify the two in Portland. The two *yahrzeit* plaques went to Etz Chaim Synagogue at 267 Congress Street and are currently hanging in the first floor chapel. Sometime in the mid to late 1960s, Anshe Sfard was abandoned and boarded up. It disappeared from the *Portland Directory* in 1967, and on August 5, 1983 the building was razed.

Besides the expected immigrant drift to suburbia, by the mid 1950s the blight of urban renewal had hit the adjacent India Street and Bayside areas hard. Whole neighborhoods were torn down—among the first to go were Vine, Chatham and Deer Streets in 1954. Later in the 1960s, more would go to accommodate a cross-town throughway, Franklin Arterial, and a large housing complex, Franklin Towers. On Franklin Street itself, many families in this ethnically diverse area were forced to leave as their multi-family houses were demolished. Only two or three buildings on this street were spared out of approximately one hundred. Upper Wilmot, upper Chapel and Quincy Streets, among others in the Bayside area of Portland, were also erased. All around Anshe Sfard, apartments and small businesses vanished leaving the synagogue in decrepit solitude amid parked cars and whizzing traffic. Today, a parking lot and a long stretch of asphalt have taken the place of this once lively neighborhood that for a hundred years had seen homes, churches, synagogue, Chinese laundries, stables, civic organizations and family businesses on streets lined with elms.

There were a few other owners of the Anshe Sfard building after its board of directors sold the property. Finally, EC Jordan Engineering purchased the building and oversaw its demolition. Many in the Portland Jewish community, and certainly the general public, have no idea that the congregation—or indeed the neighborhood—ever existed.

The Building

The synagogue building itself —a flat-roofed brick box with a pointed façade and concrete steps— was not very interesting. Although there were a number of stained glass windows, it has

not been possible to ascertain the design and colors, assess the workmanship or identify the artisan. The interior of the synagogue was typical of the Ashkenazic style of the time, set up in the same way that *Adat Israel*, later known as *Etz Chaim* (1921), on Congress Street, and Shaarey Tphiloh on Newbury Street, were arranged; *ark* in the front of sanctuary and the *bimah* in the middle. The second floor was a three-sided loft where the women sat. The kitchen was in the basement. There probably was no *mikvah*; if anyone needed the use of a ritual bath, the one at the rear of Shaarey Tphiloh a few blocks away was available, and later there was one at Etz Chaim up the street. The interesting and unusual aspect of this synagogue, besides the aforementioned *minhag* and *nusach* of the congregation, was the interior design.

A photo taken on Demolition Day, August 5, 1983, shows, amid the rubble, two wall paintings located on the north-facing interior wall of the building, the façade, on either side of where the ark was located. Although difficult to make out, one appears to be a rendering of an aqueduct, perhaps meant to evoke the one at Caesarea on the coast of Israel between Tel Aviv and Haifa. The other may be olive trees. (I may have sanctuary orientation backward.)

In his book, *Resplendent Synagogue: Architecture and Worship in an Eighteenth Century Polish Community*, architectural historian Thomas Hubka describes in great detail the history of Polish wooden synagogues and their fantastical paintings that often covered the interior of the synagogues from floor to the tip of the domed ceilings. The many color plates and black and white photographs comprise a wide range of illustrations taken from many sources. Common motifs are animals, including those never seen by Eastern Europeans, calligraphic painted prayers, and the signs of the zodiac. The Gwozdziec Synagogue, which is the focus of his study, has around the uppermost tier of its domed ceiling, all twelve of the symbols. (Hubka)These can be seen in detail at www.handshouse.org

Hubka posits several theories to help us understand the possible historic associations and antecedents of the Gwozdziec wall paintings. What meaning the Anshe Sfard paintings might have had for the artists and the Portland congregation, or what role they may have played in Jewish tradition at the time, is not clear. We can nevertheless imagine that they are connected, however tangentially, to the artistic and religious traditions of the Polish communities that Hubka describes and from which Anshe Sfard congregation members likely emigrated.

Carl Lerman, a former Anshe Sfard member, recalled that there were paintings of the zodiac symbols on the walls of the sanctuary. Although that assertion has not yet been confirmed by other interviewees, an engineer overseeing the demolition did recall a “mural.” Gerry Cope describes a blue ceiling painted with clouds. Coupled with the images of the paintings in the Schechter photographs, we may conjecture that they did exist, especially with the knowledge that they were commonly used in both the Polish synagogues of the 18th century and on mosaic synagogue floors in Israel built in late antiquity, in the 4th to 6th centuries. (Their function was not strictly decorative, but served as a representation of the calendar and a framework for annual synagogue holidays and rituals.)The existence and meaning of such paintings at Anshe Sfard, and the circumstances of their creation, may be proved or disproved with further research.

Animals— real, and eschatological, such as *behemoth* and *leviathan*—were very common among Polish synagogue wall paintings. The American Folk Art Museum, Manhattan, in

2007, mounted an exhibit, ”Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses: The Synagogue to the Carousel,” featuring many representations of carved wooden animals, from ark ornaments to carousel horses, created by Eastern European Jewish immigrants to America between 1880 and 1920. Although it is not known that there were any animal paintings in Anshe Sfard, we do have a carved wooden *nesher* that sat atop the ark. The eagle is one of the creatures used to represent among other things, air, one of the four elements, in Kabbalistic sources such as the *Zohar*. The eagle is also an important Biblical creature. Such carvings were commonly made by Ashkenazic artisans and used both religiously and commercially in items such as *aronei kodesh* and cigar boxes.

To the artisan who carved the Anshe Sfard eagle and to this congregation, it could have been merely a type of decoration to which they were accustomed. We don’t know if the artisan was local or if the carving was commissioned to a New York craftsman. We don’t know if these were men who pursued the study of Kabbalah and were knowledgeable of its enormous complexity, or if they were simply aware, as so many are today, of its most superficial symbology.

Conclusion

This investigation has revealed some important areas for future inquiry; there is much to discover about this synagogue.

First of all, it has been extremely difficult to find information about the religious practices of this congregation. The members probably were genuinely Chassidic, but no *siddurim* or other liturgical sources have been located. Respondents, who were very young when they last attended a service, are not able to describe the liturgy. It is agreed that there certainly were differences in the traditions, but they were probably very small ones.(Ira Robinson)Further, we want to know more about its founders and members over its fifty year lifespan. What Polish or other Eastern European towns did they call home? Why did they leave? Why did they choose Maine? How did they make their living? What were the women up to? Why exactly was this the one Portland synagogue that seems to have had amicable relations with other congregations?

The building itself presents another area of investigation that is far from complete. What were the interior walls really like and what was their story? What did the members think about the paintings? How did they come to be made? Who fashioned the ark?

As with so many other extinct synagogues, both nationally and in Maine, little is known. Preservation and documentation were often rudimentary at best. In fact, such tasks sometimes occur under difficult circumstances well after a congregation’s demise. There may have been interdicts regarding photographs being made in the sanctuary. Photographs of the interiors of synagogues were not *de rigueur* then as they are today. Where would synagogue websites and Facebook pages be without highly pixilated images of the latest window designed by a famous artist or the most recent rescue of a once beautiful and thriving Lower East Side shul? New synagogues, even in Maine, are designed and constructed for millions of dollars and photographed within an inch of their lives. Every event is recorded. But this is usually not done for historic or preservation purposes.

It is a fact that humans think and act ahistorically. Sticky photos are piled in cardboard boxes stored in basements, “junk” is tossed into the Dumpster, documents are indiscriminately

selected to be buried in *genizot* and forgotten and valuable objects make their way to garage sales and are sold for pennies.

We think we invented everything. No matter in which century we live, we read or hear tales of long ago and ask ourselves why they didn't see things *then* the way we do *now*. And so on. We know this. And we know that life moves inexorably forward. Still, it can be sad and frustrating to look back at the slow death of a congregation and its home—dwindling membership, the vacant building, the stacks of moldy prayer books. Twenty years later it is as though this dynamic, forward-looking community never existed. No building, no images of the building except for demolition photos taken by the local paper, very few surviving former members and even fewer memories. There is no memorial marker to jog memories or to prompt investigation. Just a parking lot.

Susan C. Lawrence
Maine Jewish History Consultant
Maine Historical Society

Slawrence1@myfairpoint.net