

Busy, busy Ada Greenblatt

By Susan Lamb

BATH — She is better known than most city officials in some circles, and newcomers to town are more likely to call on her before opening a checking account at a local bank.

Described by Down East magazine as Bath's Dean of Realtors, Ada Y. Greenblatt is practically a one-woman institution.

At one time or another she has sold nearly every sizeable commercial property in the downtown business district, and most residences along an elegant stretch of Washington Street. Ads billing her as "your 24-hour honest and reliable real estate and insurance broker" have made her the first contact for many new residents searching for homes or apartments.

But prominence was slow in coming for this daughter of a hardworking, industrious Jewish couple who immigrated from Lithuania to Boston in 1914.

Ada was the third of seven children born to Solomon and Goldie Greenblatt, a tailor and dressmaker who soon uprooted again to settle in this shipbuilding community during its heyday. Her father made periodic trips to Boston to purchase fabric remnants which were sewn into suits at his shop on Front Street, where her brothers Isear and Abraham now run their wallpaper and paint supply store.

The family's dream of striking it rich quick in America was soon shattered by the depression, however. The financial collapse dashed hopes of higher education for the Greenblatt sons and the musically-inclined daughters.

Ada had considered studying at the conservatory, teaching or nursing careers, "but in those days the cost of higher education was dear," she recalled. She went to work for the late real estate/insurance agent Roger Skillings, later managing his office before a local banker encouraged her to branch out on her own about 20 years ago. While there were only a handful of brokers in Bath and only several women working in the real estate profession in Maine when she started, she soon learned that the male-dominated business community was not overly responsive to the prospect of dealing with a woman.

"It was rough. Many of the attorneys and bankers weren't keen. It was alright as long as you worked for someone else," she recalled, adding a number of professional men merely thought she was in business to make money for an extra household gadget. But couples she showed homes to were receptive, particularly the women.

"The women were very good when I was showing houses, because they figured a woman would know more about what they wanted," Ada discovered. It took up to 10 years of work-aholic dedication to prove to the business community that she viewed her business as a career, rather than a hobby.

Ada Y. Greenblatt has since served as president of the Androscoggin Valley Board of Realtors, the forerunner of the local

and national real estate boards. She has been equally active in civic organizations, holding down officer posts in the Cosmopolitan Club, serving as a former director of Bath Area United Way, and memberships with Bath Memorial Hospital Auxiliary, the Bath B'nai Brith Auxiliary, the Northeastern New England Council of B'nai Brith, and former member of the Bath Zoning Board of Appeals for nine years.

The professional triumphs have been accomplished without a sacrifice of femininity. She is aggressive in business dealings without being offensive, preferring a soft-sell approach to an abrasive hard-sell pitch. She always appears attractive in smartly conservative clothing, and refuses to discuss her age. Her hectic schedule leaves little time for socializing, but she manages to find time for one true love — the violin. An accomplished violinist, she has played regularly with Portland Community Orchestra for the last eight years.

Greenblatt prides herself on finding homes for clients of all economic backgrounds ("I don't care if they have a million dollars or a sou," she is fond of saying). Her advertisements in local newspapers, Down East magazine and prestigious publications such as The Wall Street Journal draw diverse inquiries, including many from young couples who aspire to become homeowners, some with unrealistic aspirations.

"I've had letters asking for a lovely log cabin with a fireplace, running water and sewage, that is on a beach where you can go swimming but not far from churches and schools — for \$5,000," she says incredulously. "Ridiculous!"

She meets many young couples who, after visiting banks and inspecting local properties, find high interest rates have shut the door to home ownership. She harkens back to the depression era of her childhood, and advises them to cut back on luxury expenses and save for the future.

"If people would only look back and try to remember," she pleads. She recalls her parents scrimped to save money finally to buy their 233 Washington St. home, where she now lives, at a time when there were no FmHA or Veterans Administration loans.

"It was just as hard to save on those salaries then as today.... People are more impatient now. They are led to believe they can have everything," she maintains. True to her heritage, she advises young couples to "pinch the penny now, try to save and cut down on the things they think are so necessary."

Greenblatt is disturbed by another trend which she describes as over-glorification of the real estate profession. Although she admittedly has made a comfortable living from the trade, she scoffs at those who view the field as lucrative.

"I was one of the first women in the state to have a real estate license, even as a salesman. At that time you didn't have everybody who could read and write in the real estate field," she adds. "Now every other person that you meet is a broker or salesman."

She shies away from multiple listing associations and prefers the status of an independent broker, which she believes offers a more personal, trusting relationship with clients. She realizes the public has an image that brokers make a killing but points out that sales are few and far between, particularly in these days of high interest rates, and that inflationary increases in the cost of gasoline and advertising make huge dents in commissions.

Her eyes light up with amusement when telling an anecdote that occurred several years ago, when she invited a high school student interested in pursuing a real estate career to spend time at her office.

"He thought all you had to do was see a house for a couple hundred thousand dollars and get your commission," Ada remembers. One day, after accompanying her on numerous tours of listed properties ("It yielded no sales, he unexplicably failed to show up at her office as scheduled."

"I found out he went back and looked at another book on careers," she muses.