

A history of the Bath Synagogue

By Nancy Heiser

Times Record Contributor

Isadore Singer recalls that as a boy growing up in Brunswick, he would attend Jewish services at a fire department building or at the old Unitarian Church in town. In the Jewish faith, all that is necessary to hold services is a minyon, or group of 10 worshippers, and an educated lay person to lead, so during the early part of this century area Jews were able to hold services without the benefit of a synagogue or a rabbi. Occasionally a rabbinical student from New York or Boston was hired for services on the High Holy Days: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Down the road in Bath, Jewish worship was similar. Small numbers of Jews met in the music hall or the YMCA and held services. But by 1919, they had formally organized into a congregation and were discussing the possibility of building a synagogue. The population of Bath had swelled during the war years to meet the demand for shipbuilding. Many Jewish families were among those who came as immigrants.

The story of the Beth Israel congregation in Bath is not unlike the history of many other houses of worship — a small group of dedicated people felt the need and set about raising money.

On a recent evening, Donald Povich, a current member of the congregation, and Isadore Singer, the congregation's president, met with a reporter and shared their knowledge of its history.

Povich had been doing a little informal research on his own into the story of the temple. His grandfather, Nathan Povich, was one of the founders. Unfortunately, there is little written material available. Povich had access to taped conversations with older members of the synagogue. He also shared a report Frances Smith, a longtime member of the congregation and wife of Dr. Joseph Smith, wrote in 1962, on the occasion of the temple's 40th anniversary.

In 1919, some members were all for the idea of a house of worship, and some were opposed, saying it couldn't be done. The congregation had just 40 members at that time. The name, Beth Israel, which means "House of Israel," was decided upon, and a vacant lot and an adjacent house on Washington Street were chosen as the site.

The group decided they needed \$2,000 to start, and they set about raising money. In Bath alone, they raised \$2,400. Even non-Jews contributed to the new building. Rupert Baxter, of the Bath Trust Co., personally donated \$250, quite a large sum at the time. Later, the Davenport fund granted an additional \$750.

Some of the men from the congregation set out in teams of two and three to other communities — Gardiner and Rockland among them — to solicit funds. In 1920 the group took out a promissary note for \$3,300 at 6 percent and bought the Salvin property on Washington Street. The next year the temple was built on the site.

On Jan. 29, 1922, there was an opening celebration, led by Charles Arik, the resident rabbi. Two hundred and fifty people, many from out of town, gathered at the old music hall, which was located at the corner of Center and Washington streets. They marched up Washington Street carrying the Torah, or the Jewish Bible, a large American flag, and candles, to the new temple.

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"In those days, they were constantly raising money," said Donald Povich. Even the opening celebration was an occasion for fund raising. His grandfather, Nathan Povich, paid for the honor of carrying the Torah. Later his father, Morris Povich, paid \$10 for the privilege of hanging the mantle on the Torah.

The notebooks of the ladies auxiliary, the Bath Hebrew Ladies Society, shed some light on the flavor of the early days of the synagogue. As might be expected, socializing and fund-raising were the primary functions of the group. But occasionally one of the members would read a story in Yiddish to the group. The notes from the '20s and '30s are partially written in Yiddish.

In another example of the mix of old and new, "the women met and tacked a quilt in good American fashion," Frances Smith wrote in February of 1923. At the same meeting, they ordered their Passover matzos (unleavened bread) directly from a supplier in Cincinnati.

When the population of Bath dwindled again after the war boom, the exit naturally included some Jews. The Bath Israel congregation dropped to about a dozen families. However, the congregation was still spiritually and financially alive. In the early '30s, the congregation burned the mortgage.

"The story obviously didn't end at the beginning," said Povich. Another surge of people came to the Bath area just before and during World War II. Some were Jewish families with eight or 10 children. The congregation hired a series of live-in rabbis, who came from away, to run the Hebrew school and conduct the services. But by 1942, it became too expensive to have a permanent rabbi, so they

started having lay people as teachers and readers. "In those days many older people were very knowledgeable," said Povich. The congregation stayed intact.

"For 40 years, the key man in this congregation was Abraham Kramer," said Povich. Kramer was president of the temple from the 1940s to the early 1980s. "He conducted the services, he ran the funerals; he really was Mr. Synagogue all those years," said Povich.

Those years were active ones for the congregation. There were many social events, services and a school. For the High Holy Days, the congregation hired itinerant rabbis or students to hold services. Bowdoin students were occasionally hired to teach Sunday school. Of this time in the congregation's history, Frances Smith wrote, "The '50s are really ours. We are of age . . . we are mature. We have gone through adolescence and early years bearing all the scars . . . We have seen a world shattered, a people partially destroyed, and a new nation born."

No story of the Beth Israel congregation is complete without mentioning Stanley Sperber, the young itinerant from Brooklyn who came to conduct Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services in the mid-60s and continued to come for about 15 years. He was a graduate student in music when he was first hired, a camp counselor at a New Hampshire, who had seen an ad in a Jewish newspaper for a cantor at services at the Beth Israel congregation. Having had no experience, he, nevertheless, was hired on the spot by Abraham Kramer. That first year he quickly captured the hearts of the congregation.

This "adorable hick from the

city," as he was called by Janice Povich, returned for several years to act as rabbi, cantor and narrator during the High Holy Days. Even as he grew in stature in the international music community — Sperber became conductor of Rinat, the National Choir of Israel — he continued to return to the Bath synagogue to conduct services. His role in the Beth Israel congregation was the subject of a Los Angeles Times newspaper article in 1980.

"After Mr. Kramer died, many members thought the congregation was on the rocks," said Povich of the latest decade. But it has had a rebirth recently, as new people have moved into Bath and surrounding communities and mixed with the old and shown an interest in keeping the congregation alive. This year High Holy Day services are being conducted at the temple by Samuel Feldman, a student at the Hebrew Theological Seminary in New York.

Nancy Heiser of Brunswick is a free-lance writer.

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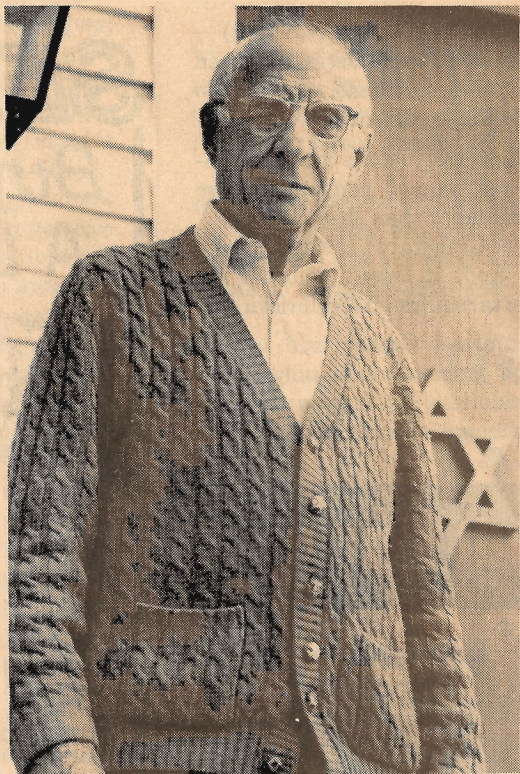
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Isadore Singer is currently president of the Beth Israel Congregation. (Photos by Richard Connelly)