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Beth Israel Congregation on Its 75th Anniversary by Donald M. Povich (1997)

Donald M. Povich

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On January 29, 1922, a parade was held ST on the streets of Bath the likes of which was never held before and will never be held again. The procession began at the Music Hall, which was located on the corner of Washington and Center Streets, and proceeded north on Washington Street to the site of the newly finished Beth Israel Synagogue at 862. The children of the congregation had gathered at the home of Rabbi Charles Arik on High Street and had marched, carrying small flags, to the assembly point. The march was led by three military veterans, Henry Gediman, Samuel Povich and Solomon Greenblatt. Following them came several men of the congregation carrying a chupa (canopy) under which was the holy Torah held by Max Singer of Brunswick. Immediately behind the Torah came the Holy Arc supported by four men, who were followed by the children carrying their flags. Next came the remaining men of the congregation bearing a large American flag and, lastly, the women each with a lighted candle.

Thus on this winter night in 1922 a dream was begun. It was first dreamed by poor immigrant families who began arriving in Bath in the 1870's and whose number grew over the next four decades. Small in number and always facing hardships, they never gave up their struggle to build a synagogue. They raised funds at every opportunity, often pennies at a time, until at last, with the help of Jewish communities throughout Southern Maine, their own efforts and the efforts of local non-Jews, including the president of the bank from which they obtained a mortgage, they raised the necessary five thousand dollars, signed the contract and began construction in 1921.

These early settlers did not have great resources. They came mostly from the poverty and degradation of Eastern Europe. They did not have great talent. They did have a burning desire for a home of their own. They had formed a congregation and they had met in various halls, at the YMCA and in their own homes and now, at last, they had a building. Although it was an empty shell, and many years and much hard work would be needed to complete the Synagogue as it is today, the founders were justly proud. This

fulfilled dream has endured for seventy - five years and gives promise to live for many years to come.

This year ,1997, Beth Israel celebrates their building's seventy-fifth anniversary with a number of events both cultural and social. On April 12th a grand event was held at the Sewall house on Washington Street. Mark Persky provided music for dancing . Hor d'oeuvres , desserts and drinks were served. Rabbi Smith and several members spoke of the accomplishments of the synagogue past , and its plans for the future. A large enthusiastic group of people attended and deemed the celebration a great success.

The congregation is about to publish a cookbook containing the member's favorite recipes which will be a fine addition to any kitchen.

At the Shabbat evening service on May 16th Donald Povich will speak to the congregation. The title of his address will be " Do You Believe in Miracles.?"

A panel of local rabbis is being contacted to present a program in the fall on Judaism in rural Maine. Other programs are in the planning stage for this year long celebration .

Don Povich