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## Beth Israel History by Donald Povich

Donald M. Povich

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Every history of Judaism in Maine begins with the first Jewish settler in Maine. His name was Susaman Abrahams and he came to Waldoboro on June 2, 1875, just nine years after the Revolutionary War. He lived at times in Waldoboro, Warren and Thomaston. He was a rag buyer, a tanner and a peddler. The latter occupation could have brought him to Bath as it was the habit of peddlers to travel and Bath was only twenty-five miles away.

If Susaman Abrahams was in Bath is a matter of conjecture. What is known is that the first true Jewish presence came about some hundred years later, in 1880, when a Mr. Goldstein had a clothing store in the Church Block on Front St. in Bath. In 1883 S. A. Issacson had a clothing store at the same location. Neither Goldstein nor Issacson were true Bath residents. Issacson did board at the Sagadahoc House in Bath but he probably came from Lewiston.

One year later a business known as the Boston Bargain Clothing Company or the B.B.C.C. opened in Bath and it was managed by Bert Filene whose family of German Jewish background was the founder of Filene's Department Stores.

The first Jewish family, who was truly a permanent resident of Bath, was that of Louis Mikelsky who arrived in Bath in 1886. The Mikelsky family, which consisted of parents and nine children, was in fact on its way from Rockland to Boston by train when one of the children became ill in Bath. Largely due to the kindness of a local druggist who helped the sick child, the family halted their journey and remained in Bath.

In the decade of the 1880's and into the first decade of the twentieth century more Jewish families began to arrive. Mostly these families were immigrants from eastern Europe and many of them started out as peddlers .



After the Civil War, with the great expansion to the West, many of the young Yankee peddlers moved westward and their places, in locales like Maine, were filled by these new European arrivals.

These new Jewish families, many of which were large, with eight or nine children, formed the nucleus of the founders of what is now the Beth Israel ( House of Israel) Synagogue.

Owen in his History of Bath describes these people this way, "Like the Pilgrims of an earlier day, they brought their religion with them and did not wait for numbers to begin organizing."Thirty-nine names appear on the founding charter of Beth Israel including: Greenblatt, Gediman, Povich, Brown, Petlock, Miller, Cohen, Kutz and Solovich.

Beth Israel was founded in 1919 and meetings and services were held in various halls around the city. In 1922, the shell of the building which now stands at 862 Washington Street was completed. Over the years, in small phases, the interior was finally finished.

On Jan. 29, 1922, a ceremony was held officially opening the new building. A parade started at the Music Hall on the corner of Washington and Center Streets and proceeded up Washington Street to the Synagogue. The parade was led by Solomon K. Greenblatt, then President of the Congregation, followed by members carrying the Torah ( The Five Books of Moses), followed by the men of the congregation carrying a huge American flag. Lastly, marched all the women of the congregation carrying lighted candles. Having thus opened the doors, the synagogue remains active to this day.



The first Rabbi of Beth Israel Congregation was Charles Arik. He was followed by a secession of Rabbis until the late nineteen forties when the synagogue was no longer able to bear the expense of professional service. At that time it became a totally lay leader organization a tribute to the desire and dedication of its members.

Despite the end of World War One and the great depression the synagogue remained viable with the addition of new families through the period.

No history of the Beth Israel Congregation, however brief, is complete without the mention of Abraham Kramer. Mr. Kramer came to Bath in 1942, to operate a grocery store. Shortly after, he became president of Beth Israel and he remained so until his death in the mid 1980's. Over all those years he was as close to a rabbi as a lay person can be. He conducted all the major services, led all the minor holiday services, was a representative to the community at large and conducted all the funerals. During his tenure there were all too many funerals as the old members began to pass away.

In addition to age taking its toll on the congregation, numbers of younger members moved away. Many were, by this time, professionals and found greener pastures elsewhere. With the death of Mr. Kramer, and the premature death of several of the younger members who had remained, the synagogue struck a low point. Its very existence was threatened.

Upon the death of Mr. Kramer, Isadore Singer, Vice President, stepped in and with a noble effort kept the synagogue together for the next several years. Services were limited



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mostly to High Holidays and memorials. Parents were sending their children out of town to Hebrew School.

As fate would have it, on one such trip, there was not enough room in the car pool for several extra children. At the suggestion of Suzanne Smith, Marilyn Weinberg began to teach a small group of children about their faith and their heritage. This small group began to grow as more and more young professional people of the Jewish faith moved into the area. Now children were coming from as far away as Freeport and Brunswick to the west and Damariscotta to the east. These children were followed by their parents and the synagogue once again took on new life.

A new set of By-Laws was drawn. A new Board of Directors was formed. Donald M. Povich became the first of the new Presidents and Beth Israel was reborn.

Growth has been steady through the late Eighties and Nineties. The membership has reached fifty families and the Hebrew School has nearly fifty students. Beth Israel has become a regional synagogue.

Today, Marilyn Weinberg is its president. The first woman elected to that office.

Although there have been a few scattered incidents of Anti-Semitism over the years, the Jewish experience in Bath has been a happy one. When in 1921 Solomon Greenblatt wanted to buy a building in downtown Bath and the owners refused to sell it to him because he was Jewish, a local Christian man, Fred Stevens, bought the building and sold it to his Jewish friend, Mr. Greenblatt, four days later. When several shares

of the Bath Trust Company, a local bank owned largely by Christian elite share holders, became available for purchase, Rupert Baxter, a non-Jewish banker, called his Jewish friend, Morris S. Povich, and offered him the very scarce stock. When Mr. Povich said, " I don't have the money," the banker said, " You buy the stock, I'll lend you the money". When that poor struggling group of early immigrants was trying to build their house of worship, which cost \$5000.00 to start, the non- Jewish community contributed \$2400.00.

In turn, as time has passed, the Jewish people of the Bath area have given of their time, talent and money to support every civic and community activity. They have become movers and doers and their heritage has become a part of Bath's heritage.

By

Don Povich