

by Dorothy Bolotin and Walter Boninger

We celebrated the 100th birthday of our congregation, Temple Beth Israel, in Sharon, Pennsylvania not just by having a special service or throwing a big party, but by inviting back to Sharon all the congregants who had grown up and lived there. We had a Grand Reunion....an incredibly memorable weekend.

At one time we were a much larger congregation. Like so many cities in our region, we have seen our numbers dwindle. Declining economic opportunities lead most of our young people to settle elsewhere and bring few newcomers. Though still 157 membership units, our religious school population has shrunk from 125 to 22. On an average Friday night we are pleased with an attendance of 25-30. Thus you can imagine our joy when all together 377 persons registered for the reunion weekend, with over 200 from out of town.

Though there were dinner parties earlier in the evening, the official festivities began with the Friday Evening Service. The main address was given by a native son, Rabbi Samuel M. Stahl of Temple Beth El in San Antonio, Texas. Following the Service, Sisterhood hosted an Oneg Shabbat in a beautifully decorated Social Hall and served homemade pastries. People who had not seen each other for twenty, thirty, forty and more years embraced, talked, reminisced and caught up with their lives....beginning the process of reunion.

The Shabbat Morning Service featured our own Rabbi, Stephen Sniderman, and was followed by a luncheon, again in the Social Hall and more talking, more remembering and getting reacquainted. Many stopped in the Freyman room where a century of photos and newspaper clippings were on display. Shabbat afternoon everyone was on their own,--visiting old friends and neighbors, seeing the town, more parties

and getting ready for the "big one", the black tie optional Dinner-Dance at the nearby Avalon Inn. An other native son, Howard Mermelstein, now known as Marc Howard, Philadelphia's famed TV news anchor, served as Master of Ceremonies. Rabbi Richard Address, Director of UAHC's Pennsylvania Council brought greetings from the Union's President, Rabbi Alexander Schindler. Recognition was given to many who had contributed to the success of the congregation. The party went on and on as people danced and talked, took pictures and shared the pictures they had brought and felt a real sense of pride with all that had been accomplished with their lives and the lives of their children.

Sunday morning the mood changed, if only for short while, as 150 people gathered at the congregational cemetery for a Memorial Service. People walked quietly among the graves. The power of memory was overwhelming. Hardly anyone is buried in the cemetery who was not remembered by someone. In a very real sense all the people of Temple Beth Israel's past became a part of the reunion.

The best attended event was the picnic, Sunday afternoon, at Buhl Park. There were the usual hot dogs and strawberries and home made baked beans, all kinds of other good foods and drinks, volleyball and baseball and other games for the children and - you guessed it - more talking, more getting acquainted with children and grandchildren who had never been to Sharon before. A brief ceremony brought the centennial weeked to a formal conclusion, as people began to bid each other farewell, knowing that they had taken part in an unforgettable experience that would never be duplicated. They left feeling strengthened in their commitment to Temple Beth Israel, to Judaism and to their love for each other..

What made it work? It worked because we always had a close knit community whose youngsters shared not only their Jewish experience - synagogue, Sunday and Hebrew School, Confirmation, NFTY, BBYO -, but public school as well.

It worked because we had capable and enthusiastic leadership and because we were fortunate enough to be able to benefit from the experiences of the congregation in nearby Butler, Pennsylvania which had staged a similarly successful reunion a year earlier.

It worked because we started our planning and promotion - building the excitement - over a year ahead of time and so many people pitched in to do all the little jobs that had to be done.

It worked because our only purpose was to celebrate our congregation's birthday in the most effective way. We never intended it to be a fundraiser, though individuals were most generous in contributing to our Centennial Fund.

It worked because our familial Jewish roots and traditions are the strongest and we all want to "go home" again.

It worked because we all have a yearning for immortality, - an immortality that can be achieved only by fashioning a link between the past, the present and the future. The synagogue provides such a link. It is said that all that we can give to our children is roots and wings. We all have a need to get in touch with our roots, so that we can be strengthened by our past as we take flight again to face the future.

We in Sharon feel good about the results as we move with new optimism into our second century.

Dorothy Bolotin served as Chairperson of the Centennial Reunion for Temple Beth Israel, Sharon Pennsylvania. Walter Boninger, who helped Sharon get started, served as co-ordinator for the Grand Reunion on the occasion of Butler, PA's congregation's 85th anniversary.

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