



Staff photo by SYL ZEMPHUSKI

Bernard G. Adelson and Abe Siegel in Kittanning synagogue

Dwindling membership forces Kittanning synagogue to close

By Tom Basista

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KITTANNING — A long tradition of Jewish culture in Armstrong County is coming to an end.

The Kneseth Israel congregation, founded in 1911 in Kittanning, is dissolving. The handful of members still remaining, most of them elderly, are making plans to join other congregations. The last service in its synagogue was held on Yom Kippur, Oct. 3, and the building that overlooks the Allegheny River is being sold.

The congregation's Book of Remembrance, a history of events and people in the local Jewish community, has been donated to the county's historical society for safe keeping. The congregation's books and religious objects are being given to other congregations.

Ralph and Dorothy Adelson of Kittanning are both in their 80s. Mr.

Adelson's parents helped to found the congregation. Over the years they have been active in nearly every phase of the congregation's life. They remember the active, thriving Jewish community in the 1960s. It served nearly all of Armstrong County.

So many children were attending religious classes that the congregation considered adding more classrooms. There were active men's and women's clubs, and every seat was taken for services, they said.

"We were young. We were active. We thought it would go on forever," Mrs. Adelson said. "We didn't notice it going."

The decline was gradual, Ralph Adelson said. In the 1970s older members began to retire or move away. Their children left the area because there were no jobs. Bit by bit, the numbers started to decline until there was not much of a congregation left. Eventually, the syn-

agogue was used only for the Jewish holidays.

"The place has hardly been used in the last 20 years. There was a time when we had service every week," Adelson said.

"You have no idea what it's like. We go down to the synagogue we built and loved and know there's no future," Mrs. Adelson said.

Abe Siegel of Kittanning joined the congregation in 1936, when there was an influx of Jewish families into the county. He has been the unofficial caretaker of the synagogue.

"What I miss most is not having a Jewish community. Older members die off and the younger ones don't stick around. It's the same with many other churches," he said.

The loss is being felt not only by the older members. Arnold Moss, 40, is the youngest member. He re

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members serving as a rabbi for children's services while still in high school. He said he practically grew up in the building.

"It's sad. It takes a part of you away. There simply are fewer Jewish people in the area," he said.

The Kneseth Israel congregation followed the route taken by many small Jewish congregations. Rabbi Irving Dick of New Kensington's Beth Jacob Synagogue said small congregations have merged or dissolved all over Western Pennsylvania.

"It's becoming prevalent in small towns. There is little to attract and keep the young people. It used to be that when a man wanted to retire, he found someone to buy the business. Now, they are going out of business," he said.

Rabbi Dick said the younger members generally have not left the faith — the number of Jews has remained fairly constant — but more and more of them are living in large cities.

The Beth Jacob congregation has more than 100 families now, Rabbi Dick said. He is not sure what the future holds for it.

"We have a viable congregation, but look down the pike 10 or 15 years

and who knows," he said.

Inter-faith marriages also are a factor, but apparently not a major one.

Moss, for example, said his wife is a Baptist and their two daughters are being raised in that denomination. However, their Jewish heritage is not overlooked, he said.

"They are aware of Jewish traditions and liturgy. I still conduct a Passover Seder," he said.

With the loss of the local synagogue, Moss figures he will be practicing his religion at home although he has the option of attending other synagogues.

Adelson said he hoped the congregation would rent space to hold

services. At least a vestige of the congregation then would remain in the Kittanning area. The plan was not approved.

"We never thought it would end like this," Mrs. Adelson said.