

HISTORY OF BETH JACOB

Just as a small group of Jews came to America some 300 years ago as pioneers in the settlement of this country, so too, did a small band of Jews arrive in New Kensington in the early years of its beginning.

New Kensington had its beginning in 1891, the first lot was sold that year. The community became incorporated as a Borough on November 28, 1892. During the summer of 1891, Isaac Claster, originally described as a "peddler who carried a pack on his back," came to the community, purchased a lot and immediately began constructing his small store on Tenth Street near Fourth Avenue. The New Kensington Dispatch dated February 20, 1892, under the heading of "Local Twinklings" notes that a Mr. I. Claster would soon open his clothing store as of April 9, 1892. This business was the first clothing store in New Kensington. The first Jewish child born in New Kensington was Ben Claster on January 20, 1893.

The Isaac Fisher family was the next Jewish family to join the small community, and an announcement in the Dispatch of March 4, 1893, indicated that Fisher's would open their store on March 6th of that year. Phillip Fisher, Mr. Isaac Fisher's brother, also came at this time.

David Solobodsky arrived as a cigar maker on January 12, 1894, and with his family settled on Second Avenue and Tenth Street, opening his cigar factory in a small hotel. About August 24, 1894, Harris N. Miller settled here as a tinner and grocer. The Dispatch edition of that date notes that a license to marry was procured in Allegheny County, the previous Tuesday, by said Harris N. Miller of New Kensington, and Mary Rosenberg of Pittsburgh. This was probably the first marriage of a Jewish citizen in New Kensington, and this Miller was evidently the forerunner of the many Millers to follow. From that time, and during the next year or so, we find that the families of Davis Miller, a shoemaker, and Hytovitz, a cigar maker also settled here. A news item in one of our first Jewish publications indicates that the first "Minyon" was in the home of I. Claster conducted by Rabbi Herman Levendorf. This same Rabbi Levendorf later became the community's Rabbi. The occasion was the reading of "Megilos Esther" on Purim Eve of 1895. At those services, the article states, there were present the members of the families of Isaac Claster, Isaac Fisher, Phillip Fisher, Davis Miller, Hirsch Miller, David Solobodsky, and Mr. Hytovitz.

The history of Beth Jacob Congregation through the first half century of existence, parallels the growth of our community at large. By 1905, there were approximately twenty-five Jewish families in this area. However there was no permanent location

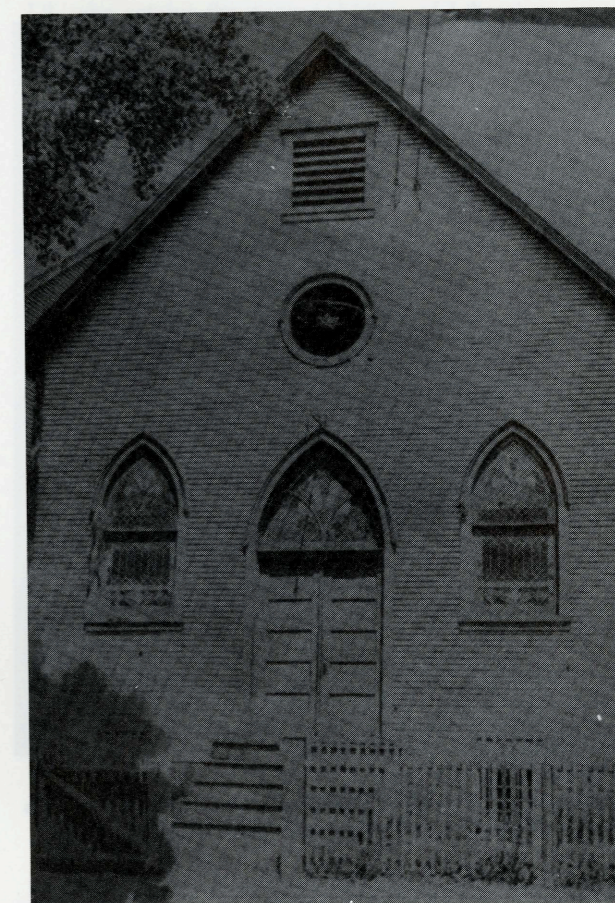
for religious services, and consequently, they were held above downtown storerooms. In August of that year, the first synagogue was founded in the 1100 block of Third Avenue. The Charter of Incorporation of Beth Jacob of New Kensington, however, was not granted until June 15, 1907. Isaac Claster became the charter President, and his Board of Directors consisted of: Isaac Fisher, David Solobodsky, Harry Simon, and Peter Richest. Other incorporators were: Louis Serbin, Davis Miller, Teres Myers, Hyman Kopelman, Harris N. Miller, Simon Steiner, Jacob Sakulsky, Morris Hershkovitz, Morris Miller, and Henry Kubrin.

During the next two decades, progress continued in the various phases of congregational activity. The women too, became an integral part of the affairs of the synagogue. The formation of a Womens' Auxiliary, in 1912, marked a new milestone in the history of our Jewish Community. Upon the insistence of Mrs. Isaac Fisher, a meeting to organize the Auxiliary (now Sisterhood) was held in the home of Mrs. Meyer Hart. All the wives of the above mentioned members were present, as well as Mrs. J. Friedman, Mrs. Bella Cohen, Mrs. J. J. Steiner, Mrs. Simon Steiner, Alice Solobodsky, and Mrs. Louis Weinberg (who for many years served as President, and as Supervisor of the Religious School). Also at this time, it is mentioned in an article in the New Kensington Dispatch, that the first person laid to rest in our cemetery was Peter Hershkovitz, on October 16, 1913.

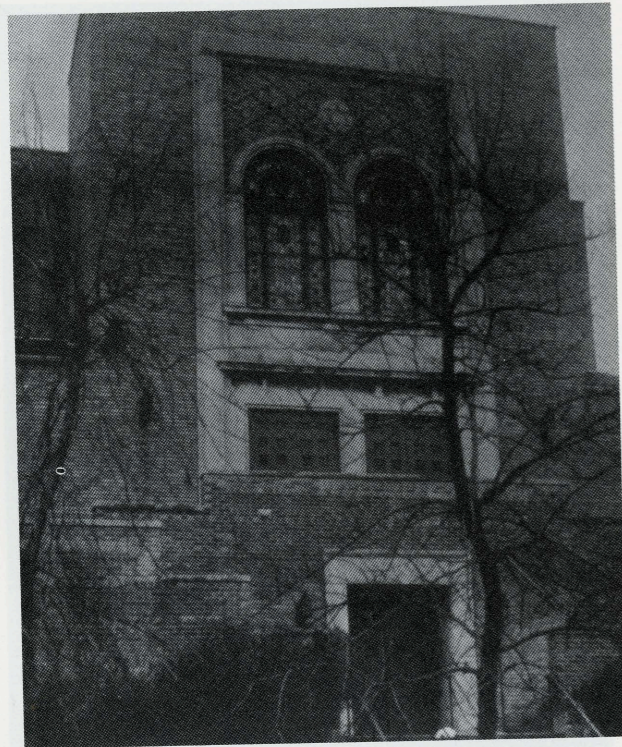
Meanwhile, Miss Martha Horwitz (now Mrs. A.N. Cohen of Rural Valley), took it upon herself in 1912, to organize the first Religious School. Five children were enrolled, but the number increased rapidly. In 1914, the first Sunday School picnic was held at a farm on Mount Vernon's present site. Mrs. Jacob Margolis distributed tickets, and had the refreshments transported by the Claster ponies to the picnic grounds. Rabbi and Mrs. Ashinsky, of Pittsburgh, were guests that day, and the picnic was a total success, socially and financially.

Later the Sunday School and Cheder were developed to the point where the first Confirmation Class was graduated in 1920. It is interesting to mention here, that since Beth Jacob Synagogue was the only Jewish house of worship in this vicinity, it was customary for the families from Tarentum and Natrona to come to our services by horse and buggy, or by train, and spend the Sabbath and High Holidays with relatives and friends.

Due to the growth of the Jewish Congregation, the facilities of the Third Avenue building soon became inadequate. A residence at the corner of Kenneth Avenue and Ninth Street extension was first rented and later purchased to serve as a recreation



Third Avenue Synagogue, photo taken in 1919. There was a house in the rear where they had Sunday School.



Our present building looked very different before the addition was put on. This picture was taken from the 50th Anniversary book.

center, Sunday School and Cheder. After the sale of the Third Avenue Synagogue, the Religious services had to be temporarily included into the functions of this Community House.

After an exhaustive survey to find the most suitable location for a new synagogue; a lot was purchased at 1040 Kenneth Avenue from Joseph Ashor, local building contractor, and plans for a new structure were drawn by architect Alfred Marks. Meyer Hart's philanthropic efforts were largely responsible for getting this new project under way. Mr. Julius Eiges, President of the Congregation, also served as Chairman of the Building Committee.

On December 9, 1924, amid great fanfare and acclaim, and with Rabbi Benjamin Lichter presiding over the ceremonies, ground was broken for the new synagogue. The total cost of the building was approximately \$74,000.00 with Powell Brothers receiving the construction contract. The ingenuity and resourcefulness of this pioneer group was apparent by their unique sale of "printed bricks" to wholesalers and manufacturers to raise money for the building fund. Additional funds were made available through the sale of "stained glass windows" to the membership of Beth Jacob.

On February 15, 1925, 150 people attended the cornerstone laying of the Beth Jacob Synagogue. The officers at this time were: President, Julius Eiges; Vice-President, Davis Miller; Treasurer, Max Schwartz; Financial Secretary, H.A. Westerman; Secretary, Ben H. Ockner. The Board of Trustees were: Jacob Margolis, Chairman; Morris Miller, Benjamin Cohen, Hyman Kopelman, and Teres Myers. Rabbi Ashinsky, of Pittsburgh, spoke on the importance of a synagogue to the New Kensington community. Joseph Bachrach and Julius Eiges, were also among the speakers. Daniel Burns, Burgess of New Kensington, lauded the Jewish people for taking an important place among the church groups in the community, and commended them for their plans to erect a synagogue. Eiges introduced Burgess Burns and handed a silver trowel to Davis Miller, Vice-President of the Congregation, who applied the mortar to set the cornerstone in place.

The dedication ceremonies were held June 6, 1926. Those participating in the program were: Rabbi G. Mendelsohn, primary speaker at this ceremony; Meyer Hart; Judge Benjamin Lencher; Bere Mayer Miller; and, Burgess Daniel Burns. Rabbi Goodman A. Rose of Beth Sholom Congregation, Pittsburgh, delivered the dedication address. At this time, Meyer Hart assumed the office of President, and the other officers retained their respective positions.

During the next thirty years, the synagogue went through a modernization and improvement program to keep pace with the growing needs of the Congregation. The social hall was enlarged. A new kitchen was installed, approximately six new classrooms were added, the Rabbi's study was renovated, a home for the Rabbi was acquired and property adjoining the present site was purchased in anticipation of synagogue expansion. This period witnessed the economic depression of the 1930's, but able leadership made it possible to withstand this crisis.

About ten years later, during World War II, approximately 100 men and women from our Jewish community answered the country's call. Morris Zinamon, son of Mr. and Mrs. Abe Zinamon, heroically sacrificed his life in defense of our country's principles.

As our community began the transition from the War Years to a peacetime environment, Beth Jacob Congregation entered an era of expansion and intense social activity.

One of the highlight social activities in the

early 1950's was the Mr. and Mrs. Club, founded by George and Lil Wolfson. Once a month, couples would come to the social hall for an evening of entertainment and good food. The Mr. and Mrs. Club's purpose was to bring our members together in fun without fund-raising. The club existed for eight years, and those who participated recall its activities with fond memories.

Increased numbers of congregants and heightened social activity called for bigger facilities. In the late 1950's, Beth Jacob initiated a Building Campaign. Rabbi Herbert Panitch was a tireless worker in this campaign. The Congregation rallied under the guidance of Synagogue President, Melvin Steinberg to make the building fund a success. Sisterhood made a pledge of \$15,000.00, and one of the ways they met this pledge was the use of "Puskies." Vivian Herman and Florence Weissburg were in charge of seeing that every Sisterhood member received a "Puskie" and each one was asked to deposit 10¢ a day until the drive was over. It proved to be a very successful project. During this period of expansion, the 1950's saw 160 families enrolled as members; 100 children were enrolled in the Sunday School; and, 60 students in Hebrew School. This was perhaps, the zenith of participation, activity, and membership in the seventy-five years of Beth Jacob's History.

Actual expansion of our facilities began in the early 1960's. Harold Schwartz was the architect and Isadore Frank was the general contractor. The community watched with eager anticipation as remodeling and building took place. The Dedication Banquet was held on November 8, 1964, a proud moment for all. Rabbi Harold Konovitch was our Rabbi at the time, and Joe Herman our President.

In 1962, it was recognized that more funds were required to support and maintain our newly remodeled synagogue and social hall. Harry Stein proposed the idea of a Bond-A-Rama. Norman Rubin and Ben Kane were Chairmen for the initial event. Since that time, Freda and Herbert Goldberg have given tirelessly of themselves, in the organization and administration of each year's event. As this most important activity enters its twenty-first year, we must thank those who initiated and maintained it, for it not only provides Beth Jacob with much needed revenue, it is also the most outstanding social event of the year.

Our Men's B'nai B'rith Lodge #1233 pledged, during the Building campaign, to fund the Synagogue Library and furnish it. On March 27, 1965, the Beth Jacob Synagogue Library was dedicated. Lil Wolfson, with the assistance of Rabbi Rudolph Loebel and many Sisterhood volunteers organized the Library. Also prominent in library matters are two Sisterhood members who have assisted since its inception: Reva Goldberg and Dorothy Wikes. It has been noted by many, that Beth Jacob has

one of the outstanding Synagogue libraries in Western Pennsylvania, a tribute to our many contributors and to Lil, who retains the responsibilities of Librarian.

Beth Jacob Synagogue has been served by many able spiritual leaders among whom were: Rabbis Isaac Mofsewitz, Isaac Cooper, G. Mendelsohn, A. Lipschitz, Joseph Bachrach, Herman Levendorf, Henry Goldberger, Mordecai Thurman, H.N. Hurwitz, Maurice Lyons, Noah Golinken, Judah Washer, Julius Berger, Bernard Beigeleisen, Leo Goldfetter, Leon Wengrovsky, Herbert G. Panitch, Harold Konovitch, and Rudolph Loebel. In 1967, the Congregation found itself without a Rabbi, but talented resources were discovered within our community: Joe Herman, Rob Kinselbaum, and George Wolfson conducted the Sabbath Services, and Dr. Howard Dunhoff arranged for guest speakers. Shortly, thereafter, in 1968, Rabbi Phillip Labowitz came to New Kensington. He was very successful in developing a program of Adult Education in which our Gentile Community participated with our congregants.

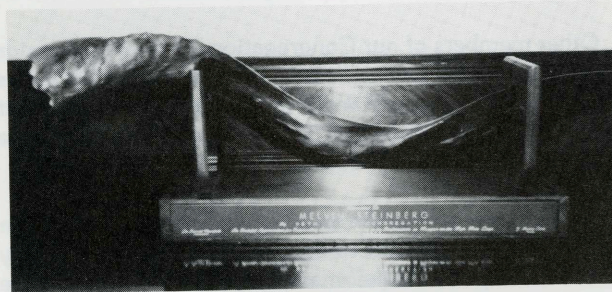
Rabbi Y. Irving Dick came to our community in 1973, and remains with us as we prepare to celebrate our 75th Anniversary. During the decade of his tenure, we have seen an increase in congregation participation in all of our services, with women fulfilling roles once traditionally considered for men only, such as Aliyah readings from the Torah. The Rabbi found a Cantor within our midst in the person of Melvin Steinberg. His rendition of High Holiday Services has been inspirational.

Other members of our Congregation have made a major contribution to our spiritual welfare: Rabbi Dick has called upon Robert Kinselbaum as the Baal Sharharit for the High Holidays and Sabbath Services, and George Wolfson as the Baal Musaf for the Sabbath Services.

Recent years have seen stability with steady progress in many areas of interest to the Congregation. A strikingly beautiful "Tree of Life" marks the foyer entrance to the Synagogue. It provides the members an opportunity to celebrate simchas or honor memories. In 1982, our President, Dr. Jon Schwartz, assisted by J. Robert Myers and James Kopelman, coordinated a revision of our Constitution and By-Laws. In 1983, the Congregation assumed responsibility for Chebra Kadisha Cemetery, a major undertaking which consolidates our religious life and obligations within one organization. And, as we approach our 75th Anniversary, for the first time in the history of Beth Jacob, we have a woman to lead us as President, Seena Goldberg.

In the tradition of our Founding Fathers, Harry Stein, in May of 1968, foresaw the time when the Synagogue would require endowment funds to sustain its operations.

Melvin Steinberg, our cantor in residence, enhances our observance at our High Holiday services and at Shabbat services throughout the year.



This beautiful Shofar was presented to Melvin Steinberg in 1977, in grateful appreciation for outstanding service and leadership in the performance as hazzan on the High Holy Days.

Consequently, he and Ruth established the Harry and Ruth Stein Trust and encouraged others to join in this effort. In the late 1970's and early 1980's, the Finance Committee expanded upon this earlier initiative, and created an Endowment Fund. A major effort, still in progress, to encourage members to contribute to this Fund, is a primary focus of the Finance Committee and the Board of Directors. The success of this effort will insure the survival and spiritual growth of Beth Jacob Congregation.

Writing a history offers a unique opportunity to look at the past, present and future; to put the events that have created our current circumstance into perspective, and to make certain judgments and decisions about the future. The present-day members of Beth Jacob Congregation are fortunate that, like the nation, our Founding Fathers were visionary, hardworking and dedicated. Their sense of responsibility was keen and well defined; their desire to create and maintain the presence of Jewish life in the community was a constant goal of their activity. We who celebrate this Seventy-fifth Anniversary are also fortunate that the leaders of our Congregation during the mid-years were as dedicated to the perpetuation and growth of Jewish life in our community.



Two learned members of our Congregation, Rob Kanselbaum and George Wolfson, help lead us in our Sabbath and High Holiday services.

as were the Founding Fathers. The beauty of our Synagogue and our relatively good financial strength are a tribute to the single-minded manner in which they kept the welfare and well-being of Congregation matters foremost in their lives.

Jewish tradition teaches us to proclaim joy and gladness even in moments of anguish and pain; to celebrate life, while never forgetting tragedy; and to plan for a future while honoring the past. This Seventy-fifth Anniversary celebration offers the participants an opportunity to practice this tradition. We celebrate the past, enjoy the present, but more important, we must plan for the future so that the generations to come may have the opportunity to celebrate as we have.