

Jewish history of Kiski valley

Until 1970, a Synagogue was maintained. Until about 1950, High Holiday services were held in Leechburg and in Vandergrift. Then the two merged and the High Holiday services were held in Leechburg at the V.F.W. Hall, because our small rooms could not accommodate the 30 to 35 people attending.

For many years, we engaged a Bal Tfille to conduct the services. At a later date, we were able to conduct services ourselves. We improvised when we deemed it necessary. For example, when some of the congregation wanted to hear beautiful cantorial renditions, we appointed from our own congregation a disc jockey, who played the best of records. At one time, for Kol Nidre, we had three different cantors; Yosele Rosenblatt, Jan Pearce and Richard Tucker. Later on, we learned the tunes and eliminated the record playing. In about 1970, because of our inability to get a minyan, our services came to an end, as well as the regular Yahrzeits and Yizkor.

A religious school was organized in Leechburg by Sylvia Braun, and later continued in Vandergrift. We brought in teachers from Pittsburgh who assisted the staff from our Valley. The school also provided a smattering of Hebrew. The Sunday School was affiliated with the Western Pennsylvania Sunday School and was sponsored by the Rodef Shalom Temple. We had about seven Confirmation classes, all held at the Rodef Shalom Temple in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

From 1921 to 1938, Bar Mitzvahs were prepared by Reverend R. Rubinovitz, who later assumed positions in Chicago and Braddock, and then at the age of 85 left for Israel to live there permanently, where he died in 1959 at the age of 96. His son, Jack, then assumed the duties of the Bar Mitzvah preparation. From 1949 to 1960, we were able to prepare 13 boys for Bar Mitzvah. We usually hired a hall, such as the Sons of Italy in Vandergrift, the V.F.W., or the Marcony Club in Leechburg. The attendance at the Bar Mitzvah varied from a low of 15 in 1940 to 250 in later years.

Our community was small, consisting in 1936 of only about 30 to 35 families. Yet we participated in national Jewish organizations such as B'nai B'rith, Hadassah and the United Jewish Appeal. In 1936 the Kiski Valley Men's Club was formed and in 1939, we became affiliated with the B'nai B'rith. We organized with 42 members. Then in 1982, after 43 years, we terminated our chapter because our membership dwindled to 8, of which only 2 members lived in the Kiski Valley, one in Apollo, one in Leechburg, and none in Vandergrift, where we still maintained lodge rooms.

During the 43 years, the B'nai B'rith was responsible for organizing a Western Pennsylvania B'nai B'rith softball league, which included the Kiski Valley, Allegheny Valley, Mt. Pleasant, Jeanette and McKeesport. The league lasted about three years from 1940 to 1943.

Through B'nai B'rith we took care of any A.D.L. problems that presented themselves. Also largely through the efforts of B'nai B'rith we continued to support the religious needs of the community — the Synagogue, Sunday School and Library for the Christian as well as the Jewish community.

Kiski Valley had a very active Hadassah Chapter. Its fund raising was very unique. The Chapter was always on the "Honor Roll" for not only meeting, but, for over subscribing its quota. Maximum membership was 37 hard working and dedicated women. As the membership dwindled, each person transferred to another chapter where she took up residence.

The Kiski Valley United Jewish Charities was formed in 1938 by Isadore Rubin and in later years co-chaired with Meyer Braun. The United Jewish Appeal was the benefactor to 85% of the amounts collected. The balance was divided among 23 other organizations. The Kiski Valley United Jewish Appeal was proud of being the second highest per capita givers in Western Pennsylvania for several decades, being second only to Johnstown. Another distinction they were proud of was that during the 44 years of its existence, they have always collected 100% of their pledges, never having a loss. Now, with only four or five families contributing, they still manage to raise several thousand dollars annually.

The community provided speakers to the Christian organizations, churches and schools. Among the subjects covered were: Judaism, Israel, Brotherhood, Ecumenical Council and a course on Jewish Prayer at the St. Gertrude Parochial School in Vandergrift. Model Seders were conducted for the various churches and Ministerial Associations.

Because of all the above activities, the Jewish Community in the Kiski Valley enjoyed a warm cordial relationship with their Christian neighbors. The Jewish Community of Kiski Valley was held in very high esteem.



This arc curtain, which was used in the Vandergrift chapel, was brought to Beth Jacob by Sylvia Braun. Joseph H. Breman was the father and grandfather of many prominent members of our congregation.