

1927

The Beechview 1926 Time Capsule
Display Case Dedication

Commissioned by The Minsky Family
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Mrs. Rebecca Ruderman

Rebecca Ruderman was a visionary and had the foresight to bring Jewish Education to the children of Beechview. In doing so she formed the Jewish Mothers' Club of Beechview in 1917, which led to the birth of Beth El Sisterhood and for that matter, the true beginning of Beth El Congregation.

Dateline - early 1948

A Jewish family stood outside Beth El on Broadway. The parents and a 12-year old daughter had moved to Beechview most recently from Philadelphia after a long journey from Germany that began shortly after Kristalnacht.

The Rabbi Pincus Miller and his wife, Leah, warmly welcomed the family. The child watched with amazement as the adults spoke, all with similar European accents. They were all recent arrivals to America.

The daughter was registered in the Beth El Sunday School, which proved to be a very pleasant experience. In this class, she met the daughter of another refugee family. These two families became fast friends.

The Beth El Sunday School at that time was a warm and comforting social experience. The classes were small (no more than ten) and the teacher, Barnetta Foreman, created a positive learning environment each week.

This was my family's story; Beth El was my first Jewish experience in Pittsburgh. Little did I know that 21 years later, Beth El would again become a central part of my family's life.

Hannah Balk

I have belonged to Beth El for 71 years and I am a 3rd generation member. I belong to Beth El in the sense that when I am at Beth El, I am where I belong. From my earliest moments through the present moment, Beth El has been an inextricable part of my life. Since we are celebrating our Centennial I will write of a brief remembrance of attending religious school in Beechview.

At the old Beth El, you walked through the doors into a small vestibule. The main doors to the sanctuary were right in front of you. On both sides of those doors were wire coat racks. There were winding stairs on both sides of the vestibule that led down to the social hall. The building was on a piece of ground that was steeply sloped from the front of the building to the back. Accordingly, even though the social hall was downstairs it was still above ground. It was an open room that was used for virtually everything except services. Even the kids' High Holiday Services were conducted in this room. At the far end of the room on the left-hand side was a kitchen, which was smaller than the kitchens in most of your homes. To the right of the kitchen was a small stage. On the left side of the stage were bookshelves, as the stage doubled as Beth El's library. To the right of stage was a small room, which served as Rabbi Miller's office.

When I was in kindergarten, they divided the room up with free standing room dividers to separate the classes for Sunday school. They were thin, they were flimsy and they were easily knocked down if you accidentally bumped them. They kept the class next door out of eyesight, but you could often hear what was going on. When I was in about 3rd grade the congregation was able to build sliding dividers much like the ones that we have in the back of the main sanctuary today.

The teachers loved the stability and improved decorum. We missed the excitement and distraction of having one of our classroom walls being knocked over.

The time demands of religious school were very rigorous compared to today, but fortunately for our parents, we didn't have today to compare it with. The first several years of religious school consisted only of Sunday School.

We started *cheder* (Hebrew School) when we were in the third grade. My elementary school football coach let us play even though we missed practice Tuesdays and Thursdays. My Catholic friends only had to miss practice on Wednesdays. Schools and coaches were more respectful of religious school back then.

Two years before our Bar Mitzvah we attended regular Hebrew School from 4:00 until 6:00 p.m. on Tuesdays on Thursdays, and we had Bar Mitzvah classes from 4:00 to 6:00 on Mondays and Wednesdays. The girls only went on 2 weekdays back then. Friday night was the time when whole families would attend Shabbat Services so we were there with Mom and Dad. Beth El was full on Friday nights and the services were more formal. In addition to Rabbi Miller and Cantor Lazear, Beth El's choir would participate in the service. Saturday morning services were not well attended and on some weeks we would have to look for a minyan. Pre-Bar Mitzvah boys were required to attend Saturday morning services as well. For those of you who are still reading but not keeping score, we were at Beth El 7 days a week. In order to maintain our interest in Hebrew School, teachers gave us a 10-minute break during our afternoon class and the boys would tear outside to play football in front of the shul. We used a rolled up tassel cap as the football and as often as possible we would stretch our break by a few minutes.

Just like today, it was tough to extend school to 6:00 p.m. and keep the kids engaged. We were fortunate to have some wonderful teachers in our Congregation. Milton and Shirley Lederman, Chuck Wittlin, Joe Sufrin and Howard Sufrin were very dedicated to making sure that we learned about our heritage. Of course, Don Selig taught just slightly short of forever. We were a small class but we came from 5 different school districts. Marty Shrut was not only our fifth-grade teacher, but he also took us bowling on Sunday afternoons so that we got to know each other socially.

As Beth El outgrew the building in Beechview, our school outgrew the building as well. For our confirmation classes, my class was moved to the conference room of Downtown Pontiac on the lower part of West Liberty Avenue. Buddy Minsky was our teacher and you won't be surprised to learn that he was provocative. He asked probing questions about our faith and about the literalness of the Torah. I still remember struggling over the "blue book exam" that he gave us at the end of the year.

At times the demands of Hebrew School seemed interminable, but the friendships were wonderful and to this day I continue to seek out opportunities for Jewish learning.

Al Scheimer

Memories of Beth El on Broadway

My grandmother lived across the street in a gray brick triplex that is still there, so Beth El was literally near and dear to us.

- Taking the street car to Hebrew school after regular school
- Stopping at the candy store at the corner
- Leaning back against the folding dividers that created our classrooms in the basement all-purpose social hall
- Running around in the balcony, that sometimes had leftover furniture strewn around
- Karel Rubenstein and I usually figuring out Danny Droz's magic tricks—bet we couldn't do that now!
- Having an Oneg on Friday night or at a Bar Mitzvah Saturday morning where honored women poured the punch at either end of the table laden with goodies created and put out by the women of the shul
- Rummage Sales
- Trimming and sorting coupons to earn money for the shul
- Sitting next to Mrs. Marm during Saturday services
- Finding my dad in the last row, on the right side of the center aisle no matter when I went looking

Just a few of the flashes of memory when thinking about my shul.

Beth Pomerantz

Beth El Congregation has played a large role in my family since I was a little girl. I can remember attending Sunday school with the classrooms partitioned with dividers in the downstairs auditorium. There I first learned about Israel. Buddy Minsky & Harriet Hilsenrath Bertenthal, college students, were among my teachers. We were part of a carpool with other Jewish kids from Brookline on Sundays from the Labovitz-Rudt-Tabor families.

During the week, I took two streetcars to get to Hebrew school after public school. My brother, sister, & cousins also attended Beth El. We became close friends with the Jewish kids who lived in Beechview, Brookline, Dormont, and Mt. Washington. There was even a Jewish family who lived in Mt. Lebanon! Hebrew school was taught by the Rabbi, Pincus Miller, who years later officiated at my wedding to Joe Sufrin, who was my brother's best friend and lived in Beechview. Girls could only attend Hebrew school until age 12, since Bat Mitzvah wasn't available to them. The Rabbi lived in a house next door to the synagogue with his wife, Aviva, and daughter, Hadassah. One of my classrooms was even held in the shul kitchen downstairs. Since my dad, Morris Melman and a Vice President of the shul, worked Friday evenings (Shabbat), I used to hitch a ride to shul with Mr. & Mrs. Marmorstein.

Every summer Beth El held a shul picnic at Dumas' farm, a member. They even had a swimming pool, in which the children all played & swam. This was long before air-conditioning. We even played games and grilled hamburgers and hotdogs.

I remember participating in a talent show on the stage playing piano.

I also volunteered in the shul choir, along with the Rabbi's wife, Joe Sufrin, and others. Hy Kimel was our director. We sang in the balcony above and behind the sanctuary. We rehearsed there too. Our Cantor, Sam Lazier, sang on all the *yomim tovim*. His son, Gil, was in my class.

Although I still see some of my classmates on occasion, I keep in touch with only one, who now lives in Las Vegas. All of my classmates were confirmed. All of the girls wore white for the confirmation ceremony. I also remember my brother's Bar Mitzvah, but I didn't become a Bat Mitzvah until my adult years, when I was Sisterhood President in the current building.

Beth El has changed significantly since my childhood, and it has played a most important and meaningful part in my life, even through today. As a result, Debby and Warren, two of our children, are actively involved in the shul. I have been attending Beth El for over 70 years, since I was in first grade. I'm still learning, and it's still shaping me into who I am today.

Judy Sufrin

Interview with Flora Lee (Small) Katz

Flora Lee grew up at 1429 Beechview Ave., within easy walking distance of Beth El. She describes a very happy experience growing up in Beechview as the middle child. She never encountered anti-Semitism. Many of her girlfriends were not Jewish. They visited her house on Pesach and she would go to their homes on Christmas.

In 1940, when she was 6, Flora Lee started Sunday School. Her favorite part was the assembly, with everyone in the school, where they sang Jewish songs including Hatikvah. At 10, she became the first girl to go to Hebrew School, which they called "cheder." She was the only girl in the class and did not like it at all. She went for about a year, four days a week. Most days before school she stopped for candy at a little store owned by the Horowitz family which was just down the block from Beth El. She thinks it irritated the Rabbi.

Flora Lee remembers a club at shul called "The Busy Bees" which she joined when she was about 10. Mrs. Zolbrod led the club. They would get together, went on picnics, played games and took little excursions. She was the only child in the Beth El choir. She described how a neighbor would walk with her to Beth El at night to attend practice, and that they performed on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

When Flora Lee's family joined Beth El, a Mr. Rubenstein was their spiritual leader and at some point Pinhas Miller became the rabbi and lived in a house next to the shul. When she was about 9 or 10 when her father, Louis H. Small, became president of the shul. Sadly, it was her dad's job to let the rabbi know he was being terminated. He couldn't sleep for weeks. The other presidents she remembers during her days at Beth El, were Mr. Minsky and Mr. Snyderman. Her father, Louis grew up on the North Side and her mom was Frances Lovelier who was also born in US.

Flora Lee's sister Skippy Kalla (Syrietta Small) was confirmed at Beth El and she remembers the confirmation class wore white robes and held red roses. Skippy also taught Sunday School. Her sister's friends at Beth El included Mikey Freedman, Gilda (Mayer) Reidboard and Audrey (Simmons) Silverman.

She fondly remembers that "when you walked in the shul, everyone knew everyone, everyone got dressed up and it was a warm, friendly experience." She recalls her parent's friends - The Ballons, Richmans, Millers, Weinbergs, Charlsons, Sufrins and Minskys. Many of their friends were already living in Mt. Lebanon and Brookline, Dormont, etc.

Flora Lee remembers on Simhat Torah the children marched with a flag and an apple. She recalls on one Sunday morning her job was to carry a basket with baby Moses in it to shul. She was so embarrassed. When her younger brother was 10 and she was 14 her parents decided that they should live in a neighborhood with more Jews, and the family moved to the East End, saying goodbye to Beth El.

Submitted by Cliff Spungen

BETH EL REMEMBERS....

The story of how my Dad, Sidney Hoffman, found the property back in 1962 exemplifies that old saying: sometimes it is better to be lucky than to be smart. How did Dad find the land? By scouring the countryside? No. By taking the bus to work? Yes. It happened that the man sitting next to him was a commercial real estate agent. Dad, after introductions were over, told of Beth El's needs and asked him if he knew of anything. He told Dad of a large tract of land, about sixteen acres, owned by Duquesne Light, which the PUC ordered them to sell, except for a small portion on which a transformer was located. On that same day, or soon after, the agent drove Dad to the property. As Dad put it, "Barbara Ring's description of the property as "scenic and secluded" was as accurate as it was vivid."

Dad quickly saw the money-producing potential of the property. But he was concerned that he could not get the necessary Board resolutions and Congregational approval before someone else snapped up the property for the \$28,000 asking price (a steal, the agent assured Dad). Dad was also afraid that, because of previous disappointments with land searches, the Congregation would have no enthusiasm for another trip up a blind alley. Dad further feared that a "wilderness" in Scott Township might not be attractive to those who preferred a more prestigious Mt. Lebanon location.

So Dad decided to go outside the usual channels. He got some members (a minyan, so to speak) to join him in supplying the money, along with their support, to acquire the option to purchase the property. The option was then presented to the Congregation and the rest, as they say, is history.

Dad also played an important part in negotiating the lease deal with Oliver Tyrone, who first approached Beth El with an offer to purchase part of the property for office buildings. Dad was opposed to the purchase offer and argued strongly for a long-term lease. Not wanting to ask the Congregation to rely on his opinion, he urged that it engage a real estate appraiser. The appraiser agreed with him that the lease deal was far better than an outright sale. (Full disclosure: the appraiser was also a fellow bus passenger of Dad's.)

Considering the rentals collected on the lease, the \$400,000 received for the sale of the lease back to the tenants, proceeds from the sale of other portions of the original sixteen acres, and various incidental benefits of the lease, Dad's guess is that Beth El profits from the purchase of the land would come to about \$1,000,000.

Dad was always proud of the fact that the Congregation passed a resolution commending him for his role in securing the property.

Bernice Natelson

Herky Charleson and Marsh Goldstein have a recollection of attending "Cheder" in the early 50s. They lived in Brookline growing up and walked in all kinds of weather, with a stop at the candy store down the street from Beth El on Broadway.

Marsh also recalls about the musical he and Chuck Wittlin were in in Sunday School. Marsh told us that he had to tell Chuck to sing louder during the presentation!

Finally these boys weren't too fond of the rabbi who was very strict with them. Their antics got them into a lot of trouble (particularly Herky).

Submitted by Joan Charleson

I went to Hebrew school at Beth El in Beechview. I remember there was a candy store near the shul and we bought candy such as turkish taffy and jawbreakers. We took the streetcar to Hebrew school. My parents were active members of sisterhood and men's club. My mother ran the bakeshop and they baked for Friday night services, her specialty was kichel.

Michael Rosenberg



NEW BETH EL SYNAGOGUE CENTER in Scott Twp. is under construction following groundbreaking ceremony. Samuel Minsky, one of the original members, and his grandson, Jeffrey Minsky, are shown turning the first shovel of dirt. Rabbi A. I. Schnipper is spiritual leader of Congregation Beth El. A school will be built later.

