Presentation to Indiana Jewish Historical Society

Annual Meeting

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It was Hanukah, 1925. A holiday befitting the dedication of a brand new synagogue. The holiday itself is all about dedication, recalling the rededication by the Maccabees of the once defiled ancient Temple in Jerusalem. And this was the holiday selected to conduct impressive events for what was described as this “massive brick structure, trimmed in Bedford stone… of modern design, marked by the flat roof and plain walled areas with ornamentation sparingly used and judicially placed.”

In other writings, the synagogue was described architecturally as a modern day Jewish temple. “It is an imposing structure of rugged simplicity, suggestive of strength and endurance…. The tannish stony brick facing is a pleasing color to the eye and stands out.”

Indeed, this newly built Jewish Temple had two main floors and a basement, for storage and heating boilers. The main floor was the social and educational area. It had meeting rooms, club rooms, rooms for Sunday school classes, a kitchen and 2 restrooms. And the two stairways made of terrazza marble led upstairs to the sanctuary which had a balcony. The sanctuary featured beautiful art glass windows and had no columns to obstruct any view. Large hidden steel girders spanned the ceiling for support. The Bimah was marked with the traditional ark for the Torah scrolls at its center, large chairs for the rabbi and Cantor, and the eternal light positioned in front of the Ten Commandments. Behind the Bimah was the Rabbi’s study. The dark stained pews in the sanctuary and balcony were made of American walnut.

On that Hanukah of 1925, starting on Friday night, December 11, three days of festive programs were held. It was a jubilant scene on the corner of 34th & Ruckle, where the newly built Beth El Temple, designed by the architects Vonnegut, Bohn and Mueller, proudly stood. It was heralded in the papers as a “magnificent structure, situated in one of the most exclusive sections of Indianapolis.” It was regarded as the leading Orthodox synagogue in the State of Indiana and the largest synagogue on the city’s north side. It boasted seating for 1,100 worshippers and eventually became the center of Jewish life for a full generation in what we now call the Mapleton Fall Creek neighborhoods. Those who are now in their 60’s, 70’s, 80’s, and 90’s still remember that time in their lives when that old Ruckle Synagogue was a beehive of activity.

The Jewish congregation that built this structure had not been around for very long before those festivities of 1925. And getting there was not all that simple.

The young congregation started in someone’s home. In Yiddish we call that a Shtibl. It was only a short 10 years before this particular Hanukah celebration that Alexander Cohen organized a Minyan, a group of at least 10 male Jews, to gather in prayer for the High Holidays somewhere around 16th and Illinois. And year after year, the congregation moved from place to place, renting places like the Masonic Temple on 21st and Central or a Hall at 30th and Talbott to conduct services. It was simple then. All you needed was a Yiddish speaking rabbi who doubled as a Cantor to lead the services.

Within 7 years, the congregation started to grow and began to realize that a permanent place for services was needed. It must have been tough to wander from year to year. And so, in the summer of 1921, under the leadership of Joseph Borinstein a small group of congregants decided to purchase a lot on 30th and Talbott, where, coincidentally the Mapleton Fall Creek Development Corporation, a vital supporter of our project, is currently located. And a year later, in 1922, the congregation hired Rabbi Bienenfeld as a regular rabbi; the Sisterhood was formed under the leadership of Mrs. Louis Sagalowsky that year and the first appeal for the funding of a new synagogue was made during services on Yom Kippur. $55,000 was pledged on that one day – which is today’s equivalent of about $770,000 – and, this money was pledged even before a single design of the building was prepared. Admittedly, these pledges did not yet imply cash on hand – but it was nevertheless an extraordinary commitment to make for such a young congregation.

With such a show of enthusiasm, it didn’t take long for the realization of the building.

On May 15, 1923, an initial design was published in the Indianapolis Star, which showed a much more ornate building than the one finally built, and that summer, the lot on the corner of 34th and Ruckle was purchased. Why the change from the original 30th and Talbott, we don’t know. And, we don’t know how much the lot cost. But the projected structure was estimated to cost $150,000 or the equivalent of well over $2 million dollars in today’s money. By the time it was all finished it probably came closer to $3 million dollars. And notwithstanding the first successful appeal and the great economy, it was not easy to raise that kind of money. Each Yom Kippur brought another appeal. There is the anecdote of a momentous Yom Kippur appeal led by the synagogue’s president Jack Goodman when he thundered from the Bimah that he would singlehandedly match the total raised by the entire congregation. And you know what? He did.

And, the construction of the synagogue did not go smoothly either. Once the announcement was made, an immediate remonstrance by property owners in the neighborhood was organized.

The leader of this vehement remonstrance was the famous engineer Daniel B. Luten, who lived in the house, still standing, right next to the Temple’s site on 3357 Ruckle. This 54 year old engineer who invented the Luten Arch which was used in concrete bridges all over the country fought the Temple’s construction in every way he could. The main argument: there will be a drop in property values. It wouldn’t surprise me that anti-Semitic undertones were at play, in light of the fact that there were already 3 churches in the neighborhood represented by the Christian Scientists, Presbyterians and Lutherans. The Jewish argument was, as stated by Isaac Marks of Beth El, “What we need is more churches and less filling stations on the corners. Then perhaps we will have less speed violators and more law-abiding citizens, through more church-goers.”

Even though the Board of Zoning dismissed the remonstrance appeals on August 17, 1923, the remonstrators took the matter on appeal to the City Planning Commission. This strong opposition took almost a year to resolve. The final appeals ruling on March 28, 1924, finally put an end to the opposition and allowed the project to proceed.

We don’t know when actual construction began, but it didn’t take long. The cornerstone, still visible today, was laid in a small ceremony on May 5, 1924, presided by the new president Jack Goodman. A sealed copper box filled with historical material was placed within the stone block. That summer it was announced that the building would be completed by September in time for the High Holidays. That did not happen. It was not finished until the beginning of the year in 1925. Nevertheless meetings were already held in the winter of 1924 with services announced at the end of January in 1925. A month later, in February 1925, the congregation had its first large meeting, organized by the Sisterhood, to discuss the selection of new Rabbi.

Rabbi Isadore Goodman, an eminent Orthodox Rabbi was hired as full time rabbi and led the first High Holiday services in the new Temple in 1925. And the Temple became a beehive of activities for the entire Jewish community even before it was completed.

And, so, here we are on Hanukah, 1925. The festivities that weekend consumed the attention of people far and wide. It was the place to be. It was the biggest draw in town. I can’t think of a more inclusive and shared series of events. Both Jews and non-Jews addressed the crowds. Luminaries were present – Indiana’s governor Ed Jackson, the city’s mayor Samuel Shank who brought the house down with his many jokes. Rabbis of other congregations were there, even one from New York. There were sermons, including those from Rabbi Feuerlicht representing the reform congregation IHC, and one in Yiddish by Rabbi Katz of Shaarei Tefillah Congregation and an address by Rev. Wicks of the All Souls Uniterian Church. There was music featuring violins, piano, oboes, and choral groups. There was eating, dancing and celebrating late into the night on Sunday. There was a procession of the Torah Scrolls and the presentation of the synagogue key, and many many speeches of course. And, there was the official installation of the new Rabbi Goodman.

The rabbi was only there for about 2 years. And replacing him was Rabbi Milton Steinberg, a giant in the Conservative and Reconstructionist movements who put a defining stamp on the congregation over a period of 6 years. By 1931 the congregation claimed 350 families as members. And in 2015, which is just around the corner, it will be celebrating its centennial – a vibrant congregation still going strong.

After the congregation moved further north to its current location in 1958, another Jewish congregation used the facility until 1967, Bnai Torah. And, from the late sixties until about 4 years ago, for a whole other generation, the building was used by several Christian churches until the building was abandoned some 4 years ago.

About 2 years ago, I had the personal opportunity of first setting foot inside Beth El Temple. It was an overwhelming experience. I was immediately smitten. It was one of those moments that stays with you forever. Oh my!!! Were the words. The Bimah was intact with the ark for the scrolls still there. The podium for the Rabbi and Cantor. The original chandeliers and some of the stained glass windows. The wall designs and original pews in the balcony. The basin for hand washing in the front foyer as you enter still dedicated to its original Jewish donor the Goldberg family. How could this be, I thought. Wasn’t this a Church? No, it was still a synagogue. It was still the old Beth El Temple on Ruckle.

And my only thought then as it is now – this building cannot be destroyed and must be preserved and shared by everyone. The heritage that this building represents must be remembered, celebrated, and passed on to future generations. And, after some research, I discovered that this is the last remaining historical synagogue structure in the City of Indianapolis. Surely, I thought, the neighborhood where the building stands and the Jewish community which had moved on further north would find this a treasure worth keeping.

For a full generation in the 20th century, the Temple served the lives, joys, and sorrows of the Jewish community. This area was a central hub for the Jewish community of Indianapolis. This area was not only where Jews attended religious services, but was also where they celebrated the Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremony, where they went to Hebrew school and Sunday school, where they attended Shortridge High School, played sports, and later got married. They did their shopping here; met their friends here; celebrated many occasions here with their families. There were many births, and weddings, and funerals.

Most of the people who once lived here have vivid memories, photographs, and documents that recall those years. And, yet, this era of Jewish life in this neighborhood of Indianapolis has largely gone unnoticed. There are very few public historical accounts, recorded memories, or pictorial collections. The history of the Jewish generation that once lived and thrived in Mapleton-Fall Creek is facing the possibility of being lost.

At the same time, there is no central address in Indianapolis, much less the state of Indiana, for anyone wanting to know, see, hear, and personally experience the history and legacy of the this Jewish community or any other community throughout the state. While there is an extremely energetic and pulsating Jewish presence in the city, filled with several congregations, social organizations and educational institutions, there is no central address where their past heritage can be transmitted to future generations - Where history and heritage can come alive, where young people can connect to their past, where those still living can pass on their memories.

The lives and contributions of Jewish families who created the city’s fabric are many. In addition to the well known Glicks, Eskanazys, Efroymsons, Simons, Maurers, and Smulyans, less may be known about those first Jews who arrived in the city in 1849. By 1860, they were already making an impact when more than half of the clothing businesses in Indianapolis were owned by Jews. In the ensuing years they came by the thousands from Germany, Hungary, Macedonia, Turkey, Poland, Russia and many other lands. They established charities, immigrant aid societies, social clubs, political societies, educational institutions, and several religious congregations.

As Indianapolis grew, so did Jewish involvement. The Jews of Indianapolis helped build today’s great city. Jews were involved in everything from business to the arts; they were not only the lawyers in the city but also the creators of civic organizations; they were peddlers, tailors, grocery store owners, butchers, bakers, manufacturers, department store owners, musicians and spiritual leaders. They were active in shoe businesses, jewelry enterprises, real estate developments and media ventures. And, they were and still are intimately involved in the polity and politics of Indianapolis.

And yet, all this history, heritage, life and contributions of the Jewish community in Indianapolis has not been fully exhibited and shared. Future generations are going to miss all that unless we do something.

In October of 2011, about 2 years ago, I stood before some 40 neighborhood residents and gave a 90 second Shpil, which was all the time that Jackie Nytes, then the head of the Mapleton Fall Creek CDC gave me. The immediate enthusiasm I received was infectious. And I’ve had this infection ever since. Sometime after that experience we gathered a small group from Beth El Zedeck Congregation led by Rabbis Dennis and Sandy Sasso for an on-site visit. He brought along Alan Goldstein, David Resnick, and David Kosene. Alan had his Bar Mitzvah in this building. And it was like watching kids in a candy store. And, I believe that they too were infected.

To make a long story short, in this 2 year time span, a group of us have already achieved much. Many people have come forward in support along this journey, stepping up at critical points, picking up the baton when it was needed. We managed to have Indiana Landmarks assume title to the building for which National Register status is being sought. We have organized a non-profit organization called the Temple Heritage Center with a Board of dedicated individuals from both the Jewish and non-Jewish communities. And, through the generosity of the City and Mapleton Fall Creek CDC we’ve been granted $190,000 to help stabilize the structure. The grant comes to us with a catch, however - we have to raise an additional equal amount from other private sources. The City wants to make sure that there is a group of stakeholders out there who will continue to support a sustainable use of this building.

I think by now you are realizing what’s missing here – the Jewish community. And, I can tell you in the same breath that the neighborhood is extending an invitation to the Jewish community to come and join it in saving the Temple and finding a good use for the building. And, we have reached the point where a forthright response from the Jewish community is needed. Is the Jewish community interested in saving this important historical treasure? Does it want to save the Temple, the last remaining historical synagogue structure in Indianapolis? Is the Jewish community willing to engage, through the Temple, with the good neighbors who are anxiously awaiting their participation?

I believe that the answer to all these questions is yes, but we haven’t gotten there yet. So far we’ve received verbal support from the Indiana Jewish Historical Society and congregation Beth El Zedeck. But we will need more than that. We will need the entire community to join us in saving the Temple and make sure that a proper sustainable Center is established. And we will ultimately need to find the money to support not only the immediate stabilization, but also the final preservation and programmatic function of the old historic Beth El Temple.

And so, I stand before you today with a dream that involves the Indiana Jewish Historical Society. And, I do so understanding full well that sometimes these things take a while to realize. And today I can only ask you to reflect on what I say and suggest and at the very least consider the points I make.

As far as I know the only organization that has played an active role in the preservation and dissemination of Jewish history in the state is the Indiana Jewish Historical Society. And you’ve been doing this for some 40 years – collecting, publishing, and programming; toiling in the vineyards, with few demands, hard work and deep love. Throughout your existence, you’ve created something that no other organization can lay claim. You have a brand and you are the only ones that have it – the Jewish history of Indiana.

I believe that this Temple, this project, may give your Society a once in a life-time opportunity to emerge as the premier organization in the State of Indiana for anything and everything related Indiana’s Jewish history - to not only preserve our Jewish heritage but also actively engage with all citizens of all faiths and backgrounds and of all ages in the preservation and celebration of our history for generations to come. We have an opportunity to take those stored documents and photos and videos and share them with everyone and anyone interested. It’s like that song in the musical Cabaret goes, “What good is it sitting alone in your room” when you can come out and play and kibitz and share the treasures you have with others.

I believe that this organization can make its home in the heart of Indianapolis, the capital of the State, and develop a new role as an active catalyst in promoting our Jewish history and heritage. And this Temple can be the place where interethnic, interfaith, and inter-communal programs, events, exhibitions and learning can take place. This Temple can once again assume a prominent role in in the city’s and the state’s vibrant cultural rhythms.

And, I believe that this organization can take a lead, in partnership with other organizations, to collect the oral histories, the photos and documents of the wonderful people who once lived around Temple Beth El and beyond.

And how do we go about doing this? We do this by partnering with institutions and organizations that believe in the same dream and together work to make that dream a reality. We do this together with the congregations of this city and other cities throughout the state. We do this with the Federations of this city and other cities throughout the state. We do this by approaching individuals who carry the same passion you do for Jewish history and heritage. And, this will take some planning, some work, and certainly some time. And we can begin doing that now. As the adage goes, “If you will it; it is no dream”

And, what is the alternative? Can we turn our backs to non-Jewish neighbors excited about our heritage and who want to know more about us? Can we afford to lose the stories of a generation of Jews still living and remembering? Are we not going to engage with our fellow Hoosiers? Should we just go back to the archives and cabinets where dusty material is stored and leave it all there?

In those documents of the Hanukah celebration of 1925, I briefly looked at the speeches and letters written to honor the occasion of the Temple’s dedication. And the only speech that seemed to resonate for me the most was the one delivered by Jack Goodman, the president of Beth El Temple. Reading it I felt that he was talking to me, over 80 years later.

I redacted his speech and I will end my talk with his message.

“We dedicate Beth El Congregation to God and Country. In doing so, I am sure I express the feelings of my fellow congregants. In this act of dedication, it is our sincere hope that it will bring with it a revived interest in the ideals of the Synagogue. We need be quite conscious of the sacred trust we have inherited from our ancestors. We need become aware of our obligations in preserving the heritage, and passing it on to our generations, undimmed, undiminished, undefiled….. We behold at Beth El a Synagogue building that is a delight to the senses and an encouragement to the soul. But we may not sit back and be content with this great achievement, for the work of our Synagogue must go higher and higher…. We are conversant with the fact that it takes time for a tree to grow. So does it take time for an idea to take hold and stir us to sublime action… may the ancient glory of our people shine forth, as the rising sun, to give warmth and light to mankind.”