

GROUP STARTED IN 1885 NOW PART OF BETH-EL ZEDEK HEBREW CONGREGATION

[This is the twenty-sixth of a series of articles prepared by Ethel A. Wynne, dealing with the history of Indianapolis churches.]

The existing Beth-El Zedek Congregation is a consolidation of two Hebrew groups, and in tracing the skein of the story previously to the merger, it is necessary to follow along two threads of history. The earlier organization, the Ohev Zedek Hungarian congregation, was begun in 1885 by Israel Glick and fifteen members. As early as 1880, however, a few persons living in the vicinity had been meeting on High Holy days in a room in the old Baldwin building at Market and Delaware streets, now the Union Title building, where services were held under the direction of Israel Glick, who was not a rabbi, but a teacher and cantor.

Among the early members were William Shane, William Schwartz, Sam Gelman, Martin Schwartz, Adolph Marer, Meyer Klein, Adam Marer, Henry Glick, Sam Lorber and Bernerth Lefkowitz. Later meetings were held in rooms at Market and Tennessee streets (now Capitol avenue), in a room at Virginia avenue and Louisiana street, and the large meetings on High Holy days were held in a small hall at South Delaware and Maryland streets.

The first rabbi was elected in 1889, Rabbi Federman, who served until 1894, when Rabbi Klein succeeded him and was in turn followed by Rabbi Jacob Hartman. During these early years, a cemetery at Kelly street and the Bluff road was bought, and the Ohev Zedek Cemetery Association was formed, in which only members of the Hungarian congregation and their near relatives were permitted to hold membership. It is of interest that the nominal fee of \$1 a year entitled a member to a burial lot, a hearse and a cab or two.

Under the leadership of Rabbi Hartman, a gradual growth was maintained and soon the need for a permanent house of worship became apparent. In 1897, therefore, when the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation bought a new site and offered for sale their temple at Market and East streets, the Ohev Zedek congregation decided to buy it for the price of \$10,000. There were at this time, about fifty-seven heads of families constituting the congregation, most of whom were small merchants living in the vicinity. Practically all were rearing large families on small incomes, but in times of utmost stress, their generosity and determination of purpose enabled the little congregation to continue. Although these Hungarian members were sometimes regarded inimical or clannish, it is explained that on any occasion when a countryman was in need, he was welcomed into a home even though the capacity of the house was already crowded beyond convenience by the family.

Zest and Enthusiasm.

One early member describes the zest and enthusiasm with which the congregation took up its occupancy in the new quarters in the latter part of 1897. A meeting of the congregation was held when the pews were auctioned at sums to meet the modest means of the members. These early members are described as a self-dependent group with strong racial pride and mutual appreciation, living in dignity and reserve within their financial means.

The word Hungarian was later eliminated when South Europeans entered

Ohev Zedek. Strict orthodox usages were retained, however. The ancient custom of men and women sitting apart was observed and the women occupied the balcony in the synagogue with a curtain of cheesecloth placed as a screen. The Mikvah (community bath) was also maintained, occupying one side of the temple, where special rituals were observed. A school where the children were instructed in Hebrew was conducted after the hours of the public schools by a teacher named Heller, and services in the temple were conducted in the Hebrew, German and English languages.

Financial stress was ever present, and although new members were constantly added, the movement of a great many persons to the north side of the city made it increasingly difficult for the congregation to meet demands. When the consolidation with the Beth-El congregation was suggested, Mr. Phil Greenwald, president of the Ohev Zedek congregation, expressed the feeling of the entire membership that the union would be desirable, and arrangements were completed for the merger.

Inception in 1915.

Taking up the other thread of the story, the Beth-El congregation had its inception in the fall of 1915 when Alexander Cohen called together a few Jewish persons living in the vicinity of Sixteenth and Illinois streets for the purpose of holding services on the High Holy days. A house in the neighborhood was rented for the first service and a cantor was engaged. There was, however, barely a minyan (a group of ten) present. During the following year the attendance increased and a place at Twenty-first and Talbot streets was rented and for the first meeting in the new room, a rabbi was engaged who also acted as cantor. Arrangements were made to use the Oriental Lodge Masonic temple at Twenty-first and Central during 1918 where daily services were held, and on the High Holy days, a student of the Jewish Theological Seminary at New York occupied the pulpit.

When in 1920 it was necessary to seek new quarters, a hall at Thirtieth and Illinois streets was rented, but by the following summer it became apparent that a permanent temple would be desirable. A committee headed by Joseph A. Borinstein was appointed to buy a lot at Thirtieth and Talbot streets.

The first regular rabbi was elected in 1922, Rabbi Bienefeld, and in the same year the sisterhood was organized with Mrs. Louis Sagalowsky as president. A gradual increase in membership was maintained and when in 1922 on Kol Nidre night, an appeal was made for a building fund, the sum of \$55,000 was pledged. The president of the congregation, Joseph A. Borinstein, died and was succeeded by Louis Sakowitz and Herman T. Cohen as vice-president.

Site Changed.

When it was found inadvisable to build on the lot on Thirtieth and Talbot streets, another site at Thirty-fourth and Ruckle streets was selected, and the building contract was signed in the summer of 1923. Remonstrance filed by property owners in the neighborhood caused all construction to be suspended. Objections finally were revoked and erection of the building continued. A second appeal for funds was made on Kol Nidre night in the fall of 1924 when \$35,000 was pledged toward the

a cost of more than \$125,000 and the congregation took occupancy of the new temple, accepting the large indebtedness with the \$90,000 in pledges as collateral. It was during this year that Abraham Goodman died, bequeathing \$25,000 to the synagogue and an additional \$2,000 for equipment of the Sunday school.

Rabbi Isadore Goodman was elected to the pulpit in the fall of 1925 and J. A. Goodman became president of the congregation. The dedication of the new temple was held December 11, 1925, with an elaborate program. Outstanding on that program was the message of the president in which he expressed the hopes and ideals of the entire congregation.

"We need be quite conscious of the sacred trust we have inherited from our ancestors," he said. "We need become aware of our obligations in preserving the heritage, and passing it on to our generations, undimmed, undiminished, undefiled. The difficulties that we had to encounter during former years in our building and organization programs should be relegated to the past. We need to make up our minds and hearts at this juncture of our journey to work for a Jewish religious regeneration. All must share in the responsibilities, then all can share in the privileges."

The congregation now was upon a sea of greater responsibilities and of greater opportunities. The response was adequate, however, and the officers of the group felt more than gratified.

Merger Made.

It was found that many members of the Ohev Zedek congregation living in the vicinity of the Beth-El temple were attending services there, and when inquiry was made, it was obvious that the convenience of the majority of the members would be served by a merger of the two congregations. The consolidation was consummated on March 23, 1917, and the name of the new organization became Beth-El Zedek. Ohev Zedek being interpreted meant "Love the Truth," or "Love the Righteousness," and Beth-El meant "House of God," it has been explained that the combined name being interpreted means "The House of the God of Righteousness."

The present rabbi, Rabbi Milton Steinberg, accepted the pulpit in 1928, and the cantor is Myro Glass, and the sexton, Eli Herwitz. It is of interest that Mr. Glass recently refused an offer in London, England, to remain with the Indianapolis congregation. It has been explained that the present consolidated organization remains a conservative congregation and aims to maintain a balance between modern American life and ancient Jewish tradition. The traditional Jewish prayer book is used and services are held using both the Hebrew and English languages. The present congregation includes 350 heads of families. Among the many affiliated organizations are the Sisterhood of which Mrs. J. A. Goodman is president; the men's club with a membership of 175, of which Max Plesser is president, and

the Young People's League with Dr. Elliott Hersh as president. The Sunday school of 300 children is held on Sunday mornings with Mrs. Julia Witoff, superintendent. Of particular interest is the junior organization which meets on Saturdays when the children officiate. Also on Saturdays is held a men's club for the study of Hebrew literature. Another group of great interest and pride is the mixed choir under the direction of Mr. Glass. Only music produced by the human voice unaccompanied is used in regular worship services. A recent acquisition of the congregation is the cemetery in the Bluff road, bought two years ago.

Massive Structure.

The Beth-El Zedek synagogue at Thirty-fourth and Ruckle streets, is a massive brick structure, trimmed in Bedford stone. It is of strictly modern design, marked by the flat roof and plain walled areas, with ornamentation sparingly used and judiciously placed. Over the main entrance in Ruckle street, the marquise of slight projection is topped by the customary symbols, the candelabrum of wrought bronze, and the tablets of law cut from stone.

A large vestibule containing rest-rooms, with stairs on either end leading to the main auditorium, makes a passageway into the vestry rooms, which occupy the first floor. In the vestibule is hung a bronze tablet which reads, "Ohev Zedek Congregation 1884-1927, Congregation Beth-El 1921-1927, Congregation Beth-El Zedek March 23, 1927." The vestry rooms are used for Sunday school, and for organizations meetings and with an adjoining kitchen of modern equipment, may be used for dinners.

The main auditorium on the second floor further exemplifies the modern interpretation of classical inspiration. The walls as well as the flat arched beamed ceiling are of ornamental stucco, artistically tinted. The long slits of windows suggest ancient usage, but are modern in construction marked by reserve and simplicity of design and all are memorial. The floors of the entire building are of terazzo in the modern spirit, and the pews are cut along lines both plain and dignified. Conforming to ancient Hebrew custom, the platform is occupied by the Bimah, or altar, with the ark containing the books of law. Upon the platform also, are the Menorahs of wrought bronze, replica of the seven-branched candles which stood in the temple at Jerusalem, and the rabbi's pulpit and the cantor's pulpit which may be inclined toward the ark or toward the congregation. Above the ark hangs the tablets of law before which burns the Eternal Light. A gallery in the rear of the auditorium is occupied in part by the choir of twenty-five voices. A bronze memorial tablet which hangs on a wall of the auditorium bears the names of deceased and a light beside each name is lit for twenty-four hours on the anniversary of the death. The seating capacity of the auditorium is estimated at 1,200. The present officers are, president, Mr. Goodman; vice-president, Isaac Marks; secretary, Jacob Weiss; treasurer, David Shane; former secretary, Daniel Stauber, and rabbi, Milton Steinberg.