The Journal of the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest

Essays edited for publication by Phil Freshman and Linda Mack Schloff

Contents

Director's Notes ........................................ 1
   *Linda Mack Schloff*

The Oasis in the Desert .............................. 3
   *Ellen J. Kennedy*

Irene Paull as Jewish Woman Radical .............. 19
   *Laura Schere*

President's Report .................................... 36
   *Etta Fay Orkin*

Officers and Board .................................. 37

Membership Information ............................ 38
In this, its debut effort at issuing a journal, the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest is pleased to present the two winners of an essay contest it conducted in 1996 and 1997. The contest was one of many events organized in conjunction with the exhibit Unpacking on the Prairie: Jewish Women in the Upper Midwest, which was on view at the Minnesota History Center, St. Paul, from September 1996 until October 1997. That exhibit was a collaborative effort by the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest (JHSUM) and the Minnesota Historical Society. The essay contest was cosponsored by the JHSUM and the weekly community newspaper American Jewish World. Support for the prizes was provided by the JHSUM’s Helen and Leo Wolk Fund. Judges included JHSUM board members Lionel Davis and Judy Sherman, Ph.D., as well as Marilyn Chiat, Ph.D.; Marshall Hoffman, Editor in Chief, American Jewish World; Beatrice Spector; and myself. Other members of the committee were Rabbi Abraham Ettingui and Billie Wahlstrom, Ph.D.

The object of the contest was to stir reflection on the subject of growing up Jewish in the Upper Midwest. The winners produced writings that are quite different from one another. Ellen Kennedy’s is a warm reminiscence about the role of her Ishpeming, Michigan, synagogue in fostering her sense of Judaism. Kennedy, a sociologist, has a Ph.D. in marketing and teaches that subject at the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul. Laura Schere’s effort, on the other hand, will form part of her Ph.D. dissertation and is written in an appropriately scholarly style. Both essays provide us with new insights.

It is our desire that the publication of these essays will help foster a climate in which more people realize the importance of commemorating Upper Midwestern Jewish history. More, we hope that others will write about their own experiences or conduct research on Jewish individuals and organizations in this region. In doing so, they will fulfill the JHSUM’s mandate—to connect our past to a Jewish future. Finally, we hope that we will find funding “angels” who will help us in continuing to publish worthwhile reminiscences, research, and analysis.
The present publication was made possible by the Jewish Women’s Exhibit Fund of the JHSUM, established to support the many events held in tandem with the History Center exhibit. We thank the hundreds of people who contributed to that fund. Thanks are due as well to Bonnie Paull, Lionel Davis, Gayla Ellis, and Laura Schere. The former two were invaluable in helping me locate photos of Irene Paull, while Gayla most kindly lent me photos for this publication. The book Irene: Selected Writings of Irene Paull, which she and others edited and which Midwest Villages and Voices, Minneapolis, published in 1996, proved useful in pinning down chronology for Laura Schere’s essay. Laura herself assisted greatly in the editing of her essay.

Linda Mack Schloff
Director
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of the Upper Midwest

THE OASIS IN THE DESERT:
A MEMOIR

by
Ellen J. Kennedy

I grew up during the 1950s and 1960s in Ishpeming, a little town in the iron-ore mining area of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. About 8,000 people lived there, including a handful of Jews. Whenever I asked my father why his father had chosen to settle in Ishpeming, Dad always said, “Because that’s where the horse died!”

Jews had started arriving in Ishpeming around the turn of the century; my father’s family, the Narotzkys, were among them. My dad’s explanation is probably as good as any for why they chose to live in the Upper Peninsula. Jewish settlement in two neighboring towns, Negaunee and Marquette, dated back to 1890. By the turn of the century, there were about six Jewish families in Negaunee and nearly a dozen in Marquette, the county seat and the largest town in the Upper Peninsula. Besides the Narotzkys, the Jewish families in Ishpeming around 1900 included the Cohodases, Dubinskys, Lowenstein, Caspers, Kamps, Arnes, Skuds, Malsins, Guefurs, and Rices. The Cohodas and Dubinsky families are my relatives, and the Lowenstein and Caspers were part of the congregational family when I was a little girl.

My earliest religious memory is of sitting at a High Holiday service when I was perhaps three years old; it was held in Ishpeming’s American Legion hall. We wouldn’t have a synagogue for at least several more years.

I asked my father, now in his mid-eighties, how Ishpeming had ever gotten a synagogue. He said, “Your mother did it, of course!” My mother was originally from Passaic, New Jersey, and as a young girl had been very active in her synagogue. I have her diary from her teenage years. Many entries relate her active participation in and enjoyment of youth groups and various synagogue events. When she married my father and settled in Ishpeming in 1947, she must have felt she had reached the ends of the earth. No syna-
gogue, and not much else either!

Growing up Jewish was very different for my dad than it was for my “nearly-a-New-Yorker” mother. When he was a boy, the forty-odd Jewish families in the county had worshiped together in rented halls in Negaunee, three miles away. Dad remembers having to walk those three miles, since it was, of course, forbidden to ride on the Sabbath. Kosher food was unavailable, and anybody who went to Chicago, or even to Green Bay, was given a shopping list: “Please bring me some bagels, corned beef, kosher pickles, tongue, good rye bread.” This was unimaginable for my mother, whose father had owned Jewish delicatessens. Here she was, the daughter of a lox-and-bagel man, married and living in the north woods with lots of Finns, lots of snow, and only a handful of Jews. Not a knish or blintz for miles!

As a first step in founding the synagogue, Dad recalled, Mom got all the women together for a meeting in our living room and made plans. Many of them were my aunts and cousins. By most standards, these were not exceptional women. This was the 1950s, and most were homemakers, including some college-educated women who were staying home and rearing their children. Perhaps it was their sense of the importance of learning that made some of them determined to provide a Jewish education for their children. For others, the influence of my mother was probably decisive. As a close friend and an in-law, she probably persuaded, coerced, and browbeat them, as need be, in order to develop support for a dramatic change in their Jewish way of life. Mom and others like her who had moved to Ishpeming from “civilized parts” wanted to re-create the active synagogue lives that they had known.

When the decision was made to build a synagogue, the women began raising money, “selling things, organizing, doing what women do,” as Dad put it. The local mining company donated a plot of land, one of the construction companies donated part of the cost of construction, and the women negotiated with other suppliers and merchants for the purchase of necessary building materials. The local Jews contributed money, but not through dues assessments; they gave according to what they could afford. Congregation Beth Sholom was constructed in 1952 through the vision, dedication, and leadership of a committed community.

That’s my father’s story of the congregation’s beginnings. But, as with any attempt at writing history, there are always various versions to be considered. The following is another one, equally interesting and heartwarming.

My cousin Bill Cohodas, who was to become a pivotal figure in our synagogue, has sent me his memoirs about the early years of Beth Sholom. Like Dad, he grew up in the Upper Peninsula. Bill remembers High Holiday services in Negaunee in 1920, held on the third floor of the old Eagles’ Club building. The visiting rabbis came from a theological school in Chicago and, Bill recalls, they were “very orthodox.” By 1942 the services were conducted at the old American Legion hall in Ishpeming and were led by students from the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. As mentioned, this is where I attended “shul” for the first time.

One day in the late 1940s, when Bill’s daughter Lynn was about five years old, she came home from school and asked her mother if she could attend the Episcopal Sunday school with all of her friends. Bill and his wife, Lois, who was from Chicago, realized that it was time to do something about teaching their children the fundamentals of Judaism. They began a little religious school in their home for five children: their two daughters and three other kids. Lois drew upon the religious training she had had as a child at Temple Sinai in Chicago to help get started. She later came across a newspaper article about Synagogue Sha‘are Zedek in Detroit that offered correspondence religious-school training for small, out-of-the-way towns. Bill and Lois wrote and received instructional materials from Sha‘are Zedek that they used for several years.

Then, as Bill’s story goes, in 1951 during Rosh Hashanah services at the American Legion hall, a young rabbi from New York, Kenneth Bromberg, asked the children how they liked the services. Bill’s nephew Howard Cohodas, age seven, asked why they couldn’t have their own building like all his Gentile friends did who attended church. As Bill writes, “We adults sat there thinking that it took a child to wake us up. There had been Jews in Marquette County for over seventy-five years, and we never did anything to build a synagogue.”

Between those Rosh Hashanah services and May of the following year, there were many kitchen-table discussions and meetings.
On May 19, 1952, a group of 125 interested Jewish people from Marquette, Ishpeming, Negaunee, and Munising met at the Mather Inn, Ishpeming’s beautiful showplace hotel, to begin organizing the Beth Sholom Community Center, Inc. The officers elected at that meeting included Isadore Dubinsky, my Uncle Lou’s brother, as president; Betty Narotzky, my mother, as secretary; and my cousin Bill as treasurer. The board of directors read like a family roster as well. The chairman was Arnold, Bill’s brother; and my uncles Lou Dubinsky and Joe Narotzky were board members. Bill Cohodas is the only surviving member of that group of founders.

From the very beginning, the synagogue was my family. Besides representing the early Jewish families of Ishpeming, it also included some of those who had arrived more recently.

Bill’s records indicate that the land for the synagogue was donated by the Cleveland Cliffs Iron Company; it was part of the Ishpeming park system, and so no one would be able to build around the proposed structure. Bill’s brother Arnold worked first to get the land donated and later with Walter Meyers, an architect, to draw up plans. Arnold wanted a simple and functional two-level building requiring minimal upkeep.

The groundbreaking ceremony, consisting of a program and prayer service, was held on Sunday, June 29, 1952. The next morning, the Pajula and Maki Construction Company began work. Arnold, assisted by his young son Howard, was at the site daily to check on the building’s progress.

As I’ve noted, there are several possible explanations as to why Congregation Beth Sholom, an outpost of Judaism in the north woods, came into being. Certainly there were people involved who had a commitment to a vision of Jewish life based on their own past experiences in big cities. And there were people for whom Judaism was important in terms of educating and training their children. But there must be many American communities that, like Ishpeming, had only a handful of Jews and never built a synagogue. Some characteristics of that particular Jewish community and the town in which it was situated, were important. For one, the land was donated. Also, though the construction company had no Jews on its staff, it built the synagogue at a very reasonable cost with donated and discounted materials. The Jews themselves must have been seen in a positive light by their fellow residents in order to bring together the various factors necessary to generate financial and other kinds of support for their religious efforts.

On Sunday, September 29, 1952, a dedication ceremony was held at which a bronze cornerstone tablet was unveiled. Religious school and services officially began. The school’s first staff included my mother; both Lois and Bill Cohodas; Sylvia Cohodas, Arnold’s wife; my Aunt Bea Narotzky; and others who came to Ishpeming in the late 1940s and felt like family to me. There was a five-member children’s choir, and there were about fifteen children in the religious school.

An official communitywide dedication was held on Sunday, June 7, 1953, nine months after the building had actually been in use. By all accounts, the event was quite remarkable. The head rabbi of Temple Beth El in Detroit, Richard C. Hertz, was guest rabbi. Sitting with him on the bimah were a Catholic priest and three Protestant ministers. This was the first time in Ishpeming’s history that a priest and ministers had ever been on a bimah, and the first time they had all worshiped together. It was like a scene from the 1988 Canadian film The Outside Chance of Maximilian Glick—almost a cliché of ecumenicism, until it actually happens. It took the building of that little synagogue to help create interfaith links among the religious groups in Ishpeming.

During the ceremony two Torahs were presented to Beth Sholom, one from the Lowenstein family and the other from the Fine family. Both Torahs, then more than a hundred years old, had been carried from Eastern Europe when the families emigrated to the Upper Peninsula in the early 1900s.

Congregation Beth Sholom obviously got off to a most remarkable start. However, there was no formal rabbinical leadership. So Bill, with permission from the other officers and the board, contacted Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati to find a rabbinical student who could lead the first year’s High Holiday services. Calling in August, he was disheartened to learn that all the year’s placements had been made, but he was also told that Rabbi Abraham Cronback, a professor emeritus of the college who was in his eighties, occasionally officiated at High Holiday pulpits. Bill called the rabbi, and he told him about this newly formed congre-
gation and its little building in northern Michigan, about the disappointment over not finding a student rabbi, and about the congregation's desire to have a rabbi for the first High Holiday services in their own synagogue. Much to Bill's surprise, Rabbi Cronback offered to come, and when Bill asked his fee, he replied, "Mr. Cohodas, if you pay me I'll come, and if you can't pay me, I'll still come."

Rabbi Cronback had recently become famous, or rather, infamous. Of all the rabbis who had been contacted to officiate at the June 1953 funeral of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who had been executed after being convicted of spying for the Russians, he was the only one who had agreed. Bill was concerned about the reaction of our congregants to this controversial figure. When he met the rabbi at the train from Cincinnati (there was no airplane service yet), he posed the question directly: Why had he consented to serve at the funeral? The rabbi's answer, as Bill vividly remembers, was, "Mr. Cohodas, we teach in Judaism that when a person commits a crime and he pays the penalty, he is then exonerated from all guilt and entitled to all the rites of the Jewish faith." Bill writes, "Rabbi Cronback sure did get Congregation Beth Sholom off to a great start!" The services, he reports, were memorable and moving.

The congregation is a Reform one. I asked Dad how that came to be, because it's surprising that unanimity was reached. (I think of that old joke about three Jews on a desert island who build three separate synagogues: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform.) Dad said a vote was taken, and that Reform won. Several of those who wanted an Orthodox congregation decided not to affiliate, but as the years went on, they all showed up for High Holiday services and, gradually, accepted the Reform decision. Over the years, of course, as the membership changed, so did the definition of "Reform" and the types of rituals that were observed.

The synagogue is lovely. It's small, compact, and gracious. The sanctuary has beautiful stained-glass windows, an ark with the two Torahs from Eastern Europe, a little choir loft, carpeting, air-conditioning, a beautiful memorial plaque at the rear, and a small organ (the purchase of which was highly controversial, Dad recalled). Over time, like one's living room, the sanctuary has become embellished with contributions and personal memorials from members, from Confirmation classes, and from families of those celebrating bar and bat mitzvahs.

I remember looking at the memorial plaque as a child and seeing the names of all of my grandparents and other deceased relatives. On the anniversaries of their yahrzeits little lights would shine by their names. When I was little, it felt really special to have their names lit up, and I was always glad that there were so many Narotzky's and Rice's (my mother's maiden name) on that plaque. It was like having a family tree right there on the back wall of the sanctuary.

The stained-glass windows are quite remarkable. Each of the ten windows in the sanctuary depicts one of the Ten Commandments. They were created by Raymond Katz, a renowned artist. There are other synagogues around the country that have one or two windows from this cycle, but only Beth Sholom in Ishpeming has the entire set. The original paintings on which the series is based are in museums around the world. There are several other stained-glass windows in the building as well, equally beautiful.

At the rear of the sanctuary is a small library. This was the prestigious place to be on Sunday mornings: It was where the
Confirmation class met. These were the oldest students, the leaders, the ones who got to be in the upstairs room with the beautiful wooden table, the fancy leather chairs, and the bookshelves lined with volumes on Jewish history, contemporary Jewish fiction, and beautiful Bibles. It was the only classroom that was self-contained, and the only one on the main floor. On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when the congregation overflowed the sanctuary, the library doors opened, and extra seating was available.

Downstairs there is a small kitchen, the site of the preparation of food for all kinds of gatherings—seder, Purim dinners, Chanukah parties. I remember working there with my mother and other women of the congregation preparing for these special events. The warmth, the camaraderie, the sense of family and Jewishness—all were connected and contained in that tiny room, with the plates and cups bought at the local grocery store from the women’s pooled mah jongg earnings. I always felt that the kitchen was partly mine, an extension of ours at home. In my memory, my mother was as much in charge of the synagogue kitchen as she was of the one in our house.

The downstairs has a large multipurpose room as well, divided by a folding door into several classrooms. Every fall when I was growing up, a consultant from Minneapolis would come to work with Bill and the mothers in establishing a curriculum for the religious school. The mothers, naturally, were the teachers (except for the Confirmation class, which Bill always taught). My class at first had four students: my cousin Norma; two friends, Jeff (whose family had lived in the area long enough to be relatives by default) and Karen, whose father owned the local furniture store from which everybody’s living room and bedroom sets were purchased; and I. My mother was our teacher most of the time. The curriculum was rigorous, with homework, workbook assignments, and tests. I remember spending many Saturday nights at Karen’s house, or she at mine, and doing some last-minute cramming and preparing for the next morning’s exams and assignments. When your mother is the teacher, there are no excuses for being unprepared.

Religious school (or Sunday school, as we always called it) met each week from 10:30 a.m. until 12:30, a rather late start. The reason was that my mother didn’t like to get up early. Also, we had a fair number of students who had to come in from Marquette, and

on a snowy or icy morning that fifteen-mile drive could take quite a long time. Most of the kids went skiing on Sunday afternoon, so we’d all be at Sunday school in ski clothes, ready to head outdoors as soon as the lessons were over. I remember us congregating in the entryway, brushing snow off our boots and leaving big puddles on the way downstairs to the classrooms.

Shabbat services were always held on Sunday evenings. Though this may sound strange, there was a perfectly good explanation for it. Most of the synagogue members were merchants whose stores were open for late shopping on Friday nights. It simply wasn’t a good policy to hold services on a Friday night; we wouldn’t have mustered a minyan. I don’t remember ever seeing a challah and only infrequently hearing the Kiddush recited, and I never saw a Havdalah service until I was an adult. But services were regular, even if they were held on Sunday. I don’t remember that they happened more than once or twice a month, however. And during the summer, when people’s schedules were erratic, there were never any services, again because too few people would have been present. This was only one of the ways that growing up in a community of so few Jews meant making compromises and adapting Jewish life to small-town life.

As noted, Beth Sholom began without a regular rabbi, and that remains the case today. In the early days lay leaders, particularly Bill Cohodas, would conduct services. However, the congregation decided that rabbinical leadership was important, and so student rabbis from Hebrew Union College would come out, about six or eight times a year. The congregation still depends on these visits. The rabbinical students stay at congregants’ homes on a rotating basis, giving the women an opportunity to outdo the previous month’s hostess for meals and hospitality. My father, a widower now for several years, continued to take his turn until just recently, worrying and fussing over the meals just as my mother had done.

Because Ishpeming has the dubious distinction of occasionally getting hundreds of inches of snow each winter, and because the Marquette County Airport is inauspiciously located in a valley, the student rabbi’s arrival by plane (after the demise of train travel) has been an uncertain business. Occasionally, a flight has been snowed in and never made it. But during all these years there has
never been talk of discontinuing the program. There has, however, always been lively discussion about whether the plane would make it in and whether the service would begin on time and how far someone would have to drive to pick up the stranded rabbi-in-training lucky enough to get Ishpeming as his pulpit.

Many of those student rabbis have become wonderful friends of the congregation. Some have returned for a second year, having found a home within the small but very dedicated Jewish community. While I was growing up, one of my favorites was Martin Siegel, who conducted services for several years. When the student rabbis made their visits, they not only led the Sunday-evening adult services and special holiday services, but they also led children's worship at Sunday school. The favorites, such as Siegel, were the ones who told good stories, particularly engaging ones about the sage Rabbi Hillel. I remember sitting in the choir chairs just to the right of the bimah and seeing him look over at the eight of us in the choir and having our absolute, undivided attention with the tales he would tell.

We had lots of pageants and plays, opportunities to dress up and act out the stories of the various holidays. I'm in a women's chavurah now, and when the group members were sharing Chanukah memories recently I was the only one to mention that portraying Judah Maccabee was a regular holiday highlight for me. We dressed up for Chanukah and for Purim every year, and the taller girls (of whom I was one) always played boys' parts. I remember a long purple robe trimmed with cotton batting and a terrific tinfoil crown that I wore as King Ahasuerus at Purim for several years in a row.

Such events enhanced the feeling that my little synagogue was like most people's families: It was the place for warmth, friendship, celebration, and connection. There, Judaism was alive and participatory.

I remember both my mother and Bill Cohodas leading many special kinds of events from the bimah. One year they even put on a reading of the play JB by Archibald MacLeish, which is based on the Book of Job. Synagogue life meant doing things, not just coming to listen to a rabbi (because there usually wasn't one) or to listen to a sermon (because there usually wasn't one of those, either). And everyone did things: Everybody acted in the pageants, took turns as teachers and synagogue directors, cooked in the kitchen, and planned special evenings.

Each year on Sukkot we built a sukkah in that wonderful little basement. The boards and chicken wire were put up early on a Saturday morning, before the moms and kids arrived. When we all got there, there were boxes of produce from Cohodas Brothers, the company that Bill and Arnold headed. The kids' job was to tie strings onto the apple stems, the bunches of grapes, and the gourds to decorate the sukkah. The boxes of apples I remember particularly vividly; they were Red Delicious, and I always ate more than I put onto the sukkah. None since have tasted quite as good. The boys went to the woods behind the synagogue and cut maple branches of gloriously colored leaves that we'd put into the chicken wire for the walls. Our Sunday school classes would make paper decorations, and we'd have our Sunday school service in the sukkah instead of in the sanctuary. There was always a wonderful smell, a combination of the fall leaves and the apples mixed with the peculiar odors of crayons, paints, and wine spills from long ago.

On Passover we always had a seder in the synagogue basement. The long banquet tables were covered with white paper table-

![View of basement kitchen and social hall/classroom.](image-url)
cloths that would be wine- and juice-stained by the end of the evening. The meal always began with Aunt Bea’s matzoh ball soup, the matzoh balls so hard that they could be used as baseballs. The women clustered in the kitchen to serve up the meal. It was always an honor to be allowed in to help, and it was a privilege to recite the Four Questions—“Ma nishtana halayla hazeh mikol halaylos?” When I attend catered seders at big synagogues today, I always think of those days with the matzoh-baseballs, the platters of chicken from all my aunts’ houses, and the various desserts that were each woman’s specialty; and I feel a twinge of sadness, a yearning for the love that went into the preparations in the little basement kitchen.

We celebrated everything in that basement. I always enjoyed the oneg treats after the Sunday-evening services, but I particularly recall the little dish that was set out for everybody’s contribution toward paying the person who would clean up. There was no such thing as a synagogue janitor; there was only the man across the street who looked after the building and who had the extremely important job of turning up the heat before weekend events. I recall phone calls about the heat and hearing my parents talk about the furnace being out, again!

Our family celebrated all of the life-cycle events at Beth Sholom. The b’nai mitzvot of my twin brother and sister, Robert and Linda, was a memorable occasion, with family members coming from all over the country to be at our little synagogue. My cousin Alfred, a kosher caterer in Chicago, even flew in all the food for the entire weekend’s festivities. My mother was thrilled to have all of her favorites, at long last!

In addition to the services and events I’ve described, I remember having many of my birthday parties in the synagogue basement. It was a terrific place, with enough room for a crowd of kids to be noisy and play games, and with the kitchen to prepare the birthday treats.

I was in a Confirmation class of three; the other two were my cousin Norma and my friend Karen. We wore beautiful white robes at the lovely service held when we finished our studies. I still have the Bible that I received that day, with my name engraved on it in gold. The picture taken of me standing in front of the bimah is one of my favorites. I remember that my class donated timbrels for one of the Torahs, and every time I see the timbrels on the Torah at my present synagogue in Minneapolis, I remember that Confirmation class gift. I also remember the most important message of that year of study, Bill Cohodas telling the three of us know-it-all teenagers the meaning of religion: “Religion is the answer to the unanswerable”—a profundity that has stayed with me for more than thirty years. That’s not bad for a class in a small backwoods synagogue.

The photographs of all the b’nai mitzvot and Confirmation classes hang on the walls in the library as a testimonial to the power of that small congregation to “grow Judaism” in its young people. The Jews in that synagogue, mostly relatives, did more than share worship and bloodlines. They shared and enriched each other’s lives as Jews. My dad said that during his years as synagogue president, a number of articles appeared about our little congregation; some called it the “oasis in the desert.” And truly it was an oasis, a place where Judaism flourished. It not only flourished in that small oasis but also in each of us, so that we continued to “grow Judaism” long after leaving Ishpeming.

Many of us, the first generation of Congregation Beth Sholom youth, have gone on to lead active Jewish lives. I have been on the board of my synagogue, Congregation Shir Tikvah in Minneapolis, and I am the parent of a daughter who hopes to be a rabbi and a son who just completed his bar mitzvah. I may even have my own bat mitzvah next year. My cousins are all raising Jewish children. Jim and Karlyn Rapport, an almost-related Beth Sholom family by dint of community longevity, have a son who is a rabbi who married a rabbi. Bill’s daughter Lynn, the one who at age five asked if she could go to the Episcopal Sunday school with her friends, grew up to marry the student rabbi who had led services for my brother and sister’s b’nai mitzvot.

My daughter, Louisa, was named at Congregation Beth Sholom in 1981. The female rabbinical student who officiated at that event was the first one to serve the congregation. It was a most moving occasion for me to be on the bimah with my own daughter, looking toward the back of the sanctuary, with its “family tree” of names and lights. It was a moment of richness, connection, and continuity.

When Louisa was about fifteen and my son, Jonathan, about
twelve, I returned with them to that synagogue. They were astonished that such a small place could sustain a congregation! They were also amazed that everybody present seemed to know me—and of course, they all did. Not only that, but they also knew all about my children, because the members of the congregation were family, in both the literal and metaphorical meanings of the word.

The congregation has persevered for more than forty-five years, in spite of the fact that most of my generation, raised in Ishpeming, has moved away. To be a Jew in a town of almost no Jews requires courage, tenacity, and commitment. I was one of only two in my graduating class of 200 students at Ishpeming High School in 1966. The next year, there were no Jews at all. In 1968 there were again two: my brother and sister.

It was odd to be in that highly visible minority position. Because there were so few of us, and because Ishpeming was such a little town, everybody knew who was Jewish. I was always called upon at school to “explain” Jewish holidays. Until I went away to college at the University of Michigan, I never knew what it was like to not know lots of Jewish people my age. I never had a sense of Jewishness as being anything other than being part of a small, isolated minority that was essentially family. It also meant that there was a responsibility. My parents would always admonish me to behave in certain ways because, if I didn’t, it would “reflect” on all of the Jews in the community.

It’s hard work, growing up in that kind of Jewish environment. Yet the synagogue’s founders really worked miracles. We lit Shabbat candles in our homes, made hamantashen and matzoh-baseballs, were confirmed, and then taught classes in the religious school. Aunt Bea taught everybody a little bit of Hebrew, and Uncle Bill conducted the Confirmation class for more years than I dare guess. We had beautiful Torah covers and timbrels and breastplates contributed by families at important times in their lives. We had lovely stained-glass windows and a furnace that got us through the bitter Ishpeming winters. We had different student rabbis nearly every year and a staff of teachers who were unpaid mom volunteers.

The shared identity and sense of community among people who otherwise were outsiders meant that every Jew in the vicinity came to Beth Sholom and that each one was made to feel welcome. Newcomers to the K. I. Sawyer air base about thirty miles away, new faculty members at Northern Michigan University in Marquette, new physicians at the area hospitals, new shopkeepers in town—if someone was Jewish, we knew about it; and the new arrival belonged to all of us.

Jim Rapport, of the family-by-dirt-of-longevity in Marquette, is a retired professor and father and father-in-law of rabbis. He wrote a heart-wrenching story, “Who Died?,” which appeared in a small journal, Being Jewish. The story, a true one, is about the death in Marquette of a seventy-year-old traveling jewelry salesman from Philadelphia. His body laid “on ice” for three months before a distant relative was finally found. She decided that he shouldn’t be buried among strangers in Pennsylvania but instead with his friends in the Upper Peninsula. The salesman, who was Jewish, was given a beautiful funeral at Congregation Beth Sholom and was laid to rest. The congregants polished their Buicks for the funeral procession, cried quietly at the Kaddish, and put pebbles on his gravestone. The relative never found out that the blue-haired mourners didn’t know the salesman, that the men shoveling the dirt on the coffin had never met him, that he had no “friends” in the cemetery. But did it matter? Of course not. Even dead, the salesman deserved to be part of the family of Jews at Beth Sholom.