

The History of Congregation B'nai Israel

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ASBI

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(1) This is Part 1 of a 2-part series. Today I am going to speak about the history of Cong. B'nai Israel. At a later date, David Passman will do Part 2 – the history of Anshe Sholom. You might say I'm David's opening act.

(2) Do you know the full name of our synagogue? It's ANSHE SHOLOM B'NAI ISRAEL CONGREGATION. That is a mouthful! It is five words, thirteen syllables, and (counting the apostrophe and the spaces) 38 key strokes. You could say ASBI (I do that a lot), but most people outside of Lakeview wouldn't know what we were referring to. It's much easier to simply say ANSHE SHOLOM. I've even done it myself. B'nai Israel does not get enough recognition. That's nobody's fault. We have very detailed information about the history of Anshe Sholom, thanks to David, a fourth generation member. However, we know very little about B'nai Israel.

(3) I have been researching the subject for over 2½ years and will share with you what I have learned. You may wonder why I took this project upon myself. It started when my brother put me in touch with Elaine Bush, our third cousin, who put our family tree on tribalpages.com. I looked up all the relatives I had met as a child. One of them was Rabbi Solomon Rest, who was my grandfather's first cousin. There was a side note on the web site that Rabbi Rest's draft card from 1918 showed him as the rabbi of Congregation B'nai Israel at 1363 Sedgwick Street. That address looked so familiar, so I looked at our shul's web site. Sure enough, it was the same B'nai Israel that merged with Anshe Sholom!

(4) I thought to myself, "Wow. That is so cool! I moved to Lakeview in 2010 just so I could daven at Anshe Sholom B'nai Israel. Without knowing it at the time, I came back to my roots!"

(5) Cong. B'nai Israel was founded in the 1880's. It was a small synagogue. The few listings I found showed that they had between 50 and 100 members. They were located in the Old Town neighborhood at 169 Gault Court, at least as far back as 1900. The street was re-numbered in 1909. The address became 1115 N. Gault Court. At a later date, the street name was changed to N. Cambridge Ave. That location is now a parking lot. It is one block east of the former Cabrini Green Housing Project.

(6) Sometime between 1908 and 1918, B'nai Israel moved to 1363 N. Sedgwick Street, a building formally owned by Anshe EMES. Anshe Emes moved to the Lakeview neighborhood. They were listed in the telephone directory at 627 W. Gary Place starting in 1916.

(7) Congregation B'nai Israel was not listed in the directory until 1923 because they didn't have a telephone. It's possible that B'nai Israel and Anshe Emes shared space for a period of time, but we will never know for sure because Anshe Emes' records from 1916-22 were all destroyed in a fire.

(8) Anshe Emes rapidly outgrew the building on Gary Place. They purchased the building at Pine Grove and Grace from Temple Sholom in 1926. The building was expensive to maintain and they had too few dues paying members. Anshe Emes soon found itself in financial trouble, which was aggravated by The Great Depression. ANSHE EMET OF CHICAGO, a successor religious corporation, was formed in 1935. They bought the property of the distressed Anshe Emes.

(9) Anshe Mizrach moved from the South Side into the building vacated by Anshe Emes. They were first listed in the telephone directory at 627 W. Gary Place in 1933. The street was renamed Patterson Avenue in 1935 or 1936. Their last listing at 627 W. Patterson Avenue was in 1991. Their last rabbi was the late Solomon Rockove. Many of you will remember him. He was a member of ASBI after he retired. He passed away in February, 2011.

(10) The property at 627 W. Patterson was sold to a developer and went through an extensive renovation. It is now a condo building, with ten units, including two multilevel units. If you pass by, you will see the name "ANSHE EMES" carved in the stone above the doorway. According to a realtor I know, it's a stellar building with hardly any turnover. The last sale was in January, 2015. It was one of the multi-level units, over 3,000 square feet with 14-foot ceilings, four bedrooms and three baths.

(11) B'nai Israel remained on Sedgwick Street until the building was sold in 1956. One source I found said that the building was sold to the Muslim Holy Temple of Islams; however, I was not able to verify that information. I do know, however, that the Pillar 3 Rock Missionary Baptist Church occupied that location sometime after B'nai Israel moved out. I have two eye witnesses who saw the church, David Passman and Herb Eiseman. The building has since been torn down and it's now a horse pasture owned by the Nobel Horse Theater.

(12) Anshe Sholom and B'nai Israel merged in 1960. David was there at the merger and will you tell more about it at his presentation. Some of B'nai Israel's plaques are hanging on the back wall of our sanctuary.

(13) I have information on only three rabbis at Congregation B'nai Israel, although there may have been more:

(14) The American Jewish Committee 1900-01 Yearbook Archives shows the Rabbi as J. N. Rosenblum. I was not able to find any other information about him, not even his first name.

(15) I know a lot about Rabbi Solomon Rest from the family tree, from meeting him as a child, but mostly from two CDs his granddaughter sent me this past March, which were copies of a taped interview he did the age of 84. I will give you the highlights.

(16) Rabbi Rest was born in Plungyan, Lithuania in 1880. He was one of eleven children. At least two of his siblings died in childhood. The family tree show the years of their births and deaths. I suspect two others also died in childhood. The family tree shows a girl born in 1872 and a boy born in 1876. The rabbi did not mention them when his son asked Rabbi Rest to name his siblings.

17) When Rabbi Rest was a young child, the family moved to Libau, Courland on the Baltic Sea. Courland is a province of Latvia. It was ethnically diverse because, at different times in history, it had been under the sovereignty of Poland, Russia, and Germany. Many languages were spoken there. Rabbi Rest became fluent in German and probably spoke some Russian and Polish, as well.

(18) When he was eleven years old, his parents sent him away to Yeshiva. He studied at a number of Yeshivos in Europe until he came to America in 1900, arriving in Portland, Maine. From there, he went to Chicago.

(19) Shortly after arriving in Chicago, Rabbi Rest met Abraham Isaac Miller, a shochet. Mr. Miller introduced the rabbi to his daughter, Ida, who the rabbi described as a fine young lady who spoke a very clear English. Rabbi Rest remained in Chicago a very short time. He spent the next three years as an itinerant rabbi to various small Jewish 4 communities in Wisconsin. He obtained kosher meat for these communities and taught the children. He also sold eyeglasses for a Chicago department store to German farmers in Wisconsin. Optometry was not an exact science in those days!

(20) He came back to Chicago in 1903. In August of that year, Rabbi Rest and Ida Miller got married and settled in the Old Town area. He was unable to find a position as a pulpit rabbi, so his father-in-law bought a meat market on 14th Street for Rabbi Rest and a partner. The partner stayed in the shop while Rabbi Rest made the deliveries by horse and wagon. His mother was very embarrassed by this. Her son, a Talmud scholar, who spent so many years studying in Yeshivos, driving a horse and wagon!

(21) After 6 months, the rabbi sold the meat market and bought a small grocery store in the Old Town neighborhood. That didn't last long either, because in the spring of 1904, he found a job as a shochet for Armour & Company's Kosher Division at the Chicago Union Stockyards. He took the streetcar to work. He remained with Armour for sixteen years, where he became their head shochet.

(22) Rabbi Rest and Ida had six children, all home births. They had three daughters. The fourth child was a son. Then they had twin sons, which was a big surprise, because they didn't know they were expecting twins. Rabbi Rest mentioned that his father-in-law was the mohel for the twins' brissim, which boggles my mind, because Mr. Miller was a shochet! I would think those were very different skill sets.

(23) Phone directory records listed Solomon Rest as a laborer until 1917, when he was shown as the rabbi of Kehilath Israel. I have documentation that he was rabbi at Congregation B'nai Israel from 1918 thru 1923. He was also the Ba'al Tefillah there on the High Holidays and he taught Hebrew school and hired other teachers.

(24) Kosher slaughter was like the Wild West in the early 20th Century. There were shoctim who worked for meat packing companies at the Stockyards and there were also shoctim who worked for individual butchers. A shochet might work for several butchers. Kosher certification standards varied. The cRc did not exist until the 1930's. Rabbi Album, who Rabbi Rest respected very much, was the Rav Hamachshir in charge of Armour.

(25) Organized crime was very involved with the unions. The gangsters were the ones responsible for organizing the workers in butcher shops and the shoctim into a union. The union had officers, but the gangsters really ran the show. Rabbi Rest mentioned four names, Mr. Atkin, Mr. Taylor, Mr. Green, and Maxie Eisen (who was a notorious gangster).

(26) Rabbi Rest attended some of the union meetings, but was unable to become a member because Armour was a non-union shop. In 1919 a committee of shoctim asked him to become the president of their union, but that would have meant him resigning from Armour. Also, Rabbi Album advised him against it because of the involvement of organized crime. In 1920, Rabbi Album died. Two other rabbis, who Rabbi Rest declined to name, came in with a different Hashgasha. Because of this, he resigned from Armour.

(27) In 1920, Rabbi Rest agreed to become the president of the Butcher Workers and Shoctim Union. While he was standing on the podium, Mr. Atkin came up to congratulate him. From what I understand from listening to the interview, Atkin was employed by the union, but really ran things behind the scenes.

(28) Rabbi Rest told Atkin, that things were going to be different. He said that he would not take orders from the gangsters. He told Atkin that if they had a problem with a butcher or with a shochet, that, instead of breaking windows, breaking ice boxes, breaking knives, and maybe beating up the man, that they should first come to him and he would try to settle it. The rabbi said that, if he couldn't settle it, he would tell Atkin what to do, but not to do anything without him.

(29) Atkin would not take orders and caused a lot of trouble. After a year, Rabbi Rest fired him. This may have been a mistake, because Maxie Eisen (who had previously concentrated his union activities to the fish markets)

and Mr. Green got more involved with the Butcher Workers and Shochtim Union. Maxie was a lot worse than Atkin. Green, however, proved to be an ally.

(30) When Rabbi Rest first became president, he had an expense account, which he used for taking cabs to and from union meetings. In 1921 the union bought him a car and he had to learn how to drive.

(31) In 1922, the butcher workers and the shochtim split into two separate locals. Rabbi Rest remained president of the Shochtim Union. He was a real thorn in the side of organized crime. He couldn't stop all abuses, but he did whatever he could. The Forward newspaper supported him. He asked a friend who worked there for advice. The friend told him to talk to the State's Attorney. The State's Attorney told Rabbi Rest to report to him if anybody threatened him, and not to wait till they actually did anything to him.

(32) After one contentious union meeting, Mr. Green went to the office looking for Maxie. He was told that Maxie "went to fix up Rabbi Rest." Green then rushed out to his car, caught up with Rabbi Rest, who was driving two shochtim home. Green signaled for him to stop and not go any further. Green then went ahead and they waited for about fifteen minutes.

(33) Green found Maxie, who was waiting in ambush. Green pointed his gun at Maxie and said, "You are going home. You are not laying a hand on the Rabbi Rest, the president, or you will be finished up right here." Maxie backed off and left. Green returned to where the rabbi was waiting. He said, "Rest, I saved you." The rabbi said, "You saved me, why?" Green told him what happened. Rabbi Rest said, "I thank you very much, Green. Should I make a report?" Green said, "No, don't make a report. Just go home."

(34) Maxie then tried another tactic. He filed a complaint with the Amalgamated Meat Cutters Union of North America, the umbrella group to which the Shochtim Union belonged. Rabbi Rest was called to appear before Amalgamated.

(35) The officers told Rabbi Rest that Mr. Eisen said that he was not letting them do their work. The rabbi said, "When I can't open a door, I don't break the door down; I try different keys." He said that when they had something against a butcher, they wanted him to away the shochet and they broke things in the shop. The rabbi told the officers he believed in sitting down and settling their differences in a fine respectable way. The officers agreed with the rabbi and told Maxie not to interfere. The rabbi did not mention Maxie again, but this was not the end of his problems with the gangsters.

(36) Rabbi Rest went on a trip to New York. While he was there, he received a call from someone at The Forward Newspaper. He was told that it was not safe for him to be in New York because the Chicago gangsters were in contact with the New York gangsters and it was dangerous for him to stay there. The rabbi cut his trip short and went back home.

(37) The last straw occurred in 1930. Rabbi Rest was on the podium at a union meeting when a gangster came up to him sticking a gun in his side. The gunman said, "Either you step down and resign the presidency right now or we will fix you up. You 7 come out in the hall with us." The rabbi said, "If you are going to do something wrong to me, you are going to have to do it right here, in front of the whole union. I am not going anywhere with you." The gunman backed off and left. Rabbi Rest was mad because no one tried to stop the gangster, so he did resign as president.

(38) There was a lot a trouble with the union after that. There was a strike. Judge Fisher was called in to mediate. The judge prevailed upon Rabbi Rest to take back the presidency in 1931. The rabbi accepted, but resigned again in 1933, when his wife got sick and he needed to spend more time at home.

(39) Rabbi Rest was the rabbi of Ravenswood Hebrew Congregation from 1931-39. His draft card from 1942 showed that he was employed at Beth Jacob Feder at 5047 N. Kedzie Avenue.

(40) Ida Rest died in 1944. She was not very old, only in her sixties. Rabbi Rest remarried the same year to the former Rose Phillips. Rose died in 1963.

(41) My father was very close to Rabbi Rest. He visited him often. When I was a child, I went with my father several times. When I met Rabbi Rest, he was retired and totally blind. His second wife, Rose, was still living at the time, but I do not remember ever meeting her.

(42) When I met Rabbi Rest, he lived at the Somerset Hotel, located at 5009 N. Sheridan, in the Uptown neighborhood. It was a very nice hotel and Uptown was a nice neighborhood at that time. The hotel first opened in 1920. In addition to long-term residents, many famous people, such as movie stars, stayed there. Also, some infamous people, like Al Capone. His tunnels are still under the building! In the late 1970's the Somerset reopened as a mental facility. It was a horrible place! It was finally closed down in by the state in 2010.

(43) The building was sold and went through a 2½ year renovation. It reopened in October, 2014 as a luxury apartment building. It has 160 apartments consisting of studios, one-bedrooms, and two-bedrooms. I was in the building in July of this year. I saw the lobby, the workout room, and a two-bedroom unit. Everything was beautiful, but I wouldn't want to live there. I'm hoping this building helps to bring back the Uptown neighborhood.

(44) Rabbi Rest lived his later years at the Jewish Home for the Blind. My father visited him there, but I did not.

(45) Rabbi Rest died in May, 1972, at the age of 92. He was buried at Waldheim Cemetery in Forest Park, with his first wife, Ida, and with his eldest daughter, Goldie, who predeceased him by four months. I saw their graves in 2013. They have a triple headstone.

(46) I know a little bit about Rabbi Eli Regensberg. He was the spiritual leader of Congregation B'nai Israel from 1935 to 1955. He was born in Poland in 1875. He came to the America in 1924 and became a citizen in 1930. He was married to the former Bertha Gordon. They had five children. Bertha died in 1939 at the age of 63.

(47) Rabbi Eli Regensberg came from a rabbinic family. His father was a rabbi. In fact, he came from a long line of rabbis in Europe. His brother, Rabbi Chaim Regensberg, was the Dean of Factuality of the Hebrew Theological College and the Av Bet Din of the cRc.

(48) I found two articles in the Chicago Tribune archives about Rabbi Eli Regensberg. One was about time he came to the synagogue one morning and found a dead body in the washroom. The other article was his obit. Rabbi Regensberg died in December, 1955. He was buried with his wife Bertha at Waldheim Cemetery in the B'nai Israel section.

(49) I would like to acknowledge all of the people who helped me with this project. If you are in this room, please stand up when your name is called.

- David Passman, ASBI's historian, has been my mentor throughout. He was able to fill in some of the blanks I had in my research. He directed me to resources. He was able to tell me when I was getting off-track.

- Herb Eiseman, who owns Herb's Tours. He conducts tours of Jewish Chicago, primarily of the South Side.

- Carey Wintergreen, who owns Wintergreen Architects. He has been instrumental in preserving many old synagogue buildings.

(Both Herb and Carey are board members of the Chicago Jewish Historical Society.)

(50) I also got information from:

- Rabbi Lopatin
- Kevin Tatum, a real estate agent with @Properties.
- Erin, the leasing agent from Somerset Place Apts.

From my family there were:

- Arliss Rest, my third cousin and Rabbi Rest's granddaughter. She originally created the family tree by hand and was the one who sent me the CDs of the interview with Rabbi Rest.

- Arliss' brother, Hillard, also gave me some information.

- Elaine Bush, who is Arliss' second cousin and my third cousin. She has done a tremendous amount of work putting the family tree on tribalpages.com and is currently maintaining it.

(51) You may wonder if being the first cousin twice removed of one of the rabbis of the shul gives me any clout around here. I will tell you, it gives me a seat in the second row!