

This American Jewish Life

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By Bernie Maengen

In my household, we have 2 phrases: "Less is more" and "To make a long story short!" We'll see how this talk fits. I grew up, where some of us around here like to say, in the holy city of Pittsburgh. My parents however chose to live in the suburbs and as a result we did not experience Squirrel Hill (the Jewish section of Pittsburgh) except to visit on occasion and eat at the delis! I am a first generation American, an only child of parents who immigrated from Germany in the late 1930s. Growing up my parents and I always observed the Jewish holidays mostly just the three of us since relatives lived in other states. Religious services and Sunday school, as it was called then, were held in a local school before the synagogue in this area of Pittsburgh was built. Parents were the teachers, as there was no hired staff. After some time a total of 56 original families came to together, through fundraising and most likely a capital campaign, and built what is now Beth Israel Center. That is where I continued to attend Sunday school until I lost interest and told my parents I was no longer going to attend! That didn't go over too well, so I went reluctantly and then sporadically. The teachers weren't very engaging and I just wasn't that interested, plus there was homework. Since girls didn't have Bat Mitzvahs at the time, I went through what was called a confirmation. Girls who were in 9th or 10th grade each gave a talk and there was a ceremony of some kind. There were probably 7 or 8 students in the group. That is all I remember about it. For me services were solemn, boring and not very engaging. There was no music like we have here. It was a young congregation at the time and I'm sure now, things have changed. In fact, my mother still receives a newsletter from the Center and it is thriving and growing. I Googled Beth Israel Center recently and looked at the website and photographs. I must say, things look much different now. The events and programming certainly have developed from those early days. The Center looks so much more inviting now.

Being the daughter of immigrant parents and one of very few Jewish students in my public schools certainly put me in the minority. I felt awkward about missing school for the high holidays. My friends had lots of relatives, we had very few. The Holocaust was a shadow over me, sometimes talking about it and sometimes not. We lost family during that dark time. I remember as a young girl once visiting relatives in Ohio and driving by the local swimming pool. My aunt pointed out that the pool was segregated. We talked about what that meant and how wrong it was. She and the rest of the family could relate and had their own personal experience to draw from.

It wasn't until my adult years that I did my research to see if I could locate other family members. I did discover relatives, some living in the States, some in England, France and Canada. I found out about those who perished through another relative and a Jewish genealogy Web site. I was even able to see a photograph of my mother's aunt's apartment building in Germany when I posted the address on a Jewish Web site called All Generations. Seeing that photograph made me wonder who is living in that apartment now. Do they even know the

history of who lived there before they did? I continue exploring this part of my life through publications, Web sites and visiting my elderly relatives in New York when I'm there.

Upon arriving in Eugene after having lived in upstate New York for several years I immediately sought out the Jewish community. I never connected with a Jewish community in upstate New York and now I felt like I needed that connection. So, when I started attending services, Rabbi Myron Kinberg suggested I meet people who were new to town like me. He gave the names of people I might want to contact, and that is what I did. Those people are still very close friends almost 30 years later. At first I came to services regularly, then sporadically, then regularly again. Once I met more and more people involved with TBI I realized this is where I belonged. I started getting really immersed. I became a member, started taking classes, serving on committees, volunteering for various tasks, went to Israel twice, took part in Purim shpiels, attended large seders and Hanukkah parties. Finally, after being involved for quite a few years I was asked to be on the Board and I'm still on the Board! My involvement with Jewish life grew and continues to grow here in little Eugene, Oregon. I feel like I have a definite role in my community. When I worked at the Eugene Public Library, I used my resources of Jewish publications and listserves to recommend children's and adult Jewish related books so that the library could purchase those books. People in the Jewish community have often told me how much they appreciate the many books of Jewish content the library has. This is not only my doing but I would like to think I had a little influence. My connection to Jewish life is stronger here than it has been anywhere else. Even going to New York City, where there is a very strong Jewish presence and a multitude of synagogues one could join, my sister-in-law has said, the best Jewish community is in Eugene. My friends are my extended family. My connections here are strong. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. My parents set my Jewish foundation and the layers evolved here.

If you are new to our TBI community, I encourage you to get involved, take part in what is offered – join a committee, volunteer, become a member. You might just find you are part of a new extended family.

Shabbat Shalom!