

INTRODUCTION

In 2003, three seemingly unconnected events occurred that brought about this book / project.

First, my lovely wife Fern and I decided to do a black and white photo history of our families in Chicago. Her family started out in the Maxwell Street neighborhood. My family started out in the Lawndale neighborhood (my Grandfather was in the meat business and went daily to the Union Stock Yards). While taking photos of what was left of the Maxwell Street area, I was struck by how a once vibrant community such as this, could just completely disappear. (At one time there were over 45 synagogues located in this neighborhood, as well as many other ethnic/religious/cultural groups). As I continued taking pictures of the Stock Yards, Douglas Park, and Albany Park I noticed that quite a few synagogues had just seemed to vanish. I was looking for Beth Itzchock, The Drake Avenue Shul, located in Albany Park, my wife's family shul. I just couldn't find it. There was just a park where the once venerable synagogue for over seventy-five years. There was not even a plaque stating that there once stood a magnificent synagogue and that a once vibrant Jewish community inhabited this Chicago neighborhood.

Next, as I was inspecting a new condo building (I am a professional, private building inspector), I noticed across the street an unusual church with a condo building adjacent to it. Turns out that this church was Beth El Congregation, built in 1902. The condominium was Mohlner Hall, the Beth El communal building. I was surprised to say the least. I wondered how many synagogues were now churches, Asian Temples, Mosques, Condos, and Community centers. I wondered how many were falling apart due to lack of funds, or community support. I wondered how soon, would it be before valuable record of the Chicago Jewish communities very existence would be erased forever, like Maxwell Street.

Finally, a book came out called "A Walk to Shul", by Norman Schwartz and Bea Kraus. It is a wonderful book about the Lawndale neighborhood. It lists over 55 synagogues, schools, clubs, and other communal buildings. I immediately drove downtown to the Jewish Historical Society, and picked up a copy. I read it completely. It even has a photo of the old J.P.I. (The Jewish Peoples Institute), the predecessor organization to the J.C.C.'s), where I had gone to nursery school in the early 50's. I thought what a great idea to write and photograph about a bygone era. It also occurred to me at this time, that there must be many such synagogues and communities that at one time or another had sizable Jewish populations; a now had evolved into other ethnic communities. The more I researched this phenomenon, it is also became painfully clear that several synagogues were in disrepair, or worse already torn down, and with it a valuable piece of Chicago-Jewish history, gone forever.

I next ventured to the Spertus College Library to see if such a book existed, the chronicled the history in photographs all of Chicago's synagogues. I asked head librarian Dan Sharon if such a book existed and if I could take it out of the library or used for research. He asked what I needed it for, and I told him of my family photograph project and that I was searching for Beth Itzchock. I also told him I was taking photos of all the places our families had lived and

worked in Chicago since coming to America and I wanted to fill in the blank in our photo history. I told Dan, that my wife's synagogue was torn down, and that many others were in danger of the wrecking ball. I told him of my concern of saving in photos a history of Chicago's long gone vibrant Jewish communities and I did not understand why a photographic history was never undertaken before. To make a long story short, Dan said quite off-handedly, why didn't I just take all the photos myself and preserve the remaining synagogues. I told him I was not a professional photographer. He said could you take a photograph. I said yes I could. Dan said, well take them and we will both have a record. I could donate them to the Spertus.

The first problem was first I needed to locate the former synagogues and I needed to make a list of the addresses. Where to start? I did not realize, that a list already existed. (Historian Dr. Irving Cutler, researcher/photographer Norman Schwartz, and author Sidney Sorkin compiled it, in 1980. Also available at Spertus). So I went to the Chicago Public Library downtown. There I went through the microfiche from 1900 thru 1950 and made a matrix of all the synagogue listings on my computer. So with map/matrix in hand, I started combing the various Chicago neighborhoods. This was done in between my regular work inspecting Chicago homes and condos. Often times I would have time in between inspections to photograph my subject buildings.

After receiving a camera from my wife, I set about the task at hand. That being a photographic chronicle of as many synagogues, community centers, orphan homes, and any other Jewish communal building I could find. Little did I know, that I would also find a treasure in the new ethnic communities that replaced the former Jewish communities. I was delighted that what was once a Jewish synagogue or communal buildings were now used to serve the Afro-American, Hispanic, and Asian religious and communal needs.

I first went back to those first church and condo buildings. It turns out that they were originally the synagogue and community center for Congregation Beth El. Built in 1902. Later they relocated to the Logan Square neighborhood to 3228 W. Palmer, in 1923. Again they moved to West Rogers Park at 3050 W. Touhy in the 1950's. And currently resides in North Suburban Northbrook off Dundee in the 1997. And this of course was the toughest challenge. To not only locate what was, but to find where they are. Which is to say what happened to a particular congregation after they left "the old neighborhood". Did they move to a larger building or to a smaller one? Did they move to another neighborhood, or did they relocate to another suburb? Did they merge into another congregation, or did they just fade away (such as Bikur Cholim on South Houston St. on the South East side of Chicago, which closed this spring and relocated to the southwest side-Lawn Manor. A valuable source of information on this changing / merging phenomena is "The Jewish Resource Book" by Rachel Baron Heimovic.

As you can see this task is quite daunting, but what worthwhile is not. It is with great pleasure that I present to you, "Doors of Redemption, The Forgotten Synagogues of Chicago and Communal Buildings".