

COMMUNITY NEWS

The Jefferson Ave. Shul and the search for East Side memories

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The former Ahavas Sholem known as Jefferson Avenue Shul still stands at 407 Jefferson Avenue, but it is a shell of its former self. To the right lies a vacant lot strewn with rubbish; to the left a home that has seen much better days. Yet when it was built, it expressed the hope of an East Side Jewish community that was gradually moving away from poverty and into prosperity. While the congregation incorporated in 1892, this site dates from 1903, when for the princely sum of \$28,000, a byzantine style shul with a dome and honey colored bricks fascia — both design choices unusual for their time — was erected, striking an imposing presence in the neighborhood. A line of three Stars of David ran from the top of the entranceway doors, to the large stained glass window in the front of the building, and on to the top of the dome. The building itself was topped with decorative brickwork and a set of four intricate finials sat on the topmost corners. It was an impressive sight. In directing the building of the new “Congrega-

It was here on the East Side that over two-thirds of the Jewish population lived at the turn of the last century. While nearby William Street was the mercantile hub of the East Side Jewish community, Jefferson Avenue was the central religious and cultural heart. In the late 1920s and 1930s, Irving Freedman, like other teenaged boys, spent Friday nights “shul-hopping” as they walked from shul to shul wearing their tallism.

tion of the Lovers of Peace,” the architect, A. Minks, wrote in his notes that “All materials to be of the best of their respective kinds, and all workmanship to be of the best quality.” Not surprisingly, the Jefferson Avenue Shul was described as the “stylish” shul of the neighborhood.

Some of those same elements of the original building remain today, although not all. The Magen David was removed when the building was closed as the last synagogue in East Buffalo to shutter its doors in the 1960s. Sold to a church and then to another church, it is now known as the Greater New Hope Church of God in Christ, but it has suffered decades of neglect that has reduced this once beautiful building to a crumbling edifice that is under threat of an emergency destruction order. A team of East Side preservationists, led by David Torke of “FixBuffalo” are trying to halt its planned destruction, as they devise a plan for its restoration and an adaptive reuse for its future life. He can be contacted at



The synagogue at 407 Jefferson Avenue was built in 1890 and was once the largest place of Jewish life on the City’s East Side. Today, along with the forgotten Beth Jacob Cemetery at the end of Lansdale Street, Ahavath Sholem remains one of the last vestiges of Jewish life east of Main Street. According to City records the synagogue was sold to Saints Home Church of G-d in 1960 and in 1982 Greater New Hope Church congregation bought the building.

David Torke: <http://fixbuffalo.blogspot.com/2009/10/city-for-sale-part-iv.html>

716-602-5440. You can see some of his photographs at: <http://fixbuffalo.blogspot.com/2009/10/city-for-sale-part-iv.html>. His email contact is davidtorke@gmail.com.

Although 407 Jefferson Avenue has not served as a synagogue since the 1960s, this building remains one of the last physical links to Buffalo’s East Side Jewish past. It was here on the East Side that over two-thirds of the Jewish population lived at the turn of the last century, and it was the place where many of today’s Jewish families can recall their own relatives’ early beginnings. While nearby William Street was the mercantile hub of the East Side Jewish community, Jefferson Avenue was the central religious and cultural heart. Across the road from Ahavas Sholem, stood the JCB or Jewish Community Building (a forerunner to the Jewish Community Centers). The Jefferson Avenue Shul was used as a meeting area for other community events that were too large for the JCB, as well as a temporary home for a community-wide supplementary religious school. Other synagogues stood nearby, all of which have since been raised. Irving Freedman remembers the area well for this is where he spent his childhood. Hanging out in and around the Jewish Community Building and Ahavas Sholem in the late 1920s and 1930s, he, like other teenaged boys, spent Friday nights “shul-hopping” as they walked from shul to shul wearing their tallism. They would often end up at the Jefferson Avenue Shul, congregating outside on the steps and chatting as their parents attended services inside. Larry Macks also remembers the synagogue fondly for it was here that his father and uncle served as officers for many years. High Holidays were particularly memorable when officers wore cut-away coats and silk hats and the Rabbi and Cantor appeared at the bimah — as if by magic — having used a special set of stairs from the basement to make their entrance. In this Orthodox shul, the women sat in a horseshoe shaped balcony beneath a beautiful ceiling.

This new volunteer preservation group is not the first interest group formed to save the former shul. In 1997 the former temple was given local landmark status and a preservation plan was drawn up. Later in

2003, the building received a \$10,000 grant from the New York Landmarks Conservancy Sacred Sites program to repair the roof. Neither of these efforts could be sustained long enough for a complete repair and restoration.

The Jefferson Avenue Shul highlights the need for active archival collecting. Much of the history of Jewish life on the East Side in documentary form is not available in public archives. Few photographs survive of the synagogue buildings of the East Side, including the Jefferson Ave Shul, and what exists is of limited quality. Minute books and other documentation are completely absent or incomplete. Interior photographs of shops, synagogues and even

We are seeking materials to document these areas and need your help to do this. Without these materials and the recollections of those who remember the East Side — this crucial part of Jewish life and history will be forgotten. If you hold any materials relating to the East Side, please contact Chana Kotzin at 716-923-0020 or via email at: archivesproject@bjebuffalo.org.

homes are not found in public historical collections. Street photographs of the area from the 1890s through the 1960s located in collections at the Buffalo Country Historical Society and the Central Library do not reveal Jewish stories. Instead, these focus on different blocks where Germans or Poles held sway. To counter this absence, we are seeking materials to document these areas and need your help to do this. Without these materials and the recollections of those who remember the East Side — this crucial part of Jewish life and history will be forgotten. If you hold any materials relating to the East Side, please contact Chana Kotzin at the Jewish Buffalo Archives Project at 716-923-0020 or alternatively, you can contact Chana via email at: archivesproject@bjebuffalo.org.

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