

The B'nai Abraham Synagogue in Virginia Minnesota is a story of loss and reuse. Built in 1909-10, it was the last remaining active synagogue on the Iron Range until its congregation dwindled to a handful of members who could no longer maintain the handsome brick structure. It closed its doors in the mid-1990s. It was acquired in 2004 by a not-for-profit organization, The Friends of B'nai Abraham, who raised funds, and continue to do so, for the building's restoration and reuse in order to serve as a cultural center for all the citizens of Virginia, Minnesota and surrounding areas, and to preserve the history of its Jewish community, of which it was so much a part. Together with our partner, The Virginia Area Historical Society (VAHS), we look forward to seeing this lovely building used for many cultural and educational programs for the community.

- The B'nai Abraham Museum & Cultural Center is located at 328 5<sup>th</sup> Street South, at the corner of 4th Avenue & 5<sup>th</sup> Street South.
- For updated information visit the B'nai Abraham website: [www.ironrangejewishheritage.org](http://www.ironrangejewishheritage.org)

## TRANSFER OF MEMORY EXHIBIT (by Margie Ostrov)

This past October, The Friends of B'nai Abraham were proud to bring a special exhibit, "Transfer of Memory", to the B'nai Abraham Museum and Cultural Center. The photo exhibit produced by the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas (JCRC), depicts Holocaust survivors who made a new life in Minnesota. Photographer David Sherman and writer Lili Chester created the exhibit in partnership with the JCRC. The people depicted in this exhibit share their stories of surviving the hardship and brutalities of the Holocaust, yet they all focus on life and hope. From the horrors they experienced in Europe they found a safe haven in Minnesota where they were able to fulfill their dreams of a future free of persecution and where they could start a new life. Their lives are a constant reminder of the value of freedom and the enduring human spirit.



Viewing the exhibit.



Introduction to a film by Lili Chester

An opening reception for the exhibit was held on October 7. Speakers included Steve Hunegs, Executive Director of JCRC, and writer Lili Chester, whose parents survived the Holocaust, and who presented a short documentary titled *But Some Survive*, which featured members of her family.

Sue Devereux, a longtime instructor at Mesabi Community College played an important role in coordinating activities in conjunction with the exhibit. For the past 12 years Ms. Devereux has taught the class “The Holocaust: Prejudice, Racism and Stereotyping”. She included the exhibit as part of her curriculum, and assisted local high school teachers in introducing the lessons of the Holocaust into their curriculums. About one thousand people saw the exhibit during the month of October.

In addition to the Transfer of Memory exhibit at the B’nai Abraham Museum and Cultural Center, an exhibit of photos taken at Auschwitz by Twin Cities photographer Mike Rosen was on display in the library gallery at the Mesabi Community College. Both of these exhibits had an impact on the community as can be seen in an eloquent editorial published in the October 1, 2014 *Mesabi Daily News*:

*We must never, ever forget when evil tries to take root and attempts to destroy the very soul of mankind. That is what happened in Adolph Hitler’s Germany during WW II. It’s almost impossible to comprehend Hitler’s fixation on trying to annihilate all Jews from the face of the earth. Yet, that is what was happening in those dark days of the war from 1941-1945. That is why we all need to hear from the Holocaust survivors. We need to take their recollections to heart and vow to never allow such wicked history to be repeated. The terrible story of the Holocaust must be passed down from generation to generation.*

### **Going Home (by Jean Ostrov Steiger)**

At heart, I am and will always be a “Ranger”. This means I was born and raised on the Iron Range in Northern Minnesota, specifically Virginia, Minnesota. At the time I was growing up, the iron ore mines were still very productive and the Iron Range cities were thriving. Virginia was a small (population 12,000) but vibrant city, with enough jobs and wealth to provide its children with good schools and other cultural opportunities.

My family was one of about 50 Jewish families in Virginia and we all belonged to B’nai Abraham, the small synagogue that had been built by my grandparents’ generation. Both inside and out, the synagogue resembled the small structures they had left behind in Lithuania, Russia, Poland and Germany. But every Jewish family had given their children what most of the first immigrants had not been able to afford – a college education and usually, a profession that meant they would never again live in Virginia. Thus, the Jewish families had almost entirely disappeared from the Iron Range and the small synagogue had fallen into disrepair.

Ten years ago, my brother, sister-in-law and other descendants of the B’nai Abraham Synagogue came together to save the building. Because the synagogue was already on the National Register of Historic Places, the group was able to apply for grants and donations and begin the process of restoration. Today the transformation is almost complete; the building has been repaired and brought back to life, even more beautiful than it was before.



## **Birthday 1944**

But it wasn't a happy place for me when I was a child. It was hard to be different, to be Jewish when all my friends were Lutheran, Presbyterian or Catholic. Occasionally I would run into anti-Semitic remarks and they would smart. I hated the High Holidays when I would have to miss school to attend services. But my closest friends were accepting and I learned to be careful about exposing myself to new people. I grew up always feeling a little different and as if I didn't quite belong in either world, Jewish or Christian.

Six years ago, I returned to Virginia for my 50<sup>th</sup> class reunion. My first stop was Minneapolis where my sister-in-law gave me a progress report on B'nai Abraham. The social hall on the lower floor was in complete disrepair but the sanctuary was almost complete. It had new floors, a new ceiling and the stained glass windows were slowly being cleaned and repaired. She handed me the key to the synagogue and said, "You can open it up for your classmates to see, if you would like."

I took the key but I was certain no one would be interested in seeing the building. In Virginia, on the first night of the reunion, I made the announcement that I and my close friend, Pat, would hold the synagogue open from 2:00 pm to 4:00 pm the following afternoon, if anyone would like to visit. Pat and I picked up lunches, packed books and prepared ourselves for two quiet hours inside the synagogue. But when we arrived, several people were already waiting at the door. I unlocked it and within half-an-hour, the sanctuary was filled with classmates and some spouses.

The men and women, my classmates from 50 years ago, inspected the new/old sanctuary. They examined an exhibit that held photos of the original building, Jewish families and Jewish businesses that had once thrived on Main Street. They remarked on Jewish artifacts, reflected on Jewish families they had known and asked me questions about the synagogue, the religion, the people. One man who had grown up Catholic remembered out loud that his priest had told them they would go to hell if they set foot inside of the Synagogue.

I was talking through blurred eyes, trying very hard to hold back tears. This interest and acceptance was something I had longed for as a child and now, at my fiftieth class reunion, here it was. This was a new world. Finally, someone suggested we all stand on the Bema and take a class photo, which we did. It was a wonderful affirmation and an experience that I will always value.

Again, this summer, my husband and I traveled first to Minneapolis to visit my extended family and then we drove to Virginia for the weekend. Inside the sanctuary, I still feel the presence of my parents and grandparents and now I can remember the services and events of my childhood with a feeling of truly belonging to both my Jewish heritage and the Iron Range.

### **The 2014 season in retrospect: *most with free admission* Wonderful Performances, Lectures and Exhibits**

*This year has been wonderfully rewarding as we are seeing rapidly increased utilization of the facility with the participation of multiple community organizations as well as our local partner, the Virginia Area Historical Society.*

**June, July and August** an exhibit of work by local artists including the award-winning western painter **Duane Bryers**, and Native American water color artist **Carl Gawboy**. Members of the **Range Fiberart Guild** also displayed their work.

**June 27 – Connie Evingson & her Jazz group**

**July 12 – The Northern Lights Music Festival** under **Veda Zuponic**

**July 13 – Artist, Duane Bryer's**, exhibit and lecture plus music by his nephew **Darwin Alar**

**August 15 – Temple Israel in Duluth's**, "Shabbat on the Range", lead by Rabbi David Steinberg

**August 16 – Pat Surface** and the **Boundry Water Boys**

**Sept 16 – Antique Road Show** style Appraisals

**Sept 20 – The Harbormasters Barbershop Chorus**

**October 6 – Jeffrey Smith** read excerpts from his novel, **Mesabi Pioneers**

**October 1 - 31 – Transfer of Memory:** A special exhibit featuring photos and stories of Holocaust survivors living in Minnesota. (See Margie Ostrov's article on page 1.)

**October 7 - Opening Reception** for Transfer of Memory Exhibit

## **Construction – The Beat Goes On (by Michael Blehert)**

In the spring newsletter, it was noted that a serving kitchen would be completed with NSF approved sinks, floor and washable walls and ceiling tile. After some false starts related to plumbing permit approval, the pieces came together this fall, including a brand new NSF approved refrigerator, thanks to a generous donation from the Oren and Sharron Steinfeldt Family Foundation. There is still some finishing work in process to complete the ceiling and a portion of one wall, but the kitchen played an important role at the opening reception for the recent Transfer of Memory exhibit on Oct 7<sup>th</sup>. The reception was well attended and the functioning kitchen enabled us to prepare food trays that added a wonderful touch to the evening.



**New Kitchen with Margie Ostrov & Francine Gunderson**



**Mike Blehert, Will Winger & Robert Rosco**

The front entry of the building and concrete stairway were rebuilt in 2010 but not completed due to lack of funds. A grant recently awarded by Wells Fargo will now enable us to continue with the restoration of the front entry. This grant will fund brick newel posts, stone capstones, bricks on the sidewalls and a permanent railing. Capping of the front step walls will protect the concrete wall blocks from water penetration and damaging freeze/ thaw cycles as well as providing the proper period architectural appearance.

Inside the building, a Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund grant through the Minnesota Historical Society will be used this winter to complete the repair of window molding and sills on the last four lower level stained glass windows as well as repair of the stairway leading to the balcony. Completing the molding and windowsill repair will eliminate air and water infiltration and protect the beautiful restored stained glass windows. Thank you for your donations as we work to finish the restoration.

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### **Board of Directors of the Friends of B'nai Abraham**

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Leighton Siegel, MD, *Webmaster/Editor*  
Judy Karon

Elayne Deutsch Chiat  
Audra Keller  
James Rubenstein  
Jo Doig

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### **Grants awarded to the Friends of B'nai Abraham for 2014 - 15 restoration**

**Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund (Legacy Funds) - \$8,438.00**

*This project has been financed in part with funds provided by the State of Minnesota through the Minnesota Historical Society from the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund.*

**Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Board - \$8,481.00**

**Wells Fargo - \$11,000**

## Grants awarded to the Friends of B'nai Abraham for 2014 programming

US Bancorp Foundation, Virginia MN branch - \$500

Arrowhead Regional Arts Council - \$2920 *Legacy Funds are made possible by the voters of Minnesota through a grant from the Arrowhead Regional Arts Council thanks to a legislative appropriation from the Arts and Cultural Fund.*

### Individual Contributions: May 2014 – November 2014

Apter Family Fund of the  
Duluth -Superior Area  
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Melanie and Charles Barry  
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Beverly Fink  
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Oren and Sharron Steinfeldt  
Family Foundation  
Sharron and Oren Steinfeldt  
Thrivent Financial (matching)  
Howard and Kathy Zack

### Special Contributions: May 2014 – November 2014

**Carolyn Abramson:** In honor of Marilyn and Harvey z'l for receiving the Louis Gainsley Award at Temple Israel; **Judy Sagen Atherton:** In honor of the wedding of Marcy Gurovitsch and Mark Schafer; **Lenore S. Bear:** In honor of Harry Bear; **Sidney Booth:** In memory of his grandfather, Morris Benjamin Booth; **Joan (Shuirman) Bream and Family:** In memory of the Shuirman and Coinsberg families; **Bobbie and Allen Bright:** Wishing Ray Bright in Honolulu a speedy recovery; **Lewis Casson:** In memory of Kelly Roth; **Lili Chester:** In appreciation of the hospitality and assistance with the Transfer of Memory exhibit; **Marilyn Chiat:** In memory of Fred Baron; In memory of Burton Bolter; In honor of Jay Cohn's birthday; In honor of Ann Phillips; **Carol and Shel Damberg:** In honor of Ann Phillips; **Sandra and Paul Friedman:** with thanks to Ann Phillips; **Beverly Fitzgerald:** Wishing Danielle Kassmir a quick recovery; **Malka Goodman, MD:** In memory of Dr. Ernest Goodman; **Nancy Lammi Granovsky:** In memory of Virginia's early settlers and in honor of the visionary wisdom of the Friends of B'nai Abraham in restoring a community treasure; **Barbara Halper:** In memory of Bernard Harper, MD; **Harriet Israel:** In honor of my good friends, Margie and Charlie Ostrov and Dianne and Leighton Siegel; **Carol Kemper:** In honor of Audra Keller; **Gene Kishel:** Wishing Margie Ostrov a Happy Birthday; In honor of Charles and Margie Ostrov; **Linda and Warren Mack:** In honor of Ann and Felix Phillips; **Robert Maslansky:** In memory of Carolyn Maslansky; **Margie and Charlie Ostrov:** In honor of Barb Frank's special birthday; In honor of Sam Siegel's special birthday; **Ann and Felix Phillips:** In memory of David Meshbesh; In honor of Harriet Joseph's special birthday; In memory of Phyllis Perlman Stern; In memory of Truen Press; **Bettimae Richman:** In honor of the marriage of her daughter, Lori to Janet Lund; **Miriam Sanders:** In honor of Ann Phillips for her work on B'nai Abraham; **Sandra and Mort Greenberg:** Best wishes to Marilyn Chiat on her new great granddaughter; **Diane Siegel:** In honor of daughter, Anna Peter's graduation from high school and recipient of Rose Rees Award; **Leighton and Dianne Siegel:** In memory of Elliot Karasov; In honor of Barb Frank's special birthday; In honor of Bar Mitzvah of Noah Schloff; In honor of Sam Siegel's special birthday; **Maraline Slovut:** In memory of Gordon Slovut; **Karen and Richard Weiland:** In memory of Munroe Milavetz.

*If we have inadvertently missed your name out of the Contributors list, please let us know so that you can be included in our next newsletter.*

## Endowment Fund Creation – help us preserve B’nai Abraham

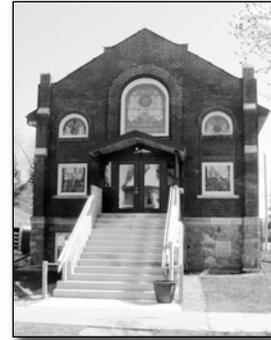
Now that the building’s restoration is well on its way, **The Friends of B’nai Abraham would like to create an Endowment Fund** that will make certain B’nai Abraham can be well maintained long into the future. We have spoken to staff at several experienced community funds who have expressed an interest in being the repository for such an endowment and work with the Friends to assure that these dollars continue to be used to meet the goal of providing a community resource and ensuring that the contribution of the Jews of the Iron Range will not be forgotten.

**To quote our Board member, Dr. Marilyn Chiat:** B'nai Abraham represents our nation's great religious, cultural and ethnic diversity. When historic buildings such as B'nai Abraham are lost, our nation's magnificent mosaic (to quote Hubert H. Humphrey) loses some of its brilliant color.

This building in particular, the only extant synagogue left on the Range, and the only synagogue building in Minnesota to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places, provides people with a window into

understanding the history of the Range and the people who contributed so much to its unique character.

*If you have suggestions or may wish to make such a contribution, please contact Charlie Ostrov at [costrov@gmail.com](mailto:costrov@gmail.com) or Ann Phillips at [phill037@umn.edu](mailto:phill037@umn.edu). We need everyone to be a part of this.*



Ensure the preservation of this wonderful building.

### WISH LIST - YOUR HELP IS GREATLY NEEDED TO COMPLETE

- Interior trims around three stained glass windows in the balcony
- Small kitchen appliances need to be purchased
- Baseboard trim in the Sanford I. Berman Social Hall and Sanctuary needs to be completed
- Crown molding in the sanctuary
- Tuck point of the exterior
- Landscaping
- Final finish of wood floors

| We are still short of our goal.  | All donations are fully tax deductible.  |
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| <p><b>Please send your donation to:</b></p> <p>Friends of B’nai Abraham<br/>c/o Charles Ostrov, treasurer<br/>1788 Maryland Ave. North<br/>Golden Valley, MN 55427</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Endowment:    <input type="checkbox"/> Restoration:</p>                                   | <p>Name: _____</p> <p>Address: _____</p> <p>City, State, Zip: _____</p> <p>Amount: _____</p> <p>To contribute stock <i>-or-</i> appreciated securities, contact:<br/>Jackie or Daryl at Morgan Stanley 800-791-8360 <i>-or-</i><br/><a href="mailto:costrov@gmail.com">costrov@gmail.com</a></p> |
| <p><input type="checkbox"/> Memory of:    <input type="checkbox"/> Honor of:    <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p> <p>Send acknowledgement card to:    Name: _____</p> <p style="padding-left: 150px;">Address: _____</p> <p style="padding-left: 100px;">City, State, Zip: _____</p> |  |

***If you would like to receive emails of our upcoming programs and events or you would like to receive our newsletter by email, please send your email address to Charlie Ostrov [costrov@gmail.com](mailto:costrov@gmail.com) or Ann Phillips [phill037@umn.edu](mailto:phill037@umn.edu)***