

Rita

March 12, 2015

Rita is a lifelong Mount Zion member. She was born and raised in Saint Paul, where she raised four sons with her husband Sherman, who passed



away in 2010. She also now has three daughters-in-law, and twelve grandchildren. Rita was 18 when she became engaged, before marrying Sherman at the age of 19. She attended Richard Gordon Elementary, followed by Sanford Middle School, and then Saint Paul Central, before briefly attending the University.

A lifelong member of Mount Zion, Rita is known and loved by many within the congregation, and is perhaps best known for her devotion to our daily services, which were started by her father over sixty years ago (with the move to Summit Avenue), and through her passionate efforts, and those of many others, continue to this day.

Tell us a bit about yourself.

I'm Rita Grossman. I should say Rita Blaine Grossman. My maiden name was Blaine. My parents, Nettie and Will, were members of Mount Zion at the time, so I was born into this congregation, along with my older sister Barbara (now Minsberg). And I have grown closer, and love this place more dearly every year.

It's my second home – It's my second home.

My parents had an electrical wholesale house, in downtown St. Paul. They both came from Milwaukee, and worked for an uncle of mine who was in the same business in downtown Milwaukee. Lappin Electric. My mother's brother. And they bought a business here that was actually from a member of Mount Zion. Richard Perwin was his name. It was hard times



And remained here.

Was at Portland and Snelling. 1552 Portland.



with a friend of his. It was a hayride we were on. And I was with a young man. And Sherm was on a blind date with a good friend of mine. I was told later that he said he had noticed me. I don't know what that means exactly, but that he was going to call me. My best friend is the one who told me this. And I said "Oh no!" But anyway, he did. And we did. Etcetera.

He went to work for my Dad, and that's where he learned business. Became a businessman.

I assume you were confirmed here?

I was confirmed at Mount Zion, but not at this synagogue. I was confirmed in 1945 at the old Mount Zion on Holly and Avon. Rabbi Margolis was the Rabbi. Services were very formal. He wore a frock coat. I don't even know if anybody knows what a frock coat is. But very formal.

And it was lovely. I remember it.

I remember the sanctuary so well. The dark wood. The social hall was downstairs, like in the basement. And we were married at the temple, and we had the reception downstairs. We had the dinner the night before, at the Athletic Club in downtown Saint Paul. On Fourth and Cedar.

What do you remember about your neighborhood growing up?

We used to play along Summit, along Grand. My best friend lived on ... I don't know what you call it, these homes along Summit are all regal. Big. Large. But she and her family were very poor. They lived on Summit, but it was like the garage. It was like a little apartment on the side of the garage. And she was my best friend. Betty. Not Jewish, but we were very close.

I think of Summit so fondly, because she lived on Summit.

But she actually didn't live in the big house, you could say. She lived in the garage.

What do you remember about your grandparents?

My grandparents lived in Milwaukee, and like so many people my age, my grandparents came from Europe. They came from Poland and Russia. My mother's maiden name was Cohen. And she's the only grandparent I

grandchild from my generation.

My grandparents, their name was Blumberg. My Dad changed his name to Cohen when he went into business here. But they all lived in Milwaukee; living in the town.



My mother's parents were Rachmeal and Rebecca Cohen, and I was named after Rachmeal. My grandmother was a sweet, wonderful, short little roly-polly woman. Who didn't speak a word of English. So she and I actually, unfortunately, could never really have a conversation. But she was very affectionate. I just knew I had a grandmother. But unfortunately, I could not tell her things I wanted to tell her. She tried to talk to me, but of course, there was no use.

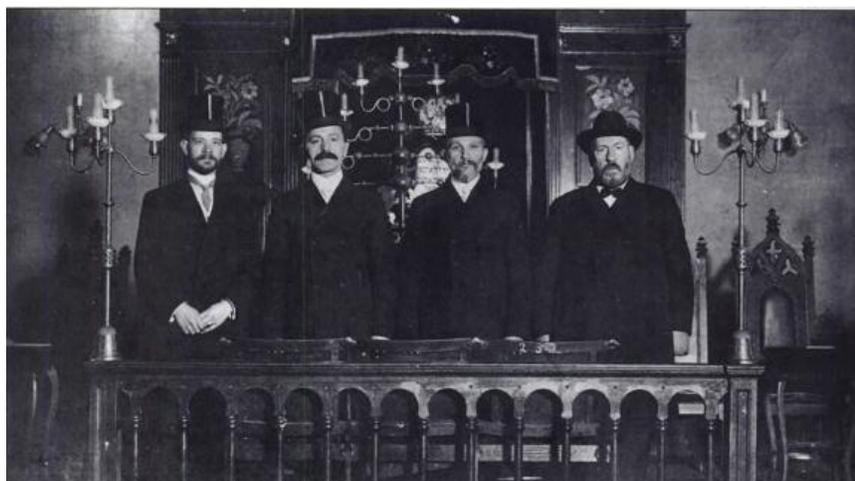
And he was considered – maybe because his name was Cohen – that he was considered a very wise man. People would come to him and ask for advice. When he died the funeral procession took them by all the synagogues in Milwaukee, and as they went by they opened the doors, out of respect for him. That he was passing the synagogue.

I wasn't alive for that. I was just told that.

You can see ... it still affects me as I'm saying it.

Editors note:

Below is a 1912 photograph of the leadership on the bima of Congregation Beth Israel in Milwaukee. Left to right were Rev. L. Cohen, cantor; I.J. Rosenberg, president, Rachmeal Cohen, vice president, and Jacob Rothstein, sexton. (photograph courtesy the Jewish Museum Milwaukee).



[cleanbreak]

Rachmeal Cohen was also mentioned in a 1978 article in the Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle, by Marilyn Ruby (who was then Managing Editor, and is



and the Jewish Home itself, providing a legacy that continues to affect us all. And on a daily basis.

It is perhaps telling that, more than 100 years after this photo was taken, and over 35 years after her article was written, Marilyn Ruby now works closely with current St. Paul Federation President Susie Minsberg, who is married to Mickey – great grandson to Rachmeal, and nephew to his namesake, Rita.

Finally, our own siddur, that Rita and others have helped to create for our daily services, includes an interpretative reading written by Sheldon Blank, which ends with a verse that somehow seems to resonate at this point:

*And oh, make us sensitive, God
sensitive to the sound of the words which others speak –
sensitive to the sound of their words – and to the silences between.*

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