

## CONGREGATION BETH ISRAEL, OAK STREET 1955

by Barbara Pelman

Every High Holidays we congregated on the stairs,  
each of us in our new outfits, crinolines  
scratching our legs. Who had the starchiest?  
Whose new shoes the shiniest? Certainly  
not mine. I stood on the edges of the crowd,  
in my cotton dress, limp crinoline,  
partially polished shoes. This was 1955,  
I was twelve, when things like that mattered.

The synagogue brand-new then, another sacred space  
for the Jewish congregants, so soon after the war.  
Built in 1948, the pride of the Jewish community,  
for those who wanted to sit beside their wives,  
the wives refusing to sit in the balcony  
like their immigrant mothers did, separate.  
They wanted equality, in this country  
they had been born into, not like their parents  
who fled the pogroms in Russia, in Poland--  
arriving in Vancouver with their passports  
and not much else. Now their fathers  
swayed under their prayer shawls  
in the other synagogue down the road,  
their mothers in the balconies, looking on.

Beth Israel, with its fortified walls,  
its stained glass windows, its majestic staircase  
where we lingered, waiting for the service  
to begin. Rosh Hashana,  
and I am twelve. My dress  
was never velvet, or silk, or wool,  
my shoes never from Ingledew's or Eatons.  
But I was the Choir Leader's daughter  
and could sit up in the choir-loft  
looking down on all of the congregants.  
I could peek through the latticed walls  
and listen to my father's voice  
soaring over the others, his high tenor  
like the Angel Gabriel, or so I thought.  
I could even look down on the Rabbi,  
with his white *kittel*, his white *kippah*,  
and pretend to listen to his sermon.

Everyone I knew sat in those seats,  
the polished pews, the raised *bimah*

in front of us, where the Rabbi and Cantor sat.  
We gathered at Friday services, where my father  
came down onto the *bimah*  
to raise the *Kiddush* cup, bless the wine.  
We met at *bar mitzvahs*, morning services,  
lingered over sandwiches and tea, after.  
The Rabbi inquired about our health,  
asked about our lessons. Were we preparing  
for our own *bat mitzvahs*? A new tradition,  
the world opening up for women.

Beth Israel, so different now, renovated  
in 1993, its grand staircase gone,  
the choir loft gone, my father's voice  
an echo in my mind. *Hashkivenu*  
he sang, *let us lie down in peace*.

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