

"Eternity" - a play by Ann Schulman

A story about the grandchildren of Jewish immigrants moving away from the Jewish communities of small towns.

Hi Allan,

I wonder if you ever heard about Eternity, a play by Ann Schulman premiered in 2001 after Agudas Achim in Superior was demolished? It's about the Hebrew cemetery ancestors emerging from their graves and our Litvak relatives possessing their descendants, trying to get them to salvage the shul.

I was shocked to see the Singer name featured prominently on the gravestone in the set they created using rubbings from the actual cemetery headstones. I got the perusal copy of the play the same day that the cemetery worker contacted me to tell me that a dozen of the stones had finally been repaired that had fallen and been neglected probably for decades. I alerted the Hyatt/Arnovich family and they handled it with the Christian cemetery. The worker sent me a dozen photos.

A Superior librarian helped me find the article below in the Duluth News Tribune. Sadly, there was no local news article at all about the demolition of the Litvak shul in December of 2000. I imagine they probably didn't want anyone to hear about it.

The story of the play might be an interesting addition to your site.

Shabbat Shalom,

Dan Singer - September 2024

This is the article from the Duluth News Tribune found by a dedicated Superior librarian:

VANISHING COMMUNITY HISTORY OF SUPERIOR'S JEWS INSPIRES PLAY TITLED 'ETERNITY'

March 4, 2001 | Duluth News Tribune (MN)

Author/Byline: Candace Renalls/News Tribune staff writer | Page: 01F | Section: US

Like a community apart, the Superior Hebrew Cemetery sits at the crest of a gravel road, past Riverside and Graceland cemeteries, just south of Superior.

Cramped within the encircling chain-link fence lie row upon row of headstones with names like Kaner, Lurye, Siegel, Karon and Cohen.

Many of the grave markers are in Hebrew, fading reminders of Superior's first Jewish settlers. Most emigrated from Eastern Europe around the turn of the century and helped build a thriving Jewish community.

They lived in Superior's North End, within walking distance of the city's two "shuls," or synagogues, at North Sixth Street and Hammond Avenue. Their community was close-knit, with Jewish organizations, kosher

butcher shops, a Jewish bakery and other businesses run by Jews. The Superior Jewish Women's League would put on its annual autumn ball; teen-age boys played basketball at the Young Men's Hebrew Association; and parties were held at Carpenter School.

Over the years, as the cemetery filled up, Superior's Jewish population declined. Younger generations moved away. From a high of approximately 800 Jewish residents in the 1940s, the numbers have dropped to about 30 today. The last of the city's three synagogues closed eight years ago.

When St. Paul playwright Ann Schulman attended her grandmother's funeral in Superior several years ago, she was so struck by the sight of the crowded Hebrew cemetery that it inspired her to write "Eternity," a play about Superior's vanishing Jewish community. The production opens Saturday at the Great American History Theatre in St. Paul and runs through April 1.

Schulman, the granddaughter of Abe and Belle Siegel, imagined a whole town of dead Jewish people rising from their graves, speaking Yiddish and going about their daily lives in the cemetery. That vision became the opening scene of her play.

The play tells the story of one spirit's journey to save the old Hebrew Brotherhood Synagogue from demolition and save her great-great-granddaughter from assimilation.

The synagogue, at the southwest corner of North Sixth Street and Hammond Avenue, sat unused for years before being demolished last October.

"This play uses Duluth-Superior as a springboard to talk about more universal themes," Schulman said in a recent interview. "How does one maintain tradition in a global world? The play is a metaphor of the disappearing American Jew."

Ron Peluso, the theater's artistic director, said the play will strike a chord with Jewish and non-Jewish people alike.

"It's universal, whether Jewish or Swedish," he says. "How do families hang on to tradition as the generations pass? How do you fit into this American melting pot without losing touch with your traditions?"

Said Schulman: "The play doesn't solve anything, it just vibrates in a question."

Why Superior?

Why the first Jewish immigrants chose to settle in Superior in the 1880s is unclear. Perhaps it was the climate, which was similar to their homelands. Perhaps this was simply as far west as they got.

Many who came later followed relatives who had already settled here. They left bad times in Europe and came seeking a new life, work and a place to raise their families.

"They were looking for a place to make a living," said Harold Witkin, 76, whose father came to Superior as a Jewish immigrant in 1916.

Superior wasn't the only place the immigrants settled. Jews also settled in Duluth and on the Iron Range. In Superior, most Jewish immigrants came from Lithuania and lived in the North End or Connors Point. To scrape out a living, they peddled rags, junk, vegetables, fruits and other items from a horse and wagon. Once here, they sent for relatives.

"It was a nice community," Witkin recalled. "Everybody knew everybody."

In 1977, the Wisconsin Historical Society researched Superior's Jewish history and taped interviews with several Jewish residents who had immigrated in the early 1900s.

Among them was Witkin's father, Louis Witkin, who ran a kosher meat market at North Fifth Street and

Ogden Avenue from 1929 to 1944.

“When I came to Superior in 1916, all the Jewish people lived in the Fifth and Ogden area,” said the elder Witkin, then 84. “The two synagogues were there, the two rabbis. There were about 150 Jewish families ... When you come to a strange town, you go among the Jewish, because you don't know anybody else. You're more satisfied to live among the Jewish.”

The first settlers brought their Old World cultures and religious practices with them. They banded together and met in homes for services, organizing the city's first Jewish congregation, Hebrew Brotherhood Congregation, in 1890, and building a **synagogue** in 1907.

By then, a second Jewish congregation, Superior Hebrew Congregation, had sprung up with a **synagogue** across the street. Life revolved around the synagogues, which offered daily services and prayer.

“These Jews were tight-knit, but they were also part of the Superior community,” said Schulman who grew up in Menomonie, Wis., and visited her grandparents in **Superior**. “They weren't isolated. They did business in a secular world.”

Declining population

By most accounts, the Twin Ports Jewish population began its decline in the 1950s.

“Most of us who went into the service never came back to live,” Witkin said. “The older people died off, the children moved.”

Like others of their generation in **Superior**, the Witkins' children have moved away.

“In the last 25 years, kids just don't come back to settle,” said his wife, Shirley. “There's nothing here in terms of work. Professions offer other things, other places.”

In 1977, immigrant Barnett David Schneider, then 83, had similar observations: “When these children grew up and were old enough to go to college, they left and never came back. All that was left were the old folks. And as the old folks died off, there was nothing left here.”

Some say what happened in Superior has happened elsewhere in small-town Jewish America. New to the country, the immigrants worked hard to get started. Their children followed suit, building on their gains. But the more affluent grandchildren fled to the wider choices of the big cities.

For Shirley Witkins, it's lonely being one of **Superior**'s few Jewish residents. But she insists it has little to do with religion.

“Everyone we know is in the same boat,” she says. “No matter what the ethnic group, there are very few third- and fourth-generations here.”

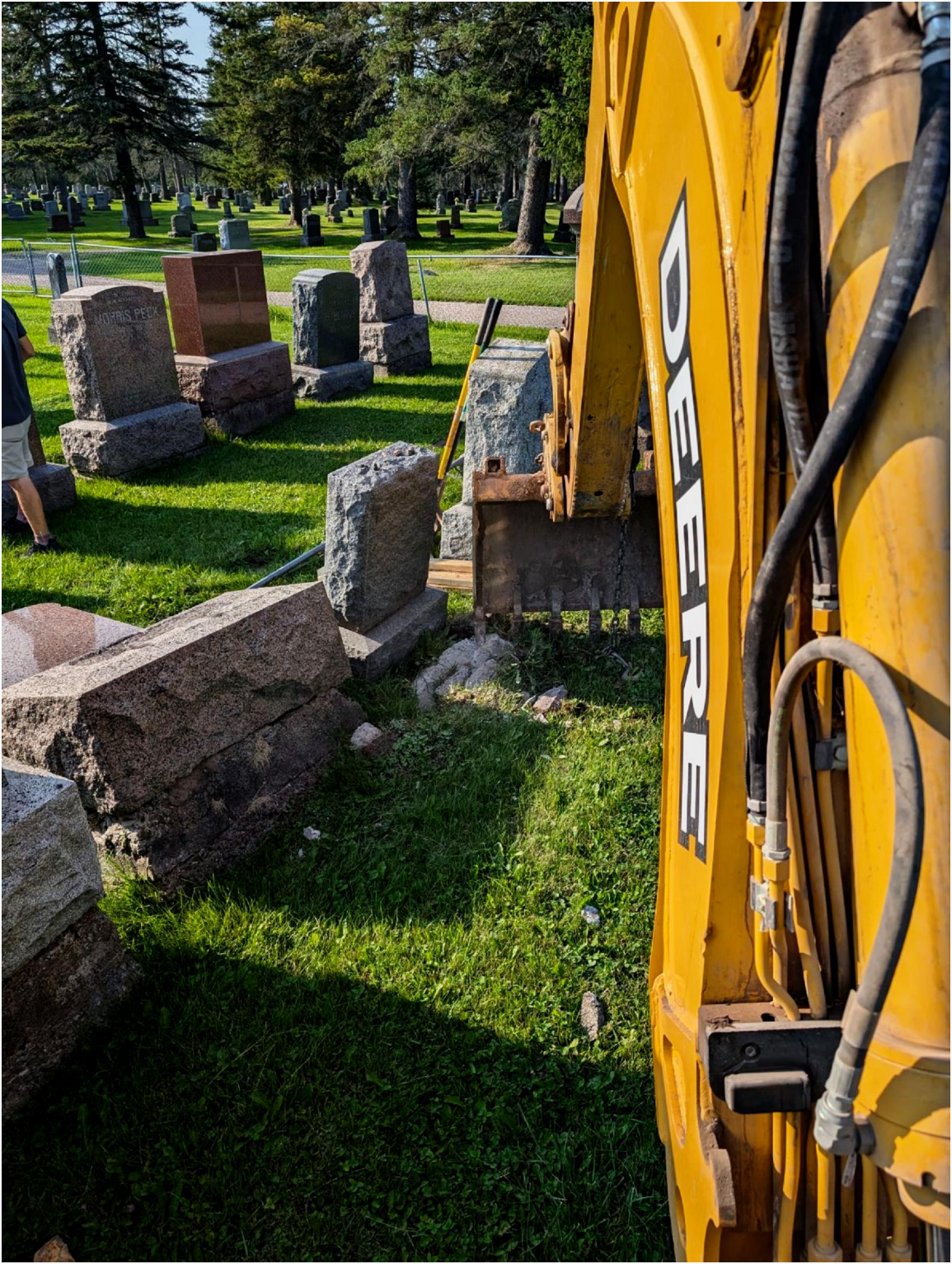


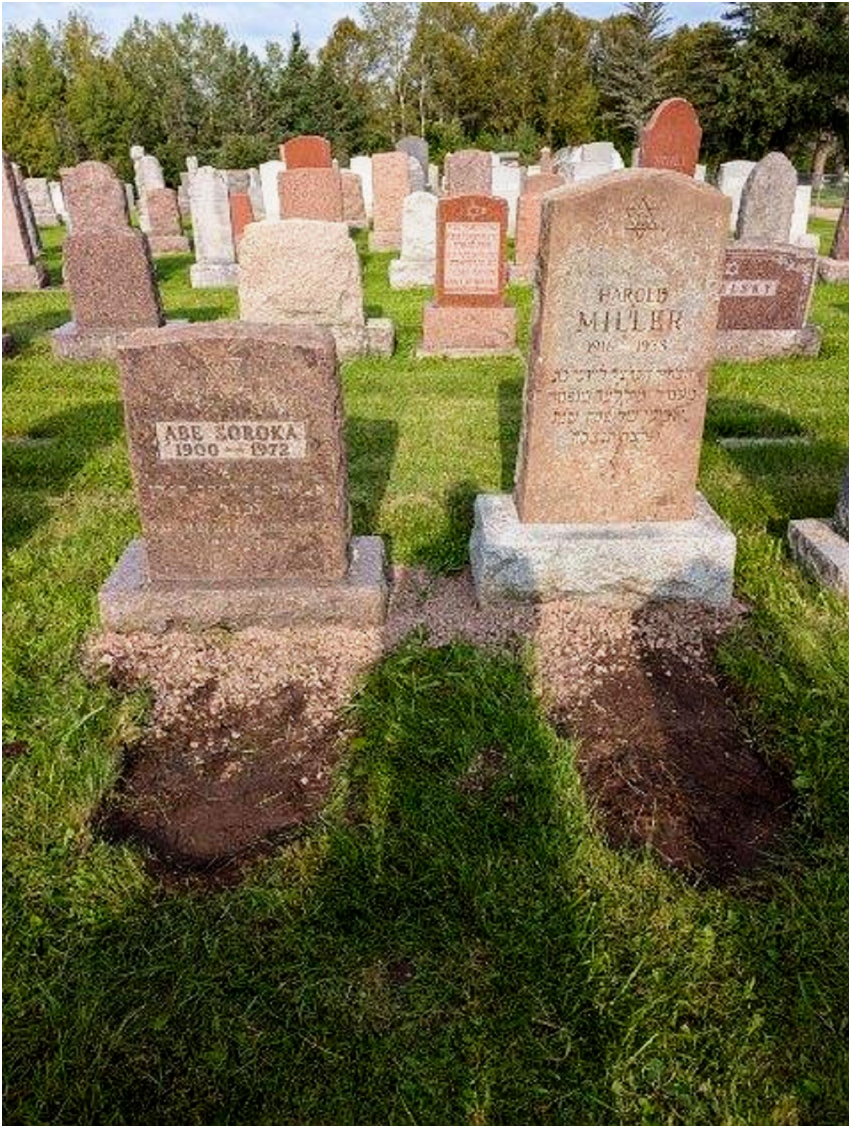
ETERNITY

by

Ann Schulman

Act 1 scene 1





ABE SOBOKA
1900 - 1972

HAROLD
MILLER
1916 - 1973

ה'תשנ"ג 1973
ה'תרע"ז 1916
ה'תשנ"ג 1973
ה'תרע"ז 1916



BESSIE
EDELSTEIN
SEPT. 15, 1896
JULY 9, 1973