

OPINION EXCHANGE

The day my grandfather's synagogue burned

For me and so many, Adas Israel was a labyrinth back to the old country.

By Bryan Altman | SEPTEMBER 11, 2019 — 5:51PM

On Monday morning, I awoke to messages that overnight the Adas Israel Congregation's synagogue in my hometown of Duluth had burned (<http://www.startribune.com/cause-of-duluth-synagogue-fire-still-unknown/559968232/>) to the ground. As of Wednesday we still did not know the cause. My great-grandfather, MJ Widdes, was one of the congregation's founders in the late 1800s. I sometimes attended Adas Israel nearly 100 years later in the 1980s and '90s with my grandfather, Getchell, and his brother, Ted Widdes.

MJ, and I assume most other founders, had fled Vilnius, Lithuania, where the Russian empire blamed Jews for assassinating Czar Alexander II. The riots that ensued killed many, demolished their homes, and sought to vanquish them from the region. MJ and Sara Widdes fled to Duluth in pursuit of a safer Jewish existence and the American dream. Adas Israel was a sanctuary for their new life grounded in ancient traditions.

Like many strictly observant traditional congregations, Adas had passed its prime by the time my generation occasionally joined our grandfathers. The men who remained were deeply devoted to upholding the traditions their parents had fled to protect.



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Little remained of Duluth's Adas Israel Congregation after it was gutted by fire early Monday morning. The writer remembers its

For me and so many, Adas Israel was a labyrinth back to the old country. Mahogany blanketed the sanctuary. Dull, dusted light bathed the bema through century-old stained glass. There were pews upstairs for the women and pews downstairs for the men. An olfactory cocktail of silk, aging Yiddish prayer books, and the Manischewitz (or was it Mogen David?), whiskey, and schnapps of daily kiddush was unmistakably Adas. If I had to guess what the shtetls of Vilnius smelled like, Adas Israel was it.

By the late 1900s, no one really led the congregation in prayer. Instead, each day congregants sat in the same seats, bobbing back and forth under their tallits while they mumbled and chanted in Yiddish through the daily service. It was all muscle memory; a routine. Everyone got through it at his own speed and everyone knew one another's pace. I'm pretty sure they even attempted to throw off others' cadences when they were on one another's nerves. If I ever felt close to G-d in my life, Adas Israel is where I felt it.

Over time, many of Adas's founders prospered in the new world, and it became a congregation of means. MJ had founded an agricultural business upon arriving in Duluth. If you happen upon an old cement cellar in Hartley field, it was his. I think it is where he stored feed over the long Duluth winters when he ran cattle there, but I may be wrong about its exact purpose. His business, now known as Widdes Feed and Trailer, is

in its fourth generation. So, our family has a couple of things left in Duluth that still bear his legacy. Adas Israel, however, was the one I imagine meant the most to him and to so many.

As I consider my family's journey through Adas Israel, I cannot help but consider that their journey is nearly impossible today. It feels symbolic that it burned to the ground at a time when the number of refugees granted asylum in the U.S. is approaching zero. I am reminded today that immigrants bring great things to our communities. They establish businesses that last four generations and counting. They establish congregations that last 130-plus years. When I see refugees today, I cannot help but see MJ — a man who found new beginnings based on old traditions in a new land.

My heart goes out to the congregants of Adas Israel. May the memory of "3rd Street Schul" be a blessing.

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MJ Widdes