

Building Lost, But Family Memories Remain Amid Adas Israel Fire



The author's great-grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary celebration at Adas Israel Congregation in Duluth.

Guest Post

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My family's story is inseparable from Adas Israel. The news Monday morning of the devastating fire is difficult for all of us to bear. As we continue to mourn the loss of the Synagogue and its contents, I've found myself reflecting on our family's story and history.

Like many American Jewish stories, the Bruzonsky family immigrated to the United States in the early 20th century, fleeing persecution in Eastern Europe. Leaving Lithuania, they made their way through Canada and settled in Duluth around 1909 looking for a better life. My great grandparents, Joseph and Zelda, with three kids in tow and not speaking a word of English found themselves in an isolated town of around 80,000 people with a small but tight-knit Jewish community of 1,500, all with similar stories. Together they built a new life, knowing that their children, children's children, and children's children's children (me) would have opportunities they couldn't even imagine. Over the years Joseph and Zelda had three more kids and were joined by their parents, making their family complete. Starting with my Great Grandparents the Bruzonsky family had an active presence in Duluth and Adas Israel until 1994 when the last of my great aunts and uncles moved to the Twin Cities to be closer to family.

Adas Israel was central to life in Duluth for the Bruzonskys for nearly 80 years. It was their community, their connection and their constant. Adas Israel was where big moments were celebrated, family members were mourned and day to day life was centered. My Zayde and his brother Nate were both presidents of the Synagogue at different times over the decades. My mom and her siblings quite literally grew up at Adas Israel, to this day any time we visit Duluth we not only drive past her childhood home but also the Synagogue.

As we continue to navigate the emotions after the fire, all the stories I've heard over the years rush back. I find myself sorting through deep sadness, grateful nostalgia, and everything in between. Losing the building, the countless pictures that lined the walls and the *yahrzeit* nameplates feels like losing family members all over again. While the loss of these physical items is difficult to manage, the stories our family continues to share make their memories that much stronger.

Stories like the one my cousin Amy tells about how our great uncle Nate, beaming with pride, as he in his late 80s, would yell at all the old men (10-15 years his junior) to "shut up" and let his grandnieces lead *hamotzi* and *kiddush*. To my mom telling me how she used to play with her father's tallit during services and still plays with my dad's or mine. If you were ever at Adas Israel before 1994, you might remember my great uncle Nate cooking his noodle kugel for any dinner or shiva at the shul, even when he was 92 years old. These stories aren't centered on any big event, just my family's day to day life at Adas Israel.

These memories have become all the more important in the wake of the fire. It's these stories, not the nameplates or pictures that keep my relatives alive. As devastating as the loss of the Synagogue is, I'm grateful for Adas Israel and the role it will continue to play in my family's story.

may their memories be a blessing.