

A Remarkable Reunion The Children Return by Yori Yanover

A gathering of 130 cousins from nine family branches in a Lower East Side Synagogue revives long-abandoned notions of family and history

New York City, August 20 -- The oldest Ashkenazi synagogue in the City, Beth Hamedrash Hagadol, at 60 Norfolk Street, on the Lower East side, was the site of an unusually cheerful gathering today, as some 130 men, women and children, Jews and a few non-Jews, all descendants of the Lithuanian immigrant family Aug, came looking for their common roots. The synagogue's Rabbi M. H. Greenbaum welcomed the gathering to the place where their ancestors had first arrived in the New World. These days, the landmarked BHH, with the support of the Lower East Side Jewish Conservancy, is in the process of securing the structure (roof, beams, etc.) and renovating its main sanctuary, which is in great disrepair, and, in fact, barred from regular use. Rabbi Greenbaum and the LES United Jewish Council's Executive Director Joel Kaplan thanked Councilmember Alan J. Gerson, who addressed the gathering, and Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer, for their efforts to secure \$750 thousand for the renovation. According to LESJC Director Laurie Tobias Cohen, a matching grant for sacred sites historic preservation from NY State rounds up the amount to \$1 million, or, roughly, a quarter of the funds needed, but sufficient for the securing of the structure phase.

The Sunday event was the culmination of an effort begun years ago, by genealogist- and Aug family member- Rabbi Ben Zion Saydman, from Lake Forest, CA. "This project has been ongoing since I was in high school," said Saydman, who was near-tears through much of the day. "To see the stairs in front of the shul filled with my family... It's a miracle..." Rabbi Saydman is the fifth generation descended from Nachum and Aug.

Back in 1871, the Augs joined BHH, which had been converted from a Baptist church. Since then they have grown into great wealth and achieved notoriety for their philanthropic works. They were also renowned for giving birth to mostly female children, which explains why, in a few decades, the Augs had branched into nine different lines. Over the century that followed, many of them moved west. Then there was a dispute over an inheritance, roughly 75 years ago, and a rift that wouldn't heal even as all the characters were long gone.-what's this about? There were also Aug descendants who stayed in Russia, went to France and made aliyah to Israel. Many of them were brought together by Rabbi Saydman, with the help of a few long-forgotten cousins who also share the genealogy bug. Allison George from Roselyn Estates, NY, said, "I also started doing research," on the Meltzer branch of the family, "at about the time the rabbi had started. We found each other and have been in communication for 15 years...." Adam Weiner, 14, from Denver, CO, was another enthusiastic organizer. "Finding Benzi on the Internet was a huge thing for me," he says, referring to the connection he made with Rabbi Saydman a year and a half ago. "Now that I'm here today with so many of my relatives I never even knew about, it's really special." Adam is determined to keep in touch with his kin. "So far I have 1500 names in my database, and I'm looking to add more."

The get-together, at the ground floor of the synagogue, included a roll call, after which each branch of the family sent a representative to light a menorah candle (they upgraded the *shamash* middle candle for the occasion). Then Rabbi Saydman presented a slide show to the cousins about themselves and the many generations which preceded them. They emerged into the sunny courtyard in a somber, contemplative mood, but when they posed for a gigantic group photo on the steps of the synagogue they were smiling again.

After lunch, there was a tour of the Lower East Side, led by tour guides of the Lower East Side conservancy, with particular attention to locations related to the Aug family.

“I brought my son, who’s sixteen, to see his roots,” said Victoria LeVitre, from the Krull branch, a resident of Laguna Niguel, CA, who was one of a number of non-Jews, including a few Mormons, who were welcomed warmly by their mostly Jewish cousins. “We’re all family,” she said