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Boston Synagogue Celebrates 125 Years

**by Eddie Small
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The Boston Synagogue is celebrating its 125th anniversary with a book.

Synagogue treasurer Michael Weingarten recently wrote a history of the institution that dates from the founding of its predecessor synagogue Congregation Beth Jacob in 1888 to the present day. The story, released in May and titled *History of The Boston Synagogue: 1888-2013*, contains information ranging from an interview with former West End resident and famed actor Leonard Nimoy to a story about local butchers attempting to poison 2,000 guests at the wedding of influential Boston Rabbi Moses Margolies' daughter Ida.

“He was very strict about kosher meat certification, so some of the kosher butchers in Boston really disliked him,” Weingarten said.

Although several wedding attendees were poisoned, none died, and the wife of one of the butchers confessed the plot to Margolies the next day. He did not seek legal action, but many of the butchers ended up having to look for other jobs.

“Would you want to buy food from someone who would poison you if he didn’t like you?” asked Weingarten.

A total of six predecessor institutions for the Boston Synagogue formed between 1888 and 1900 in the city. One of them, known as the North Russell Street Shul, quickly became a famed spot for concerts by prominent cantors, which helped make it the largest synagogue in the West End.

However, although the neighborhood’s Jewish population had skyrocketed between 1870 and 1910, it began dwindling by the 1920s, as local Jews became wealthier and left for the nicer parts of the city at the time, such as Dorchester and Mattapan. This caused several of the institutions to merge, ultimately leading to the formation of the Boston Synagogue.

“It actually is a legitimate history that tells a story,” said Weingarten, referring to the book’s account of the synagogue.

Susan Schreiner-Weingarten, chairperson of the board at the Boston Synagogue and Weingarten’s wife, described the history of the synagogue as similar to the history of the city: growth at the beginning of the 20th century due to an influx of immigration, a subsequent period of decline, and a revitalization as Boston has become a more attractive place to live.

The city’s population has become increasingly large and diverse in recent years, and the Boston Synagogue has tried to stay relevant by changing with it. About 12 years ago, for instance, the organization decided to allow both women and men to be active participants in the service, and about seven years ago, it began taking on rabbinic interns from Hebrew College in Newton.

However, Schreiner-Weingarten said there were a few elements of the synagogue that have been present since its formation.

“I think that this community has always been open, unpretentious and welcoming throughout its history,” she said.