



KICKOFF: About 200 people attended ceremony to mark the start of renovations at the Breed Street Shul.

Aging Shul to Be Revived

Boyle Heights residents fondly remember synagogue, which has fallen into disrepair.

By STEVE HYMON
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Lifelong Boyle Heights resident Lucy Delgado can remember the years when the now mostly Latino neighborhood was home to more than 75,000 Jews, many of whom worshipped at the Breed Street Shul.

The 78-year-old Delgado isn't Jewish, but on Sunday she and many other Boyle Heights residents joined members of Southern California's Jewish community as they returned to the neighborhood.

The occasion: a ceremony to kick off the start of renovations to the shul, which in recent years had fallen into severe disrepair.

"We always had all kinds of races and nationalities living here, and everyone always got along," said Delgado. "We're trying to do the same thing now."

Boyle Heights has long been known as the melting pot of Los Angeles, where in the first half of the 20th century, immigrants of many nationalities lived together while putting down roots in the United States. Before the early 1960s, the neighborhood was home to the largest Jewish community in the country outside of New York and Chicago.

The shul is among the last reminders of that part of Boyle Heights' history. But it almost met the wrecking ball in the 1990s, when it was abandoned by a dwindling congregation and eventually taken over by the city of Los Angeles.

The already-crumbing buildings, dating to 1915 and 1923, further deteriorated. Even today, the insides of both structures are covered with graffiti. A roost of pigeons has taken up residence in the synagogue — through a giant hole in the roof — and caused considerable damage. The stained-glass windows are broken and covered with plywood.

"We think prayers are what's



Photographs by CAROLINE CHAPPEL, Los Angeles Times

READY FOR WORK: After years of neglect, the Breed Street Shul in Boyle Heights will be renovated. The two buildings that date to 1915 and 1923 have been damaged and need much work.



OPENING SOON: The shul was abandoned by a dwindling congregation and was taken over by the city of Los Angeles.

keeping the buildings up because there is no other explanation," said Stephen Sass, president of the Jewish Historical Society of Southern California.

The buildings are no longer used as a synagogue. One is closed to the public, and the other is almost never used.

The society has been fighting to renovate the shul, eventually securing enough funds to purchase the buildings back from the city. About \$1 million has been raised to begin the work, said Sass, who also said that \$5 million may be needed to finish the job.

Sunday's ceremony also had symbolic value because it came on the same weekend that Jews celebrate Tu B'Shvat, the beginning of the "new year" for trees. The holiday honors the

renewal that comes with spring, a theme that many of the roughly 200 in attendance applied to the shul's rehabilitation.

An exhibit in the smaller building allowed residents and visitors to vote for how they would like to see the shul used.

The four choices were: a job training facility; a cultural arts center for dance, music and theater performances; a museum focusing on the migrations of Jews to the western United States from New York and Europe; and a community center that would offer recreational and educational programs for youths and adults.

Although there are few, if any, Jews still living in Boyle Heights, many still speak of the neighborhood in the same rever-

ential tones reserved for old Jewish neighborhoods such as Brighton Beach and Park Slope in Brooklyn.

"People played in the streets here, and there were very strong human connections. That's what you feel when you talk to people who lived here," said Robin Kramer, a board member of the Breed Street Shul Project. "Like all immigrant communities, people helped lift each other up."

After World War II, the Jewish community began moving away to the burgeoning suburbs of the Westside and San Fernando Valley. Another wave of immigrants, many of whom were Latino, took their place.

Most striking about Sunday's brief ceremony was the joy of the many Latino residents over the impending work on the shul.

State Sen. Gilbert Cedillo (D-Los Angeles), who helped secure state funding for the project, finished his brief remarks to the crowd by saying, "If we can save the past, we can build the future."

Jaime Rodriguez lives in Monterey Park but grew up in Boyle Heights and brought his son, Jaime Jr., to the ceremony.

The father said the shul must be saved for one simple reason: It was a landmark to generations of people who have lived in Boyle Heights.

"This isn't just for the Jewish community or the Latino community," said Jaime Jr., echoing his father's comments. "But it's something for all of Boyle Heights."