

**DRAFT: JUNE 20, 2006**

**THE LITTLE SYNAGOGUE  
ON THE PRAIRIE  
PRELIMINARY PROPOSAL**



Calgary Hebrew School Picnic at Bowness Park – c. 1912  
“Land of Promise: The Jewish Experience In Southern Alberta” p. 116

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PRAIRIE PROJECT**

# **THE LITTLE SYNAGOGUE ON THE PRAIRIE**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The first Jewish people to settle in Calgary, Jacob & Rachel Diamond, arrived in 1889. Within the next two decades Jewish people had established themselves throughout southern Alberta, contributing to the development and enrichment of the province in every way. Although Heritage Park is devoted to telling the story of the area's history to 1914, no word or artifact about that Jewish contribution can be found. A committee of interested people in the Jewish community would like to see this story included, and feels that it can best be told through the replication of an early Alberta synagogue building.

More than a generation ago, when the House of Jacob building was about to be demolished, a proposal was put forward to move the building to Heritage Park, restore it, and interpret the history of Jewish life in Calgary and western Canada. For many good reasons that concept did not go forward, and the building was demolished.

This project is particularly timely for the following practical reasons:

- Heritage Park is expanding its site over the coming few years, and there is a greater desire to tell a broadened story of the history of this area;
- The history of Jewish life in and contribution to southern Alberta is a long and illustrious one and warrants telling;
- The most effective way to tell that story is through the replication of an important symbolic building of the Jewish faith and culture, a synagogue;
- The Congregation House of Jacob of Calgary will celebrate the centennial of its incorporation in 2009. Centennials provide an opportunity to remember and interpret history in new and meaningful ways, and this event will stimulate reflection about Jewish history in southern Alberta in both the Jewish and broader communities.

This concept – the replication of an early southern Alberta synagogue at Heritage Park - has received unanimous approval in principle from both the Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta (JHSSA) and Calgary Jewish Community Council.

Although most southern Alberta communities had a Jewish presence, not all were large enough to support a synagogue. Research has discovered that most of the early synagogue structures have been demolished or converted to other uses. Two of those buildings, however, might be suitable for replication: the very small synagogue at the Montefiore Colony at Sibbald, Alberta, c.1913, or Calgary's larger, brick, House of Jacob Synagogue, built in 1911.

The Little Synagogue on the Prairie Committee encourages Heritage Park to consider the concept of establishing a Jewish presence at the historical village, and would welcome the opportunity to discuss this project in greater detail.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

It is generally known that members of the Jewish community settled in the larger centers like Calgary and Edmonton, but it is a lesser known fact that Jews also settled in rural areas of Alberta working as farmers and ranchers.

The result of this geographic spread has been that the Jewish people have made significant contributions to not only urban life but to the rural diversity and vibrancy of the province.

We are proposing to build a replica synagogue at Heritage Park that would have existed in southern Alberta at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Why should this project be executed?

First, it is an important phenomenon that has been largely forgotten that Jews were integrated in Alberta from the very beginning.

Second, the Jewish community was an important early group to the province pointing to a religious and cultural diversity that needs to be represented in historical representations.

Further, the Jewish experience is representative of the broader phenomenon not only of immigration in general but of the ethnic bloc settlements. The ethnic bloc settlements - large chunks of farm land - reserved for members of ethnic communities was an important pattern of settlement in the province. Jews can be an example of the ethnic groups settling Alberta. For example, the French at Trochu, the Germans at Hussar and the Danes at Standard. The whole phenomenon can be represented by the Jewish community.

Even though today, we see Jews as “white,” at the time of Heritage Park, Jews were considered an ethnic group. Since today we value ethnic diversity it is important to feature Jews because they were an important ethnic group.

## **LITTLE SYNAGOGUE on the PRAIRIE PROJECT COMMITTEE**

The Little Synagogue on the Prairie Project is headed up by the volunteer Little Synagogue on the Prairie Project Committee made up of the Chair, Irena Karshenbaum; Special Advisor, Trudy Cowan; Historian and Author Jack Switzer; Old Timer and Professional Appraiser Emanuel Cohen and Archivist, Historian and Author Harry Sanders.

## **DESCRIPTION of the PROJECT**

To build a replica synagogue, including a library, with a rabbi’s residence and a *mikveh* (ritual bath) at the back of the property, which would have existed on the prairies from the 1864 to 1914, the time period of Heritage Park.

Our research shows that there are probably no extant functioning prairie synagogues, most of which have either been destroyed or no longer serving their original function.

The only option is to build a replica with the help of historians, archivists, architects, community leaders and other appropriate partners.

It is proposed that the synagogue would find home at Heritage Park where it would serve not only as a new addition to the park but give voice to a little known fact of Alberta history that the Jewish people were among the earliest settlers of the province.

## **THE PROPOSAL**

### **OPTION I: Montefiore Synagogue, The Little Synagogue on the Prairie**

A first option is to build a replica of the wooden Montefiore Synagogue which was at the centre of the Montefiore community near Sibbald, Alberta.

The following article has been reprinted by permission from Jack Switzer from the "Discovery: The Journal of the Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta" Volume 12, No. 2 – June 2002.

### **Little Synagogue on the Prairie**

By Jack Switzer



Montefiore Synagogue c. 1925 Provincial Archives of Alberta #77.258/73

The photo shows a small wooden building; the Magen David at the roof's peak clearly indicates it is a Jewish building. The setting is bleak. No trees, no shrubbery, decorate or shade the structure. It is in fact located on a prairie homestead, in the centre of the one of prairie's bleakest, driest areas, near the Alberta-Saskatchewan border a few miles north of the CN rail line that runs between Calgary and Saskatoon.

The Montefiore synagogue (also known as the Montefiore Institute) was the community centre for the Montefiore colony, a group of Jewish farmers who settled early in the 1900's just north of Sibbald, Alberta. Some sources call the community Muhlbach; this was the name of a local family whose farmhouse served as the area's post office.

Montefiore began in 1910 when two young Jewish men, Bill Manolson and Louis Schacter filed for homesteads in the area. They told friends in Calgary and elsewhere about the availability of free land, and the next year several Jewish families joined them.

By 1915 there were about 30 Jewish farmers, 100 persons in all, in the district. Some of the settlers had previous farm experience from unhappy stints in North Dakota and Montana. Large families held several parcels; brothers and teen-age boys often filed on land near the homesteads of their parents and lived at "home" until they married.

The homesteaders formed a credit union and called their bloc settlement Montefiore, in honor of the 19th century British philanthropist Sir Moses Montefiore. Advice, aid, and loans were sought from the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA), a group largely funded by Paris-based Baron de Hirsch.

They also built the synagogue circa 1913 bringing in two carpenters from Calgary. They may have been a Jewish father and son team named Rootman, who built many houses for the settlers.

The synagogue was 40 feet long and 22 feet wide, according to one source. Interior walls were plastered and painted a shade of yellow. Its ceiling was 12 feet high. A simple arc housed the congregation's single Torah scroll. Women sat at the sides, men in the middle, during religious services. All furniture was pushed aside for the building's frequent use as a social hall. It hosted dances, meetings, visiting lecturers, and the community's many life-cycle events.

The building cost \$1,500, with \$300 of that lent by the JCA, the remainder contributed by community members.

The community's *cheder* (Hebrew school) operating a few hours a week, was housed in the building, which also contained a library room with over a thousand books, mainly in Yiddish.

Location of the synagogue was a corner of the farm of Jacob and Fanny Chetner (then Cheterener). Rose Chetner recalls that her husband, Israel, one of the four Chetner sons, built the exterior metal *magen david*, in the farm machine shop.

Chetner also made the *magen david* that marked the community's small cemetery, located immediately behind the synagogue.

Montefiore colony employed a series of three rabbis, each of whom served briefly as *shochet* (ritual slaughterer), *mohel* (circumciser), and *melamed* (teacher) in addition to

leading religious services. They were occasionally aided or replaced by more specialized teachers or non-rabbinic religious functionaries, some supplied by the JCA. All soon left for greener locales. Knowledgeable residents performed most of these functions between professional visits. Rabbis and teachers were housed in a small house near the *shul* (synagogue).

Religious observance varied widely among the homesteaders. Many of those with Lithuanian roots tried to maintain Orthodox traditions, while those who were younger or came from other areas of Europe tended towards secularism.

Synagogue attendance peaked at High Holy Days, when Jewish farmers from the nearby Alsask settlement joined their brethren at Montefiore. A Doctor Silverman from Sibbald attended these services, as did Jewish merchants from area towns like Alsask and Eyre, in Saskatchewan.

Zionism was strong at Montefiore. One former resident recalls that a synagogue wall held portraits of Theodore Herzl and Chaim Weizmann. The "Ladies' Auxilliary" raised funds for Palestine through various socials, some held in member homes, but most in the community's centre - the synagogue.

Farm price recession and drought followed the prosperous Great War years, and settlers - both Jews and Gentiles - began to leave Montefiore in the early 1920s. Some moved to Calgary and Edmonton, but a large Jewish group emigrated to Petaluma, California, where many took up chicken-farming. They formed the Montefiore Hebrew Club, which still holds reunions in Los Angeles.

The exodus continued through the twenties. Loans from banks and the JCA could not be repaid, and most farmers just abandoned their holdings.

The Montefiore synagogue, its congregation gone, was also left deserted. The last Jewish communal use was about 1925, when only a handful of Jewish settlers remained. It was empty in 1927 when Benjamin Zukerman found a colony-stamped Yiddish library book in a corner; the book is now in the JHSSA archives.

Most library books were dispersed with the Jewish emigrants; presumably the synagogue's Torah scroll survives, but we do not know its later history.

A 1932 JCA report stated the Association held title to the Montefiore Institute building and three acres of land on which it was situated. The building was "deteriorating from year to year" and fire insurance was not available. It should be sold, as should the remaining farm lands held by the JCA.

A local farmer briefly used the building for storing his grain. The synagogue building was sold for a few hundred dollars about 1940 and moved to the town of Hannah, where it became the Fano family home. We do not know if the building still stands.

In 1939, the remains buried in the Montefiore cemetery were disinterred and moved to the Jewish cemetery in Edmonton. There were apparently about 16 graves, half adults, half infants and children.

Among the last to leave was the Benjamin Zukerman family, who took over a JCA-owned farm in 1927 and stayed until 1949. Harry Himmelfarb, a bachelor, hung on until the early 50's.

*Sources: Sibbald Community History, JHSSA Archives, Provincial Archives of Alberta, Manny Cohen, Dave Zukerman,. Reuven Dolgoy, an Edmonton Jewish historian, interviewed many of the surviving Jewish homesteaders in 1977; his tapes, and several important Montefiore photos, are held by the Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton. The JHSSA has copies of many of the audio tapes.*

### **Montefiore Institute, More Than Just a Synagogue**

By Jack Switzer

The Montefiore Institute was the name given to the synagogue-community centre at the Montefiore Jewish farm colony, established in 1910 on dryland homesteads just north of Sibbald, in east-central Alberta.

The one-room building stood on the land of Israel Chetner, an immigrant from the Bessarabia region of Russia, where anti-Semitism and economic hardships fuelled a mass exodus of Jews to the New World. The settlement was named for Sir Moses Montefiore, a revered English philanthropist.

Montefiore was the last of about dozen Jewish “colonies” – actually block settlements - set up in western Canada after 1882. The biggest were at Hirsch (1892) and Edenbridge (1906) in Saskatchewan, and near Trochu and Rumsey in Alberta (1905-6). Montefiore (1910) was relatively small – 25 families at most, but it was in many ways typical of the important but little-known Jewish agricultural presence on the Prairies.

The Montefiore “*shul*” (meaning “school” but implying “synagogue” as it was known in Yiddish, the first language of almost every east-European Jewish immigrant) was more than a synagogue, it was a true community centre.

Late afternoons saw school children taking Hebrew and Jewish history lessons. They could take home books from an extensive library of Yiddish, English and Hebrew books stored in the colony's library – several shelves in a back corner.

Men met weekday evenings to make communal decisions on the hiring of religious functionaries or the purchase of library material. The executive of the Montefiore credit union approved small loans and supervised collections.

An *Oren Kodesh* – holy arc – was front-and centre for Sabbath services. This was a traditional congregation; men and women sat in separate areas.

On High Holy Days, Jewish merchants and farmers from neighboring communities like Sibbald, Alsask, and Compeer often attended Montefiore religious services and community social events.

Visiting speakers made Montefiore a regular stop on their swing through the prairie Jewish communities. Some were promoting the secular, socialist and Yiddish-culture base of their ideologies.

On many Saturday nights, after the Sabbath, the Montefiore Institute became a party venue. Dances and pot-luck dinners brought music and laughter to the little wooden building. Non-Jews were frequent and welcome participants in Montefiore social events. Amateur theatre and traveling Jewish films were very popular Sunday events.

Behind the *shul* was a two-room building that housed whatever rabbi or Hebrew teacher the community could attract.

Drought and low wheat prices added to the hardships of dryland farming, and during the late 1920s most Montefiore settlers left the area. Some moved to Calgary and Edmonton; a few became chicken farmers in California.

The Montefiore *shul* was eventually moved to Hanna, where it became a private home.

In 1921 the prairie provinces had 25,000 Jews. Five thousand Jews, including 700 farm families, lived in rural settings.

### **Building Description of the Montefiore Synagogue**

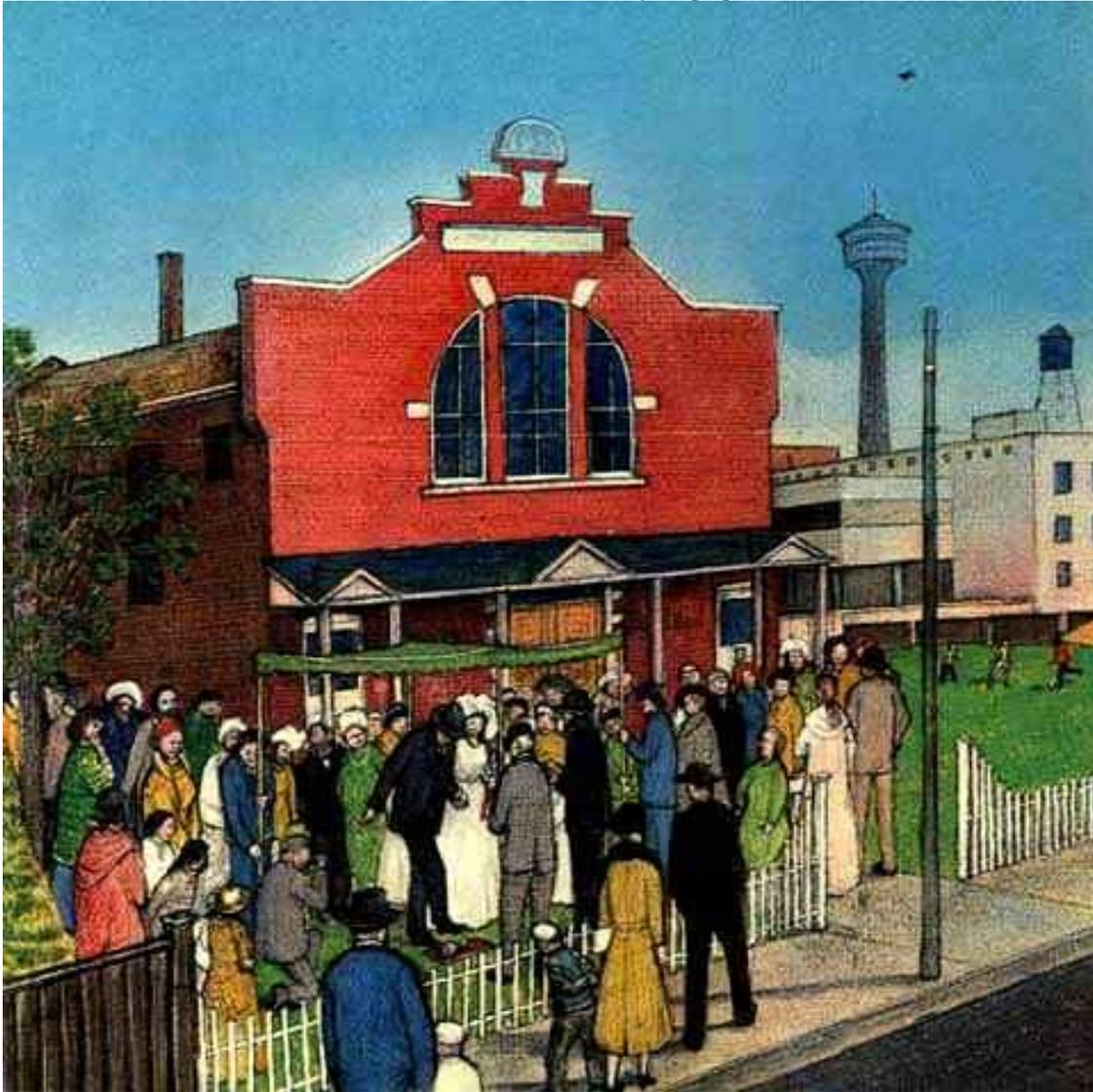
By Emanuel Cohen

The building has a frontage of 22 feet and is 40 feet in depth. The total area is 880 square feet or 81.7 meters square. The little porch entry way is 6 feet by 22 feet. The building has wood siding. The roof cover is wood shingles. The building sits on a concrete block foundation.

The interior is an open space with a small rear office area. The interior is very plain. It has one large window in the front and two windows along each side as well as a rear exit doorway from the small office. The interior floors were soft wood floors. It had a brick chimney and a wood-burning heater/stove. They did not have drywall in those days. They had either plaster or calcimine.

We have an original photo of the building on site and a photo of the building as it looks today.

## OPTION II: House of Jacob, The Not-So-Little Synagogue on the Prairie



Jewish Wedding in Calgary by William Kurelek  
<http://www.hojmi.org/wedding.html>

In time for the 2009 House of Jacob centennial, a replica of the original 1911 Synagogue can be built. Although, we have searched the City of Calgary Archives, Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta and Canadian Architectural Archives the original architectural plans of the House of Jacob no longer exist.

However, with the help of numerous photos and a scale model of the synagogue, we know a great deal about the building. We know the building was built of brick with traditional orthodox features. There was a number 5671 on the façade referring to the Hebrew year of its founding. There were two doors on either side of the main entrance which led to the women's gallery, two second-floor balconies overlooking the main floor. The *bimah* (reader's platform) stood in the middle of the main floor, the area reserved for men only, with the ark in the front. The building should also include a library, which the

Congregation most likely housed. The *mikveh* and the day chapel/meeting room/school room were at the back of the building.

Architectural plans and measurements of the building can be deduced by an architect from the scale model of the building, which is located at the Calgary Jewish Centre.

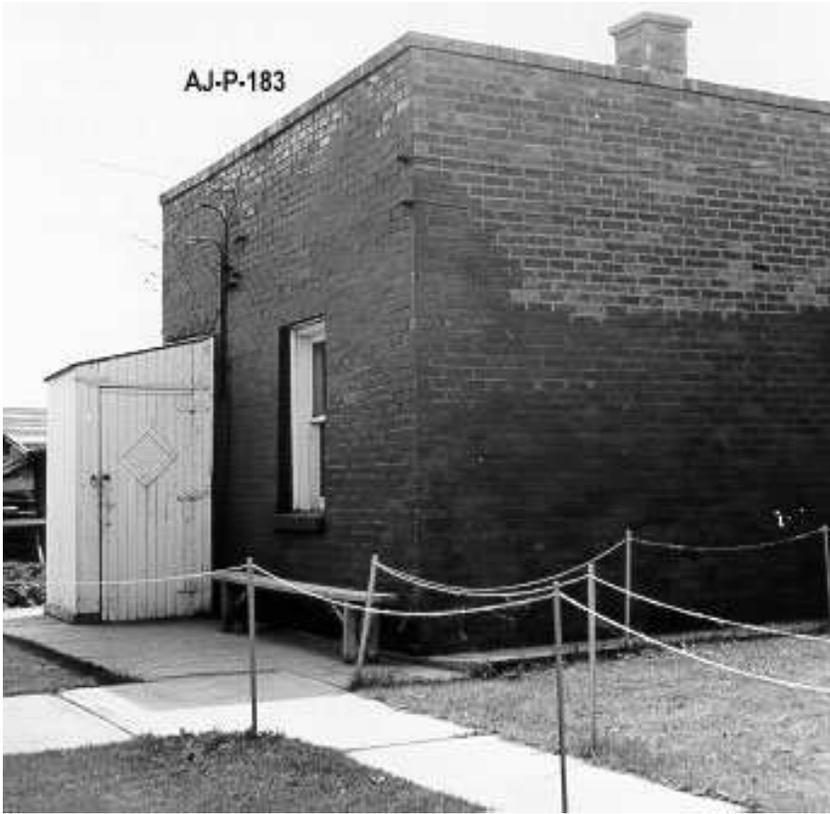
In a conversation with Jay Joffe, President of JHSAA, on April 28, 2006, he suggested that building a replica of the House of Jacob may be the best choice because it was Calgary's first synagogue and Heritage Park is in Calgary. There is also an "emotional attachment to the building" and that local families, as a way to honor their families, might want to buy name plaques for the seats. Building a large synagogue, or even a scaled down version, would give the option of using the building year round for weddings and various community events and therefore could be a source of revenue.

The House of Jacob could also have a video installation playing videos of Jewish settlers that are currently stored at the JHSAA. Mr. Joffe also indicated that the JHSAA would help do a video for the project of the history of Jews in Alberta. The video could explain that Jews came from all over but what united them was a common language, Yiddish. They did not have any infrastructure to come to, Calgarians did not want them and yet currently fifteen Jews from Alberta have received the Order of Canada.



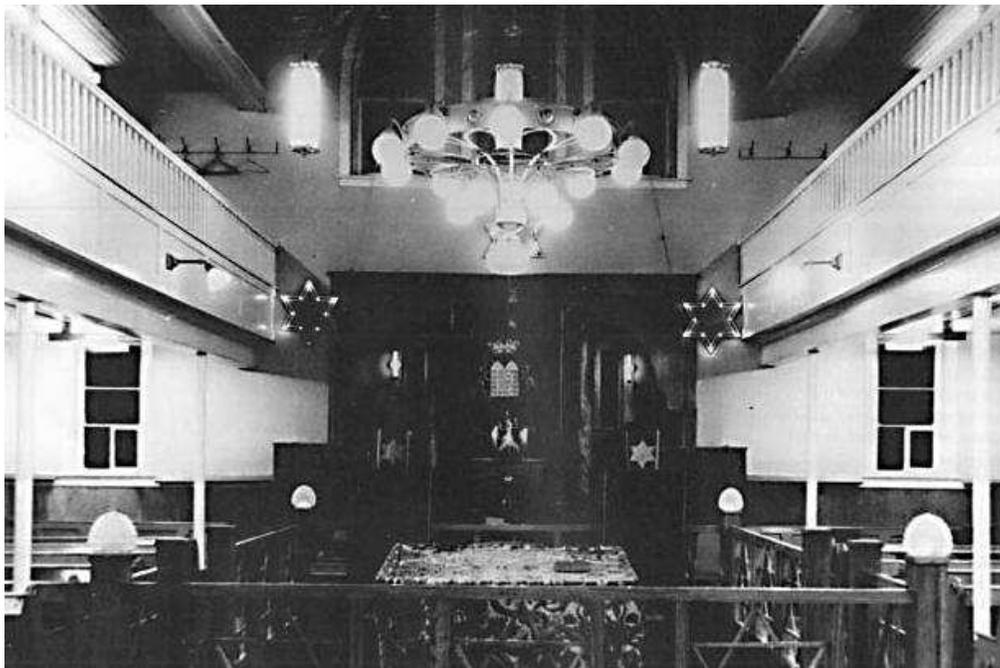
Photo taken in 1962 of House of Jacob in Calgary, Alberta (Alison Jackson Photo Collection - Calgary Public Library)

[http://calgarypubliclibrary.com/calgary/historic\\_tours/church/ch12.htm](http://calgarypubliclibrary.com/calgary/historic_tours/church/ch12.htm)



Back of House of Jacob photo likely taken in 1962, Calgary, Alberta (Alison Jackson Photo Collection - Calgary Public Library)

[http://calgarypubliclibrary.com/calgary/historic\\_tours/church/ch12.htm](http://calgarypubliclibrary.com/calgary/historic_tours/church/ch12.htm)



The interior is the traditional Orthodox style with the bimah in the center facing the Arch. The balcony served as the women's gallery. Photo – c. 1967.

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House of Jacob interior. Photo – c. 1967.  
“Land of Promise: The Jewish Experience In Southern Alberta” p. 153

### **OPTION III: Moving a Building**

The Little Synagogue on the Prairie Committee has considered and researched the possibility of moving an existing building. The following synagogues are still standing:

- Rabbi's House in Lethbridge was used as a synagogue for a short period of time but since it was not built for the specific purpose of a synagogue we believe it is not appropriate for the purposes of this project. The current Lethbridge Synagogue, built in the 1950s, is beyond the timeframe of Heritage Park and therefore has not been considered for this project. (See "Lethbridge" on page 20.)
- Medicine Hat Synagogue, no longer used as a synagogue, is a "very good building" according to Emanuel Cohen, however, since it was built in 1938 it is beyond the timeframe of Heritage Park and was not considered for this project. (See "Medicine Hat" on page 20.)
- Rumsey Synagogue is now a private home of the Sengaus family. (See "Rumsey and Trochu" on page 21.)
- Montefiore Synagogue which was moved to Hanna, Alberta is now a private home. (See "Option I" on page 5 and "Montefiore Colony Near Sibbald" on page 22.)

### **WHY SHOULD THIS PROJECT BE UNDERTAKEN?: HISTORY of the JEWISH PEOPLE on the PRAIRIES**

Jewish urban and rural communities were established across western Canada by Jewish settlers fleeing largely from the pogroms and anti-Semitism of Russia sparked by the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881.

The Jews of Russia were subject to severe economic, political and social restrictions and policies of discrimination, one of which appropriate to note, is that they were not allowed to own land and therefore did not have the experience that would have prepared them for the treacherous conditions of the prairies. This is primarily why most Jewish migration was towards the urban centers; however, some surprisingly dared to try their luck at farming. Why? Some were truly fearless and were seduced by the \$10 price tag for 160 acres of land they could buy from the Government of Canada and the land title would be registered in their name. The first time a Cohen, a Gurevitch or a Horowitz was accorded such a right.

In Alberta, Jewish rural communities existed from as early as the 1880s to around the 1930s. With the economic devastation of the Great Depression, most Jewish families, as well as other settlers, migrated to the larger centers in search of work although a few maintained their connection to their agricultural roots.

Jews have always been a small minority, as a percentage, in Canada. However, despite this, then and now, the contributions of the Jewish people to the greater community have far exceeded their numbers.

At the turn of the last century, they were homesteaders and farmers, fur traders and ranchers, store owners and even community leaders laying the foundation for their

descendants, and their brethren who would follow, to enrich the greater community through every means and almost infinite possibilities.

In Alberta, in those early years, they were primarily self-employed and self-reliant. They eventually moved on and moved up where they established themselves as business proprietors, cattle dealers, lawyers, office workers and doctors. The generations that followed have included prominent lawyers and judges, doctors and researchers, writers and philanthropists, businessmen and politicians.

At the center of this prosperity was the strong sense of family and community. And at the heart of this community was, and is, the synagogue.

The little synagogue on the prairie was the little synagogue that sprung up in countless Jewish settlements and colonies, regardless of the poverty and hardship of those early years on the prairies.

We discuss some of the Jewish prairie settlements and their synagogues on these pages.

## **MANITOBA**

### **Bender Hamlet**

In Bender Hamlet in Manitoba (NW¼ 36-19-1W) the Canadian Government gave Jacob Bender, the founder of the hamlet, permission to subdivide the land and use a portion of it to build Achdus Yeshurun Synagogue and Cheder (Hebrew School) as well as a cemetery. The community also had a *mikveh*. Bender founded the community in 1902 and served as its leader until 1907 to approximately 20 families who had come from Russia and England.



Cheder (Hebrew School) at Bender Hamlet, Manitoba

<http://web.ncf.ca/lavitt/jewishfarmcolonies/bender/img1318.jpg>

## **SASKATCHEWAN**

### **Edenbridge (Known by local Jews as Yid'n Bridge)**

The Jewish community at Edenbridge, Saskatchewan was founded by settlers from South Africa, of Lithuanian origin, who came to the area in 1906. The community thrived reaching a peak of 50 families in the 1920s. They built the Beth Israel Synagogue in 1908 which was an active place of worship until 1964 and subsequently declared a Saskatchewan historic site.



Beth Israel Synagogue at Edenbridge now a Saskatchewan historic site

<http://web.ncf.ca/lavitt/jewishfarmcolonies/edenbridge/edenbrdg.html>

### **Hirsch**

Founded in 1892 through the financial support of Baron Maurice de Hirsch and the Jewish Colonization Association, Jewish settlers from Russia, Poland, Romania and Austria worked the land of the Hirsch settlement. Their hard work eventually showed.

Eighteen miles east of Estevan, the colony prospered having three stores, a hotel and a school serving approximately 200 residents. The district is believed to have had three synagogues: the Hirsch synagogue was bought and converted into a family home occupied by Norman Abood; the Beth Jacob at Estevan is now the local public library.

### **Lipton Colony**

One hundred Jews from Romania had arrived to this area in 1901, four years before the founding of the province. In 1905, the colony had established a cemetery and the first of three schools.

### **Sonnenfeld**

Named in honor of Dr. S. Sonnenfeld a director of the Jewish Colonization Association, Jewish pioneers first settled the area in 1906. The colony had a synagogue with the community peaking at 227 people around 1929.

Other communities in Saskatchewan had synagogues that were built prior to 1920 (included here are those synagogues whose founding dates are now lost):

- Kamsack Synagogue – 422 Fort Street (19?? – 1962) – was destroyed by a cyclone in 1944 and rebuilt.
- North Battleford Synagogue – 14<sup>th</sup> Avenue & 105 Street (????).
- Regina:
  - Beth Jacob Synagogue – 4715 McTavish Street (???? – present).
  - Temple Beth Tikvah – (????- present).
  - ? Synagogue – Ottawa Street (1913 - ???).
- Saskatoon:
  - Agudas Israel Synagogue – 500 Avenue F (1912 – 1919) – moved to new location in 1919.
  - Agudas Israel Synagogue – 136 Avenue F (1919 – 1971).
  - Talmud Torah – (1915 – 1928) – moved to new building in 1928.
- Watrous Synagogue – (???? – 1973) – is now used as a summer cottage.
- Yorkton Shaarei Shomayim – Betts Avenue (1912 – 1975).

## ALBERTA

Among the first Jewish settlers in southern Alberta were Jacob and Rachel Diamond who came to Calgary in 1889, sixteen years before the founding of the province.

Rachel and Jacob were soon followed by members of their own families and many other Jewish settlers who came to southern Alberta. In 1901, it is estimated that there were approximately 242 Jews in the province. In 1911, the number had grown to 1,505. By 1921, the Jewish population was at 3,242.

Specifically in Calgary in 1911, 600 Jewish people lived in the city, which at that time, had a population of almost 44,000. This represented approximately 1.4% of the population. Between the 1920s and 1940s Calgary's Jewish population was at 2%. The percentage of Jews in Calgary is currently around 0.8% on a community estimate of 8,000 out of 950,000 people.

Unlike their co-religionists who worked in the sweatshops in the east, in Calgary, many Jews were independent business owners. Eighth Avenue East between Centre Street and Second Street, now Stephen Avenue Walk, contained some of the densest concentration of Jewish businesses in Canada from as early as 1900 to when the area went into urban decline in the 1950s. Jacob Diamond ran a men's clothing store around 1901, his brother, William, operated a similar store near by. Other businesses soon followed: Royal Hotel operated by Charles Bell and J. Schiesel, Moses Muskovitz, Jewelry Manufacturing, Joseph Serot – Barber, Samuel Cobb Grocer, Fradkin & Bercov General Store, just to name a few.

There were Jewish families in as many as fifty Alberta towns.

At least two small Alberta communities were named in honor of Jewish developers: Frank in the Crowsnest Pass, after Henry L. Frank, and Nordegg in west central Alberta, after Martin Cohn-Nordegg. Other notable contributors to the prosperity and culture of the province have included Morris Shumiatcher – the owner of The Calgary Hat Works,

established in 1919, later became Smithbilt Hats – was the originator of the famous Calgary White Hat. And Harry Veiner, the farmer, sportsman, businessman and philanthropist who was also a very popular mayor of Medicine Hat from 1952 to 1966 and 1968 to 1974.

### **Calgary**

In 1889, Jacob and Rachel Diamond were the first Jewish settlers to come to Calgary. In 1906, the community was large enough to require the services of its first rabbi, Rabbi Hyman Goldstick who later became mayor of Edson. Rabbi Goldstick acted as a prayer leader, ritual slaughterer and circumciser. For a few years he traveled between Calgary and Edmonton helping with the religious needs of both cities.

Believed to be the oldest chartered Jewish organization in Alberta, Congregation House of Jacob was incorporated in 1909 and opened the doors of its 500-seat synagogue in 1911, when the community numbered over 600, at 325 - 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue S.E.

The *mikveh* and the day chapel/meeting room/school room were built at the back of the lot first. The building was built of brick with traditional orthodox features. The number 5671 on the façade referred to the Hebrew year of its founding. The *bimah* (reader's platform) stood in the middle of the main floor, the area reserved for men only, with the ark in front. Two doors on either side of the main entrance led to the women's gallery, two second-floor balconies overlooking the main floor.

Jacob Diamond gave the first pledge for the synagogue. Brothers Henry Noah and Alexander Sereth donated the building materials from the Riverside lumber yards. Jacob Woolfe, a carpenter and cabinet-maker, is believed to have built the first *bimah* and torah ark.

Calgary lawyer and future Prime Minister of Canada R. B. Bennett addressed the audience at the opening ceremony in the summer of 1911.



Early photo of House of Jacob in Calgary, Alberta  
“Land of Promise: The Jewish Experience In Southern Alberta” p. 154

The City of Calgary purchased the synagogue as part of its east-end urban re-development project and demolished it in 1968. A scale model of the synagogue built by architecture student, Vance Harris, exists today at the Calgary Jewish Centre.

The congregation moved to the Moose Lodge building at 1212 Street S.W. where it remained until the almost inactive congregation was revived around 1980.

A chandelier and some of the wooden furnishings from the original House of Jacob are still in use at the new House of Jacob-Mikveh Israel synagogue, which officially changed its name in 1983, at 1612 - 92<sup>nd</sup> Avenue S.W. and was dedicated in 1986. The original cornerstone of the House of Jacob is built into the new building. Sadly, the original pews with lockers under the seats were kept for many years but carelessly discarded in the 1990s.

### **Edmonton**

In 1906, the Edmonton Hebrew Association was established, but the Jewish community of Edmonton had to wait until sometime in 1911 or 1912 when the House of Israel was erected at its first location at 95<sup>th</sup> Street and Rowland Road. It is believed to be the oldest extant brick synagogue on the prairies west of Winnipeg.

The building was sold in 1952 to the Dutch Reform Church and again in 1960 to a German-speaking Catholic Church called St. Boniface. Currently, the Jewish community is quietly working towards reacquiring the building with the intention of having it designated as a Provincial Historic Landmark. However, given the delicate nature of the project no public announcements have been made.



House of Israel built in 1911 to 1912.

Courtesy of Jewish Archives and Historical Society of Edmonton and Northern Alberta (Provincial Archives of Alberta, Ernest Brown Collection, B3570)

## **Lethbridge**

It is believed that the family of Harris Goodman was the first Jewish family to settle in Lethbridge in 1905. Census show the Jewish population had reached 54 by 1911. Another 50 Jews lived in Magrath, Pincher Creek, Blairmore and Milk River and looked to Lethbridge as their Jewish center. Rabbi Aaron Goodman's home served as a synagogue and classroom for the Jewish community from 1918 to 1928. The congregation is believed to have been founded in 1912 just after the Jewish school was started in 1911. The rabbi's home was located on the southwest corner of 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 4<sup>th</sup> Street and was eventually converted to a commercial property serving as a restaurant and an ice cream parlor.



Rabbi Aaron Goodman's home served as a synagogue and classroom for the Lethbridge Jewish community – c. 1920

"Land of Promise: The Jewish Experience In Southern Alberta" p. 223

The Beth Israel Synagogue at 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue and 9<sup>th</sup> Street South, was converted from the Baptist Church in 1935, serving the community as house of worship, Hebrew School and place of social gatherings until 1955 when the existing Beth Israel Synagogue was built.

## **Medicine Hat**

One of the earliest Jewish settlements in the province was around Medicine Hat in 1881, if only just briefly. Louis Sands, from Michigan, set up five lumber mills in the Cypress Hills area and at least one of his employees, Isidor Feldman, was Jewish. Farmers are also thought to have homesteaded in the area as early as 1881. Sands and Feldman are believed to have left around 1900. Jewish settlers returned around 1912 and stayed permanently.

Sons of Abraham Synagogue at 540 5<sup>th</sup> Street S.E., founded in 1928, did not have its own building until 1938. The community reached a peak of around 40 families employing a rabbi, establishing a Hebrew school and had an active Hadassah chapter as well as a B'nai B'rith organization. Esther and Max Conn commissioned a Torah scroll from a sofer in Winnipeg in 1937 for the synagogue. When the community dispersed, the synagogue

was sold and the Torah scrolls eventually found a home with the Kol Tefillah congregation in Santa Cruz, California.

### **Pine Lake**

Surviving only from 1892 to 1895, the Pine Lake area at one point had the largest concentration of Jews in Alberta numbering approximately 70 individuals. The community failed because of lack of farming experience, antipathy of their neighbors and the devastating winter of 1895-96.

### **Rumsey and Trochu**

Founded in 1906, the settlement had approximately 70 families who worked the fertile land and were blessed with abundant crops. As a result, the community at one point is believed to have been the richest Jewish community in western Canada. In 1917, they built the Beth Yaacov Synagogue. The Jewish kids went to Tolman School where according to Morris Sanders (see interview in Appendix A), there were eighteen Jewish students and only two “*goyim*” (gentile).

The 1921 census reported 174 Jews living in Rumsey.



Beth Yaacov Synagogue which was converted to Sengaus family home. Photo courtesy of Harry Sanders – October, 2004.

Things changed. Eventually, the community broke down because of hardship and struggle. It was the same for the other ethnic communities like the Ukrainians, the Germans and the Scots, who simply gave up. Jewish settlers also lived around Trochu, which was 20 miles west of Rumsey separated by the Red Deer River.

### **Montefiore Colony near Sibbald**

The first settlers to the Sibbald area were believed to have been Morris Manolson and Louis Shacter who came around 1904.

The colony was named in honor of the late Sir Moses Montefiore, the British philanthropist, who provided the funds for the synagogue that was built around 1913. The building was 50 feet by 70 feet erected on 36-29-3-W4. A small two room house was also built on the site as the rabbi's residence. The community also hired a Yiddish teacher.

The interior of the synagogue was plaster finished with a stage at the back of the hall where dramatic plays were held. The synagogue had a library room housing 1,500 volumes consisting of English, "Jewish" and Hebrew titles. All community events, socials, dances, parties, wedding and funerals were conducted at the synagogue.

After many disastrous years of drought, hail, grasshoppers and erratic grain prices, most of the settlers of the colony migrated around 1926 to Los Angeles, California. The synagogue was sold some time in 1940 or 1941 for \$200. It was remodeled into a house and moved to Hanna, Alberta around 1967.

### **SOME of the FOUNDING JEWISH FAMILIES of SOUTHERN ALBERTA**

Austin (Arenstein) Family	Kerr (Karasik) Family
Jacob Bell Barron	Kesnick Family
Belkin Family	Kline Family
Bell Family	Libin Family
Bercov Family	Madorsky Family
Bercuson Family	Maerov Family
Bikman (Bickman) Family	Malkin Family
Jack Bleviss Family	Samuel Martin Family
Block Family	Samuel Mozen Family
Abraham Chetner Family	Nagler Family
David Cohen Family	Pearlman Family
Eddie Cohen Family	Rabinovitz (Rabinovici) Family
Cohen and Karsch Families	Ratchesky Family
Harry Cohen Family	Ted Riback Family
Diamond Family	Dr. George Robbins Family
Eisenstadt Family	Rootman Family
Epstein Family	Rosenthal Family
Percy Fishman Family	Safran Family
Freedman Family	Sam Segall Family
Gelfond Family	Sereth Family
A.H. Goldberg Family	Shapiro Family

Harry Goresht Family	Sheftel Family
Norman Gould Family	Leo Sheftel Family
Groberman Family	Harry Shuler Family
Hanson (Hansin) Family	Shulman Family
Moses Hart Family	Shumiatcher Family
Hector Family	Singer Family
Samuel J. Helman Family	Smolensky Family
Nate Horodezky Family	Sosinsky Family
Abraham A. Horwitz Family	Srolovitz, Sanders and Sayles Families
Cecil Horwitz Family	Jacob Switzer Family
Harry Isenstein Family	Mendel Switzer Family
Jaffe Family	Wolf Baer Switzer Family
Joffe Family	Waterman Family
	Woolfe Family
	Ziselman Family

**INTERPRETATIONAL: WHAT STORY SHOULD be TOLD THROUGH the LITTLE SYNAGOGUE on the PRAIRIE?**

Through photographs, artifacts and stories, the synagogue should show and tell the following story:

- A brief history of the Jewish people in southern Alberta; Why did they come?
- How did they live? What were their customs? What is Judaism? Why were they different?
- What did they do? What occupations were they involved in (farming, ranching, merchants, etc)?
- How did they contribute to the greater community?
- Who were their leaders as well as prominent and unique personalities?

**FORT EDMONTON PARK – A PRECEDENT**

Fort Edmonton is the equivalent historical attraction to Heritage Park. The park explores four time periods: the Fur Trading Post from 1795 to 1870; the Settlement Era from 1871 to 1891; the Municipal Era 1892 to 1914; and the Metropolitan Era from 1915 to 1929.

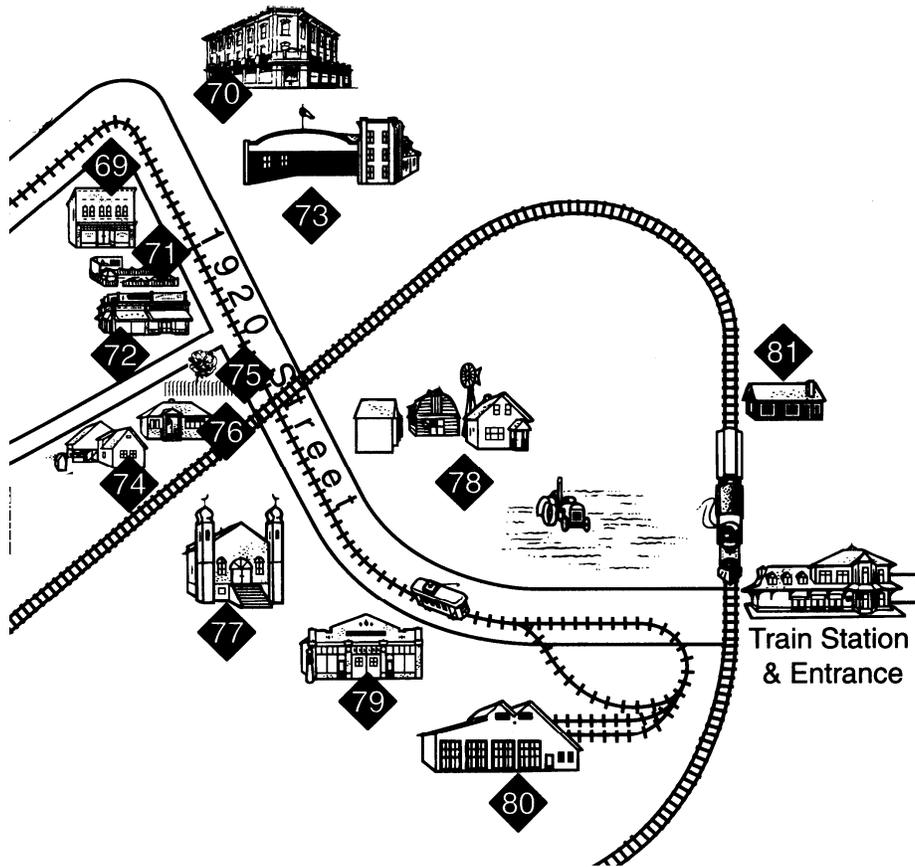
Even though it was built in 1938, the Al Rashid Mosque was moved to Fort Edmonton in 1990 where it was restored and included in the Metropolitan Era or the 1920 Street exhibition.



Front view of Al Rashid Mosque circa 1938 at Fort Edmonton  
[http://www.ftedmontonpark.com/1920pics/al-rashid-mosque-02\\_jpg.html](http://www.ftedmontonpark.com/1920pics/al-rashid-mosque-02_jpg.html)



Side view of Al Rashid Mosque at Fort Edmonton  
[http://www.ftedmontonpark.com/1920pics/al-rashid-mosque-03\\_jpg.html](http://www.ftedmontonpark.com/1920pics/al-rashid-mosque-03_jpg.html)



Al Rashid Mosque (#77) situated on 1920 Street at Fort Edmonton  
<http://www.ftedmontonpark.com/1920pics/1920index.html>

## **BUDGET and COST**

Preliminary research shows the costs of building either Option I or Option II:

- Emanuel Cohen, of Cohen Appraisals, has indicated that a low cost building, of the Montefiore Synagogue, would be in the range of \$125,000. A deluxe version of the same building would be in the range of \$300,000. These estimates are of the building only and do not include furniture, equipment and interior set-up.
- An architect has indicated a cost of approximately \$530,000 for the Montefiore Synagogue and a cost of approximately \$1.6 million for the House of Jacob. These estimates include furniture, equipment and all interior set-up.

We can provide detailed versions of both of the above appraisals.

## **DONORS, SPONSORS and PROJECT SUPPORTERS**

Preliminary research shows project funding could possibly be obtained from some of the following sources:

- The Alberta Government
  - Alberta Lottery Fund:
    - Community Facility Enhancement Program - provides financial assistance for the expansion and upgrading of Alberta's extensive network of community-use facilities. Normally, the maximum level of funding for any facility is \$125,000 per fiscal year. Grant requests of more than \$125,000 will be considered if a special need can be shown and strong community support is demonstrated.  
<http://albertalotteryfund.ca/grants/cfep.asp>
    - Community Initiatives Program - supports project-based initiatives in areas such as community services, seniors' services, libraries, arts and culture, sports, education, health and recreation. The maximum grant is \$75,000 per project per year on a matching basis. The matching requirement may be met in the form of any contribution of money, volunteer labour, services, or donated materials or equipment for the project.  
[http://albertalotteryfund.ca/grants/community\\_initiatives.asp](http://albertalotteryfund.ca/grants/community_initiatives.asp)
  - Community Development:
    - Heritage Preservation Partnership Program - supports tangible initiatives that promote awareness of Alberta's history and have a lasting impact. Grant maximum is \$5,000 per project.  
<http://www.cd.gov.ab.ca/preserving/heritage/ahrf/partnership/HeritageAwareness/index.asp>
- The Heritage Park Foundation
- The Growth Fund
- The Jewish community
- Private foundations (Martha and Harry Cohen Foundation, Alvin and Mona Libin Foundation, Kahanoff Foundation, Koshitsky Foundation)
- Corporate donations
- Private donations
- Gifts-in-kind

We are aware that if the project were to go forward we would be responsible for setting up an Endowment Fund which would address numerous issues including upkeep, repair, maintenance and programming.

## **SOURCES**

Land of Promise: The Jewish Experience in Southern Alberta 1889 – 1945  
Prepared by the Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta c. 1996

“Eight Avenue East – Calgary’s Jewish Business Birthplace” By Jack Switzer  
Discovery: The Journal of the Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta  
Volume 13, No. 3, October 2003

“Eight Avenue’s Log Cabin – 50 Years as a Jewish Business” By Jack Switzer  
Discovery: The Journal of the Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta  
Volume 12, No. 1, February 2002

“Little Synagogue on the Prairie” By Jack Switzer  
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Volume 12, No. 2 – June 2002.

Jewish Archives and Historical Society of Edmonton and Northern Alberta (JAHSENA)

Land of the Second Chance: A History of Ethnic Groups of Southern Alberta  
By Howard Palmer  
Lethbridge Herald, 1972

The Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta (JHSSA) Archives

Heritage Park 2003 Annual Report

Heritage Park 2004 Annual Report

Calgary Public Library

## Appendix A

### Questions - Prairie Synagogue Project      Date of interview: January 26, 2006

Name	Morris Sanders (worked for Curly Gurevitch) married Miriam Freedman
Age	79
Place of Birth	General Hospital in Calgary. Lived south of Scollard.
Parent's Names	Harry Srolowitz and Mary Rosentweig
Number of siblings	4 children in the family.
Name of the Jewish community where was born and grew up.	The family had a farm in Scollard, moved to Rumsey in 1941 when the family bought a store that they operated until 1959.
Where is the community located?	30 miles north of Drumheller.
When was the community founded?	1905/06
Does it still exist today?	No. Norman and David Silberstein, one 0.5 Jew and some quarter Jews live in the area.
Who first settled the community?	Elias Sengaus and Raphael Gurevitch.
What was the total population of the community? What was the Jewish population of the community?	70 families in the early 1920s. During the Depression many went broke (some sold cattle for 1 cent/pound), went to towns, many couldn't get jobs because couldn't get the shabbas off.
Were there other Jewish communities near by? If yes, where were they and what were their names?	No. The closest was the Montefiore colony where people were starving to death because the land was poor and it didn't rain.
Did the community have a synagogue? If yes, what was its name? Does it still exist?	Yes. If every Jew didn't show up there wasn't enough to make a minyan.  Transformed into the Sengaus family home. The family had three sons.
Describe the synagogue.  Colours? Layout? Library?	Was located 5 miles west and 0.5 miles north of Rumsey. Was never full. Open during the High Holidays, closed most Saturdays because Jews had to farm when weather was good.  Grey, brown wooden building on the outside. Don't remember inside. Upstairs balcony for women, men would sit below. Might have been a few books.

School?	No, taught in someone else's house to be closer to the kids. Went to a public school. On Sunday mornings had a few hours of Hebrew and "Jewish."
Mikvah?	No, the only mikvah I saw was in the House of Jacob in Calgary.
Do you have a picture of the synagogue?	No, did not have a camera.
Can a picture be found?	No.
Was there a choir?	No, hardly enough to make minyan.
Cantor?	One acted as a cantor, Nachem Gelfond, who was a farmer.
Rabbi?	Elias Sengaus was not a rabbi. He acted as teacher and led the service. He was well educated.
Bar mitzvahs?	I think it did, but don't remember.
Bat mitzvahs?	I never heard of one.
What was the Jewish population in Alberta at the turn of the last century? What was the breakdown of the Jewish population between rural and urban centres?	Don't know.
When did the move from rural to urban occur for the Jewish community?	Sanders left the farm in 1940. The community couldn't make minyan, Most left the farm after WWII. In 1940 there were about 7 families.
Describe rural Jewish life in the farming communities.	Between 1920 to '40 farming with horses. Had a Chevrolet but it didn't run in the winter because didn't have antifreeze. In 1938, a two-door Ford with heater cost \$800. When it was cold, the family would stay home eat apples, pop corn and hope no one was sick. Ate eggs for breakfast. Liked to read "Free Press Prairie Farmer" which could come as early as Monday or as late as Friday. We had all the beef we wanted and potatoes. Had picnics on Saturdays. No electricity. It was a lot of fun. I was glad I lived it. I wouldn't do it again. I had a different attitude toward life.
How prominent or how central was the synagogue to rural life and urban life as you remember it?	The only times we went was three times a year. We were busy and had to make a living so we couldn't go on the Sabbath.
How observant was the community?	Jewish was in their heart but it was impossible to be an observant Jew. We worked on the Sabbath. If you wanted to work on the farm, you had no

	<p>choice. If you had a cow that needed milking on the Sabbath, you milked the cow. Didn't keep kosher but didn't eat pork. Mother didn't work on the Sabbath.</p> <p>A popular joke went something like this:  Two people run to the rabbi's house to tell him the cow fell into the well, "What do we do?" they ask the rabbi.  The rabbi responds, "It's the Sabbath, nothing."  "But rabbi," they implore, "It's your cow"  "Then get it out," the rabbi orders.</p>
Describe the relations between the Jewish community and the non-Jewish population.	Very good. Inter-marriage common. "Shiksas" ran after the Jewish guys because they were better people. They were better people because they were a minority and had to show they were better than everyone else. We had to prove to "goyim" that we were good people. Everyone liked Jewish people. They ran stores. Jews were gentlemen.
Other	I was the last one born there. Didn't have a bar mitzvah there. Had a bar mitzvah after I got married in Lethbridge.

**Appendix B**

**Questions - Prairie Synagogue Project      Date of interview: February 2, 2006**

Name	Elly Raskin (spoke Russian and “Jewish” at home) married a British war bride one month before storming the beaches of Dieppe, France on August 19, 1942.
Age	86 (born 1919)
Place of Birth	West of Rumsey
Parent’s Names	Esther (from Kiev)and Louis (from Chernobyl) Raskin
Number of siblings	4
Name of the Jewish community where was born and grew up.	The community did not have a name, known just as west of Rumsey.
Where is the community located?	West of Rumsey
When was the community founded?	Around 1905
Does it still exist today?	No, no Jewish people left in Rumsey.
Who first settled the community?	Louis Raskin (came to Calgary in 1904, worked on the railroad, got a parcel of land and started homesteading in 1905), Sengaus, Silverstein and Gurevitch.
What was the total population of the community? What was the Jewish population of the community?	Wolfsons, 2 Gurevitch families, Raskins, Rosenthals, Sengauses, Silversteins, 2 Gelfond families, Shunds, Caplans and 1 bachelor who kept to himself.
Were there other Jewish communities near by? If yes, where were they and what were their names?	East of Rumsey, weekends and days the women would visit each other.
Did the community have a synagogue?  If yes, what was its name?  Does it still exist?	Yes, the building was dedicated entirely to the synagogue.  Don’t remember will try to find out.  The building was moved 0.5 mile west. The Sengaus family renovated it so that it would be livable.
Describe the synagogue. Colours?  Layout?	Very simple building. Beige outside, neutral color on the inside. No plumbing, used outhouse. No electric lights, used kerosene and candles but everything done in daylight. One great big room, another room in the back

	where the teacher taught. Mr. Sengaus was the teacher.
Library?	No library.
School?	The Tolman school was 0.5 miles west.
Mikvah?	Don't know if there was a mikvah.
Do you have a picture of the synagogue?	Yes
Can a picture be found?	Yes, will look.
Was there a choir?	No.
Cantor?	Probably.
Rabbi?	Rabbi would slaughter meet/cattle. Rabbi came from another community, don't know where and don't remember rabbi's name.
Bar mitzvahs?	Yes, I had a bar mitzvah in 1931.
Bat mitzvahs?	No.
What was the Jewish population in Alberta at the turn of the last century? What was the breakdown of the Jewish population between rural and urban centres?	
When did the move from rural to urban occur for the Jewish community?	Final stages were in the late 1940s and early '50s. I lived with my wife and children south of Rumsey for three years after WWII, then moved to Calgary in 1948.
Describe rural Jewish life in the farming communities.  How prominent or how central was the synagogue to rural life and urban life as you remember it?	Life was good. Learned about farming, started at 5 years at Tolman school Three years later my family moved to Rumsey where my parents operated the Raskin General Store. I skipped grade 4, finished grade 11. After my brother, Sam, and I farmed and owned a trucking business. Not that important. The synagogue was used for religious functions. I would go there for one hour after school to learn to write in "Jewish."
How observant was the community?	Observed holidays where we would gather at synagogue.
Describe the relations between the Jewish community and the non-Jewish population.	Got along very well with non-Jewish community. "Didn't stick to ourselves. Went along with everyone."
Other?	



Sam Raskin, Rex the Horse and Curly Gurevitch, the “Cowboy from the Colony.”  
The Lazy S Ranch at Rumsey, Alberta – c. 1930  
Photo courtesy of Allan “Curly” Gurevitch  
“Land of Promise: The Jewish Experience in Southern Alberta” p. 65

<b>Project Committee:</b> <b>Emanuel Cohen</b> <b>Trudy Cowan</b> <b>Harry Sanders</b> <b>Jack Switzer</b>	<b>Project Chair: Irena Karshenbaum</b>
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