

A BRIEF HISTORY OF JEWISH LIFE IN SOUTHERN ALBERTA

by Jack Switzer for Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta

It all began when Jacob and Rachel Diamond became Alberta's first permanent Jewish settlers in 1889. By the time the province of Alberta was born in 1905, some 50 Jews had followed in their footsteps and settled in Calgary. By 1911, the community numbered over 600. Most came from Russia and Romania anxious to leave pogroms and persecution behind them and to embrace the freedoms and economic opportunities that were the twin hallmarks of the west.



The newcomers bought land for a Jewish cemetery in 1904, and for their first synagogue, aptly named the House of Jacob, in 1911. By then, the fledgling community was influential enough to attract local politicians and dignitaries who participated in the cornerstone ceremony. Jewish families also settled in Medicine Hat and Lethbridge during the decade following Alberta's establishment.



Many Jews became homesteaders, mostly in "block settlements" near Trochu and Rumsey (1905-1906) and Sibbald (1910). The Trochu and Rumsey farmers were generally successful, and participated fully in their local communities, though most left farming after a generation, attracted by the economic opportunities and Jewish infrastructure of city life.

Although immigration slowed during World War I, Jewish communal life flourished. The Talmud Torah (Calgary Hebrew School) provided after-school Judaic classes for children. Zionist organizations became active, as did member organizations like B'nai Brith and Hadassah.

The 1920s saw an increase in Jewish immigration from eastern Europe. Supporters of Yiddish culture built the I. L. Peretz Institute in 1929 and, soon thereafter, established Calgary's first Jewish day school. A couple of years later, another group built the House of Israel as a Jewish community centre. It opened in 1931, although the Depression and World War II delayed its completion for nearly two decades.

In 1931, Calgary had 1,600 Jews, representing two percent of the city's population.

Lethbridge and Medicine Hat each had over one hundred Jews and boasted synagogues, Jewish cemeteries, and a surprising variety of Jewish organizations.

Alarmed by the rise of Nazism in Germany and escalating anti-Semitism in Poland, the Jews of southern Alberta tried - without success - to have the federal government liberalize its restrictive Jewish immigration policy. They were also apprehensive about the ideology of Alberta's new Social Credit government, which included in its ranks, some openly anti-Semitic members. Many Jews felt the sting of exclusion both professionally and socially. At the time, Jewish men and women were still largely engaged in small business though a few became successful in the professions. Extended families, mutual-aid societies, and individual enterprise kept many members of the Jewish community afloat during the Depression.



One in 10 local Jews – 250 in all – joined the Canadian armed forces during World War II. Many were wounded in action, 10 fell while serving their country and several were decorated for their valor. Jewish veterans quickly applied their new found skills to civilian life. They attended university, opened businesses, and drove the post-war development of their communities – in both Jewish and civic spheres. Many entered

professions and some played a role in the development of Alberta's oil industry.

Holocaust survivors, some left alone in the world and others related to Calgary families, started new lives in southern Alberta.

Calgary Jews enjoyed a major building boom beginning in 1959. During a three-year period, they built two synagogue buildings, two schools, and a memorial chapel. By 1961, nearly 3,000 Jews lived in Calgary. Their move from the city's centre to the southern suburbs was well underway.

Within 20 years, Calgary's Jewish population doubled. Alberta's economic growth attracted newcomers from Ontario and Quebec, as well as from other countries, including Israel, South Africa, and the United States. Large numbers of Jews from the Soviet Union also found their way to Calgary. Population shifts proved bittersweet, however, as the Jewish communities of Medicine Hat and Lethbridge dwindled during these decades.

JEWISH HISTORY

Calgary Jews enjoyed a banner year in 1979. The Calgary Jewish Centre and an adjoining seniors' residence opened; a Reform congregation was established; and



Congregation House of Jacob was revitalized by a new leadership. The House of Jacob was incorporated in the Province of Alberta in 1909. The Synagogue is celebrating their Centennial Year with many special events.

During the 1980's and the decades that followed, the Jewish community experienced much change: well-established synagogues and schools merged while new Jewish institutions and organizations continued to emerge. Meanwhile, members of the Jewish community

became increasingly active in the community at large as volunteers, leaders and philanthropists, most notably in the arts.

The Jews of southern Alberta have much to be thankful for. We have successfully integrated without losing our religious and cultural identity. Our community has produced two senators, two MLAs, a long-serving mayor, a city counselor, sixteen members of the Order of Canada, and a score of honorary doctorate recipients. Many Jews have excelled in diverse fields including academia, healthcare, business, the arts and philanthropy.



In 2005, some 8,000 Jews made Calgary their home. Some are the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the pioneers who came to this land of promise a century ago. All have reaped a truly joyful harvest. We are strong, successful, and proud of the role we have played in building a vibrant community for all Albertans.