

## Stephen Speisman, 1943–2008

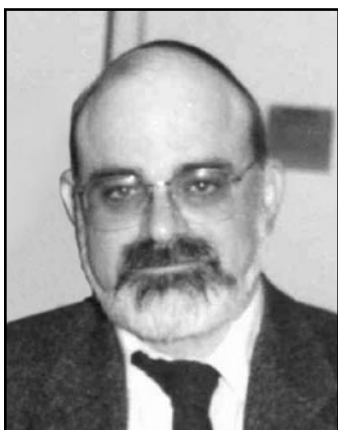


Image courtesy of Ontario Jewish Archives.

Stephen Speisman, founder of the Ontario Jewish Archives, passed away on 22 October 2008. He was born in Toronto in 1943. He studied history and completed his PhD at the University of Toronto. His dissertation was published by McClelland and Stewart in 1979 and was entitled *The Jews of Toronto: A History to 1937*. This work examined the history of Jewish Toronto during its formative years and serves as the definitive work on that subject. In 1980, the City of Toronto recognized the importance of this work, honouring Stephen with its annual Book Award.

Stephen founded the Ontario Jewish Archives (OJA) in 1973 (the OJA formerly reported to the Canadian Jewish Congress's Ontario Region Office, but is now part of the UJA Federation of Greater Toronto). The archives began on Beverley Street, where Stephen's office was located on the third floor and the records were stored in the room next to the furnace. It wasn't bright, spacious, or clean, but he made the best of it and acquired many important collections during that time. He also attracted many devoted volunteers, some of whom have been associated with the OJA for more than twenty-five years. In 1983, the archives moved to the newly constructed Lipa Green Building, located at Bathurst and Sheppard. Stephen was finally given a state-of-the-art storage vault, and generous office and processing space, which more than accommodated his needs at the time.

During his tenure as Director of the OJA, Stephen led the Sense of Spadina Tour, which has been operating for over thirty years. He would take participants on the ninety-minute walking tour of the Kensington Market area, where he regaled them with stories about old Jewish Toronto, bringing the sights and sounds of that era to life. He also spent considerable effort building the OJA's holdings, acquiring records from over one hundred synagogues as well as architectural drawings, photographs documenting a wide array of individuals, organizations and events, and finally, audio and visual recordings. One of his pet projects was to establish a Jewish museum, since no Ontario or national museum of this kind existed. He subsequently acquired hundreds of artifacts and organized exhibits telling the story of Ontario's Jews, using both archival records as well as museum objects.

Stephen was quite active in the Archives Association of Ontario, and its predecessor, the Ontario Archives Association. He was also a member of the

ACA and attended some of the conferences during the early years.

In 1999, he accepted the position of Executive Director of Pardes Shalom, the Toronto Jewish community's cemetery. He participated in the expansion of the cemetery and made his mark on that important institution while he was there.

Stephen will be remembered for his commitment to Jewish history, heritage, and community. He was a soft-spoken person who was extremely knowledgeable and well versed in a variety of areas. He truly represented the historian/archivist in his quest to wear both hats at all times.

After I arrived at the Ontario Jewish Archives, I was concerned that he might object to some of the changes I was making to his institution. These fears, however, proved to be unfounded, since he was very supportive of my work. And whenever I had questions or needed his assistance, he generously offered his time, making himself available to chat whenever I needed his help. He was truly a remarkable individual and a tremendous role model.

**Ellen Scheinberg**  
**Director, Ontario Jewish Archives**