

Ontario's Small Jewish Communities. ONTARIO JEWISH ARCHIVES. Virtual Exhibition <http://www.ontariojewisharchives.org/exhibits/osjc/>

As director of the Ontario Jewish Archives (OJA) at the time of this exhibit's creation, Dr. Ellen Scheinberg stated in its introduction that research on the history of Jews in Canada has typically focused on urban centres with large Jewish communities. One example of an exception to this would be the attention that has been given to the rural Jewish settlements created by Baron de Hirsch, a European banker who established Jewish colonies in North and South America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, these settlements were part of a phenomenon that has received attention due to its global scale and ideological underpinnings, and gaps in the history of Jews in small centres still exist. The OJA's virtual exhibit, *Ontario's Small Jewish Communities*, aims to redress the neglect of small communities, at least in the case of Ontario, and presents the histories of eleven Jewish communities. Some of the criteria used to define small communities for the purposes of this exhibit were: a Jewish population of less than two thousand; the maintenance of an operating synagogue (though an exception was made for Cornwall whose synagogue closed after work on the exhibit began); and a distance from Toronto of more than one hundred kilometres. The communities profiled in the exhibition include Thunder Bay, North Bay, Sudbury, Owen Sound, Peterborough, Belleville, Cornwall, Kingston, Kitchener-Waterloo, St. Catharines, and Niagara Falls. Some of these communities, such as North Bay, were hubs for their region, where Jews from surrounding areas were employed as scrap metal traders that required them to travel.

Each profile is structured in an easy-to-follow way that invites useful comparisons between groups in different locations. One interesting observation brought to light by the exhibit is that while many communities experienced a decline in the last few decades due to migration to larger cities – indeed the closure of the synagogue in Cornwall is a case in point – Owen Sound is undergoing a revival of its synagogue and its Jewish life.

The home page for each community provides context by giving a general history of the city or town itself. The sections on Jewish life are organized within the following themes: Early Community History, Religious Life, Social Life, Community Activity and Relations, and Recent Years. Within each section, there is a further breakdown. For example, "Community Activity and Relations" is analyzed further into "Anti-Semitism," "Involvement in Community and Political Life," and "Military Service." This provides the reader with a nuanced view of the situation of Jews in these places over time. The profile of Kitchener-Waterloo is an example that sharply illustrates the complexities of the relationship between Jews and non-Jews throughout the city's history. On one hand, there were prominent Jews in political and communal life, such as Harold Paiken, who served as the first Jewish mayor of Waterloo from 1958 to 1959.

His role in the community would seem to imply a high degree of integration of Jews in general society. On the other hand, the exhibit suggests that because of the German heritage of Waterloo residents, relations between Jews and gentiles have on occasion been more strained than elsewhere in Ontario, even in recent times with the popular German Oktoberfest celebrations. Paradoxes or contradictions can be found in some of the other communities to a lesser degree.¹ The interplay of these tensions, as highlighted in the exhibit, allows for a more complex understanding of Jewish history in small-town Ontario.

The website's main strength is the presentation of original research that has been done. One hundred and nine oral histories of Jews who either live or have lived in these places were conducted, clips of which (video or audio) are accessible on the website. Primary written and visual sources have been gathered and consulted; ninety-four archival documents, five hundred photographs, and eighteen maps and architectural plans are exhibited in this virtual display. The scans are fascinating and diverse. For example, the digitized Constitutional By-laws of the Share Shumayim in Sudbury from 1913 to 1933 offer the reader a glimpse at the synagogue's Orthodox denomination. The portrait of Levy Solomons, ca. 1760, shows the face of one of the pioneering Jewish fur traders in the Western part of the Great Lakes. A photo of Abraham Low standing in front of his junk business, which was housed in a wooden hut in Peterborough in 1913, illustrates the determined efforts of the immigrant to earn a living. The desire of immigrants to recreate Jewish life as it had been in eastern Europe is apparent in images of the onion-shaped domes of the original Beth Jacob Synagogue of Kingston, built in 1910. Where the Ontario Jewish Archives holds materials related to the exhibit, such as the fonds of Samuel Shaffer, an immigrant to Thunder Bay, a link is provided to the pertinent historical description and accession number of the fonds. It should be noted that the archival sources used in the exhibit are not limited to those held by the Ontario Jewish Archives. As a result of the partnerships forged between Jewish groups and local heritage organizations in each town and the OJA during the creation of the exhibit, the provenance of archival sources in the exhibit is broad, extending to the communities' own resources.

A noteworthy aspect of the exhibit is the detailed description of individuals who had a significant impact on their community. The details provided can be an asset for people who are carrying out genealogical research or have a personal connection to those individuals. While some viewers of the exhibit may not be interested in the biographical specifics of an early settler, the information could be an excellent source for those seeking leads on family history. For example, I assumed that my Roher-Helper relatives lived in Port Arthur (now part

1 For example, Sudbury. See <http://www.ontariojewisharchives.org/exhibits/osjc/communities/sudbury/community/anti-semitism.html> (accessed on 1 August 2011).

of Thunder Bay) from approximately the 1920s to the 1980s. I was surprised to discover that Aaron Helper, a Russian Jew, arrived there in 1890. As well, there is information that he opened up a fur manufacturing business with his son Louis, called Helper Son & Roher in Toronto, at a time that I thought the family would have been in Port Arthur. There is, therefore, potential for those with links to Ontario Jewish communities to learn more about their own past from this exhibit.

The website is also an excellent source for organizations seeking to strengthen Jewish life. Indeed, a major partner for this project, along with the Ontario Historical Society, is the Regional Jewish Communities of Ontario (RJCO), a branch of United Israel Appeal of Canada (UIAC). The RJCO's mandate is to provide educational and cultural needs to small Jewish communities in the province, and as such, dovetails nicely with the objectives of the exhibit itself. The documentation on the exhibit website brings past Jewish experiences in these communities to life – such as the sense of belonging to an imported *shetl* in Canada,² or the jubilation of a young girl who dances a hora outside of the synagogue by herself after the declaration of the State of Israel³ – and in doing so, offers insight as to how the spirit of small Jewish communities can be carried forward into the future: through community warmth and hospitality,⁴ events where Jewish food and culture are shared with non-Jewish citizens,⁵ summer camps and youth groups,⁶ arrangements for part-time teachers or clergy,⁷ and strong community leadership.⁸

Ontario's Small Jewish Communities has the potential to be developed in further directions. Indeed, the Ontario Jewish Archives already has a plan to expand the website by adding information about Jewish communities in Ontario that no longer exist. Individuals who have connections to the Jewish communi-

2 Interview with Alex Devon, <http://www.ontariojewisharchives.org/exhibits/osjc/communities/thunderbay/religiouslife> (accessed on 1 August 2011).

3 Interview with Gloria Guttman, <http://www.ontariojewisharchives.org/exhibits/osjc/communities/northbay/religiouslife/> (accessed on 26 July 2011).

4 Interview with Eleanor Jouard, <http://www.ontariojewisharchives.org/exhibits/osjc/communities/belleville/religiouslife/>; interview with Marilyn Fedorenko, <http://www.ontariojewisharchives.org/exhibits/osjc/communities/owensound/sociallife> (both accessed on 1 August 2011).

5 Slideshow of the Festival of Tables, <http://www.ontariojewisharchives.org/exhibits/osjc/communities/niagarafalls/community/index.html> (accessed on 1 August 2011).

6 Interview with Eddie Greenspan, <http://www.ontariojewisharchives.org/exhibits/osjc/communities/niagarafalls/sociallife/youthgroups.html> (accessed on 1 August 2011).

7 For example, description of part-time Rabbi Meir Uri Gottesman of Owen Sound, <http://www.ontariojewisharchives.org/exhibits/osjc/communities/owensound/recentyears/index.html> (accessed on 1 August 2011).

8 Interview with Mitchell Speigel, <http://www.ontariojewisharchives.org/exhibits/osjc/communities/sudbury/religiouslife/1940s.html>; interview with Joel Cohen at <http://www.ontariojewisharchives.org/exhibits/osjc/communities/kitchener-waterloo/religiouslife/rabbis.html> (both accessed on 1 August 2011).

ties in places like Kirkland Lake or Timmins are invited to share their stories with OJA staff.

In seeking to address the imbalance of an emphasis on the history of urban Ontario Jews to the neglect of the small town Jewish experience, the OJA's virtual exhibit is very successful. The eleven communities presented are indeed shown to have their own unique and lasting heritage. Despite the relatively small Jewish population found in these places, the exhibit convincingly demonstrates that these stories are worth sharing and discovering.

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