

A SENSE OF SPADINA



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Family Picture courtesy Mr. and Mrs. Jack M. Troster.

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REFERENCES

1. Mr. J. B. Salsberg, excerpts from taped interviews.
2. Copyright, 1974, Stephen Speisman, Archivist, Canadian Jewish Congress, Central Region.

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"Well, my personal education is nothing to talk about. Nothing much to talk about except in this — that I was a product of my times. 1

A product of their times. In our parents' generation, the times were the twenties and thirties. The places, on the whole, were in the Spadina-Kensington area. And the people were formed by the mixture of attitudes, opinions, ideologies and experiences that found their way into this crucible.

By the fifties and sixties, families had moved north and the preoccupations, the sights and smells of Spadina were part of our past. For us, a distant past. But to know your history is to know yourself. And about three years ago, certain individuals began to take steps to recover our past and preserve our heritage for the generations to come. Professor Dov Noy, from Israel, taped the songs and folklore inherited by Toronto Jews. Stephen Speisman began to work on a doctorate thesis about the history of our community. Mrs. Ricky Levine completed a paper on the first major practising Jewish architect in Toronto, Benjamin Brown. Cyrel Troster and Susan Cohen began documenting an oral history of Toronto Jewry with the aid of an L.I.P. grant. At York University, Prof. Irving Abella, while doing research in the field of labour history, recorded many interesting recollections of Jewish involvement in the labour movement. Nor can we discount the continuing work of Dr. David Eisen and others like him who worked quietly on their own.

Some of these disparate strands were pulled together last year in the activation of the Archives Committee of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Central Region. This year, the first healthy sign of the re-invigorated committee is this project, "A Sense of Spadina," a walking tour of Toronto's Jewish past.

"A Sense of Spadina" is designed to acquaint and re-acquaint people with the area through maps, historical information, pictures, discussion with residents and ex-residents, and through impressions of the life and times. We have included a questionnaire at the end of this pamphlet to show citizens how the accumulated memories and memorabilia of an individual lifetime can be of vital historical significance for the whole community and especially, through the archives at Congress.

"A Sense of Spadina" celebrates not just the intangibles of our past — the attitudes and experiences that shape a people — but also the very tangible landmarks of the past, like the beautiful Kiever Synagogue, soon to be restored and preserved from the decay of age.

We welcome you to "A Sense of Spadina", the first step in the revitalization of Toronto's colourful Jewish past and we hope that you will participate enthusiastically in its future.



THE COMMUNITY EMERGES

Some organizations were formed immediately on the arrival of these immigrants. It gave them an opportunity to meet people; it helped them to overcome the loneliness of being in a new world, new surroundings. Also, most of the societies were formed for economic and social reasons to help a landsman when in need; that meant, when sick, when unemployed, etc. Sickness was an awesome thing then. No insurance, no hospitalization, and no income when the breadwinner was hospitalized or incapacitated. They formed these landsmenshaften and benefit societies for the explicit purpose of providing benefits to a person. Eight dollars a week was the standard rate given to a family whose breadwinner was sick. Then they helped raise money for hospitalization. They also helped to establish burial societies so that if a landsman died, they would have burial grounds.¹

You know the meaning of the word 'shtible'? It comes from 'shtub' which is a room; and shtible is a small establishment. There were the shtiblach Stashover, Keltzer, etc. So the religious groupings were named after the towns they came from in the old country. They were really what I would call, in modern terms, store front congregations. Literally. They would rent an old house with a stove and turn it into a place of worship. It was also a social centre and some of them combined it with relief. A division quickly developed in that many of the newcomers were themselves secular Jews who did not want to join a synagogue and they established sick benefit societies separate from the landsmanshaft shule that may already have been in existence. It wasn't a division that led to confrontations. On the contrary, many belonged to both, but the non-religious or secular Jews belonged to the landsmanshaft which was non-religious and dedicated itself to helping members who were in need, and then, when the war broke out, branched out into raising money.¹

WORK

As a matter of fact, looking back, I remember when I first went to work. I wasn't quite 14 and the law, school attendance act, then called for attendance up to 14 years of age and I wasn't quite 14 and I remember the boss who owned a tiny little shop, an employer who himself was a struggling little fellow, rushed over and said "Get out on the fire escape because the truant inspector is coming."

*So I got out on the fire escape and he shut the window and then he opened the window and told me to come back, the inspector is gone. He knew I was underaged . . .*¹

In its prime, the Labour Lyceum was not only a union headquarters, but a cultural centre as well. The hall was busy with everything from Yiddish dramatic performances and poetry recitals to political debates. Meeting rooms and a large auditorium provided a further source of revenue.²

CULTURAL LIFE

The Victory opened in 1921 as what was one of the most modern Yiddish theatres on the continent. The Standard, as it was then called, held 500 people and was the only theatre building in Canada constructed specifically for Yiddish productions. Here the greats of the Jewish stage came from the United States to perform — Maurice Schwartz, Boris Tomashevsky, etc.²

*In the publicity, it was referred to as the Temple of Jewish Dramatic Art and it was built as a Yiddish theatre. They built a beautiful old mansion-like brick house that stood on the corner and Jews would gather and watch the progress of the digging of the foundation, the rise of the building, etc. And for the grand opening, immediately after Yom Kippur, half the Jewish community turned out for the occasion and only those who had tickets could get in. They had police on horses to keep order and they had to stop traffic on Spadina.*¹

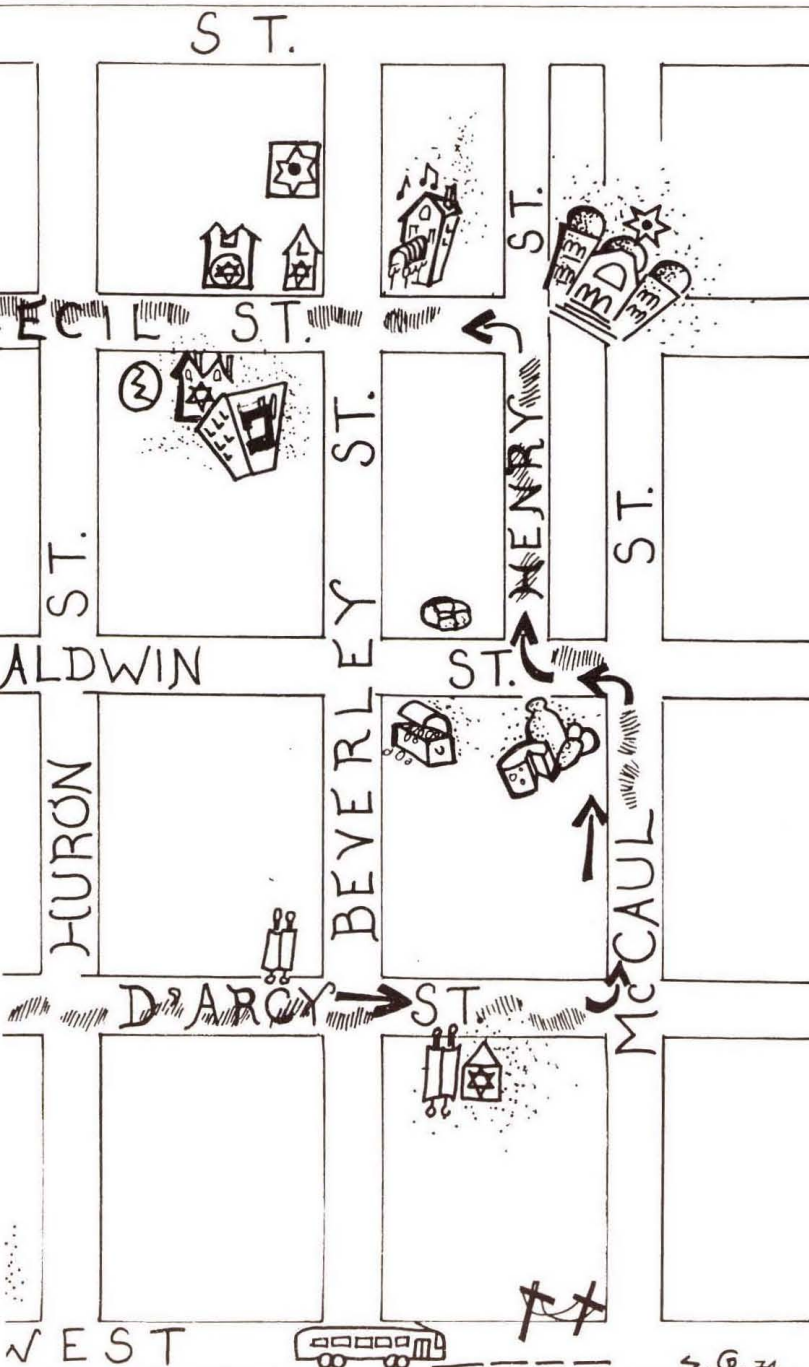


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COMMUNAL INVOLVEMENT

In the theatre, the whole conception of it was communal involvement. Shares were sold not only to have an interest in it, not only to have the satisfaction of having brought this about, but also because I think shareholders were assured of some reduction at the box office. ¹

In 1913, five people incorporated the Labour Lyceum Associated Limited to advance the interests and educational activities of the labour organizations of Toronto. They sold some shares, for \$5 a piece, until the early twenties when they bought two old houses at 346 Spadina Ave.



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KIEVER SYNAGOGUE (RODFEI SHOLOM ANSHEI KIEV), DENISON SQ.

The Kiever Shul is of particular historical interest for the Jewish community of Toronto because it remains virtually in its original condition, from the monumental ark which dominates the interior to the spittoons still to be found in the occasional corner. The building, completed in 1926, stands almost on the site of "Bellevue", the family residence of the Denisons, pioneers in early Toronto who gave the square in front of the synagogue to the public and after whom the neighbouring streets are named.

The facade of the building is actually the side, so that the hall of worship could face east as tradition demands. (A similar arrangement is to be found in the Minsker Synagogue.) The interior exhibits the characteristics of the typical orthodox synagogue of the period: central *bimah* (reader's platform) with frame for a *huppa* (wedding canopy) and an ornamental structure upon which the Torah decorations can be placed while the scroll is being read. The women's gallery, of course, is also a feature of the building. The interior, moreover, preserves examples of folk art depicting the signs of the Zodiac.

The total effect of the building is one of dignity rather than opulence. The congregation responsible for the Kiever Synagogue was not a wealthy one, and it is not an unfair conjecture that many a family deprived themselves in order to see it erected.

The Kiever Congregation has worshipped on this site since about 1917 and continues to hold regular services. Until his passing last year, Rabbi Solomon Langner Z"L was the congregation's spiritual guide.²

RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH 23 HENRY ST.

Opened in 1922 as Beth Jacob, this was the principal synagogue of the Polish Jews in Toronto. Hundreds filled the building and overflowed into Henry St. and Cecil St. to hear the dedication ceremonies conducted by the renowned Cantor Yossele Rosenblatt and his choir from New York. Beth Jacob was the first synagogue in Toronto to be designed by a Jewish architect, Mr. Benjamin Brown, who executed a brilliantly symmetrical composition in the then popular twin-tower Romanesque style.

The “Poilisher Shul” had all the conveniences one could ask for, a far cry from the congregation’s former house of worship on Elm St. The synagogue, together with the women’s gallery, accommodated 800 people with ease; there was a *mikva* (ritual bath) in the basement and an apartment for the *shammes* (sexton) at the rear. There was, in addition, a brick *succah* which served as a meeting room all year and had a movable roof for the holiday. Wash basins just inside the main entrance allowed the worshippers to perform a symbolic cleansing before entering the sanctuary. One could find also a spacious *beth midrash* (chapel), and a social hall in the basement. The five domes of the main synagogue made the accoustics the delight of every cantor who sang there.

The most striking features of the interior were a variety of painted wall decorations which no longer exist, a huge bronze chandelier which the church still uses, and especially a magnificent carved oak *Aron Kodesh* (Holy Ark), replete with the Lions of Judah and twisted columns reminiscent of the Temple of Jerusalem. When the synagogue was sold in 1966, the ark was dismantled by the Kitchener firm which had originally made it, and it now adorns Beth Jacob’s new synagogue on Overbrook Place in Downsview.

The Henry St. building is included in the list of historic buildings compiled by the Toronto Historical Board.²

MINSKER SYNAGOGUE (Beth Israel Anshei Minski) 10-12 St. Andrews St.

Although the Minsker Synagogue congregation has been worshipping on this site since the period of the First World War, it was only in 1930 that the present structure was completed. The style is a mixture of the Russian and the Romanesque. The interior furnishings, including murals, are largely intact, except for the Ark which has been replaced by a more modern piece. Notable is the narrowness of the facade, a necessity because the synagogue had to conform to the tiny lots of the two houses it replaced. Also of interest is the inscription over the main entrance. Intended to read “Built in the year 1930”, the expression “Gebildedt” (ie. “built”) is actually incorrect Yiddish, where it means “educated”. However, the word was perfectly acceptable as a hybrid of Yiddish and English, and is a sign of the increased use of English by members of the congregation in the 1930’s.²

KENSINGTON TODAY

Theatre Arts students at North Toronto Collegiate, under the direction of Mr. Peter Moore, wrote a docudrama based on their interviews and impressions of the market.

These are excerpts from their work:

Every sense is bombarded. All those colours, tastes. In most of the shops they let you taste. The cheese store will give you anything you want, the bakery will let you taste, the fruit, bits of fruit can be tasted. And of course the sound. The fifth sense. It's incredible.

The bag lady is terrific though. A lady who lives in the market. She has no home and she carries everything in shopping bags and she sleeps in the doorways. Always you can walk down there, 9, 10, 11 o'clock at night when things are fairly deserted and you'll see her walking along with her bags. She's been there I suspect, years and years and years.

Perlmutar's

The best bakery down there as it proclaims on the signs inside, "Who ever said 'man cannot live on bread alone' never went to Perlmutar's."

There also is a very ornately decorated gift certificate taped to the cash register worth \$10 in Perlmutar's for a Mr. Sam Shapiro. While we were there a customer noticed it and said, "Hi, I'm Mr. Shapiro. I've come to pick up my gift certificate." "And how do you do Mr. Shapiro? I'm Dr. Livingston" replied the storekeeper.

Bicycle Shop

The bicycle shop has been sold. It was rather sad looking and deserted. All the old bicycles and fridges and things were sitting there for anybody to pick up. There were quite a few empty stores on that street as well.

Funhouse

Next door to the Bicycle Shop. It was painted in psychedelic designs of shocking pinks and oranges and had a big poster on the door reading "PEACE AND LOVE". We weren't sure just what this place was as we couldn't see inside. However, we saw a card on the door that said 'Funhouse'. There was so much noise and music coming out of it we thought we would find a big party inside. But when we went inside there was no one around, just a few dusty, broken pin ball machines and music blaring up from the basement. We waited a bit but no one appeared.

The **Walking Tour** starts at the Minsker Synagogue at 10 St. Andrews St. and continues onto Spadina Ave. past the LABOUR LYCEUM, THE SITE OF THE HEBREW MEN OF ENGLAND SYNAGOGUE, UNITED BAKERS up to Dundas St. and down Spadina past THE VICTORY THEATRE and onto Darcy Street, past the SHIDLOWER SHUL, DARCY TALMUD TORAH, IVANSKER SHUL turning left onto McCaul street, then left onto Baldwin passing MENDLES CREAMERY, SHERMAN'S BAKERY, THE SITE OF THE OLD JEWISH CHARITIES BUILDING, and onto Henry St. passing the former BETH JACOB SYNAGOGUE and onto Cecil Street passing THE OLD MURRAY HOUSE, THE SITES OF THE ZIONIST AND WORKMAN'S CIRCLE BUILDING, THE APTER SHUL, THE FARBAND SCHUL OSTROVZER SCHUL, THE NEW LABOUR LYCEUM, THE OLD FOLKS HOME, THE FOLKS FEREIN and onto Spadina, cross the street passing PERLMUTAR'S, LOTTMAN'S BAKERIES, onto Augusta and finally to Denison Square and the KIEVER SYNAGOGUE.

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Questionnaire

You have a chance to bring alive Jewish Toronto's past for the eyes and minds of your children's children.

You might have information or material that will be of value to the rest of the community.

1. Do you have any old letters, documents (passports, certificates, licences, invitations) or memories or photographs of your parents, grandparents or yourself?
2. Do you have any anniversary books of clubs or societies?
3. Do you have any pictures of buildings used by members of the Jewish community in the first half of the twentieth century or earlier? Do you have pictures of society members or functions?
4. Do you have in your possession minute books of synagogues, societies, unions, reading groups, social clubs or charitable organizations?
5. Can you remember stories about how your parents or grandparents came to Canada? For those who emigrated from Europe we would like you to tell us of your experience. Do you know anybody who participated in the activities of any union, society, synagogue, or school?

If you have any of this information please contact the Archivist:

c/o Toronto Jewish Congress Archives
4600 Bathurst Street
Willowdale, Ontario M2R 3V2
(416) 635-2883

We would like to copy the material you have if you do not wish to donate it to the Jewish Archives.

We would also like to interview you about your life story as a Jew in Toronto.

Thankyou

Make it possible for your children to see what coloured your thinking and shaped the pattern of your life.

**10th
Anniversary Tour**