

Jewish Historical Society Of Canada — Report Of 1977 Activities

W. VICTOR SEFTON

Résumé

Plusieurs réunions ont eu lieu pendant l'année 1977 dans lesquelles la Société a joué un grand rôle. La première réunion en mai avait été organisée par l'Assemblée plénière du Congrès Juif Canadien et la deuxième en juin avait fait partie des réunions organisées par les Sociétés Savantes.

À l'Assemblée Plénière la discussion s'était centrée sur l'histoire juive et les archives. En outre on avait organisé une exposition historique à l'hôtel Queen Elizabeth. Le Rabin Howard Joseph a parlé de la Congrégation Shearith Israel, la première congrégation juive au Canada et de son histoire. Il a expliqué que cette congrégation est en train de devenir en partie française.

M. Bernard Wax de Boston, Directeur de la Société Historique Juive Américaine a parlé des méthodes et des techniques adoptées par sa Société pour créer et maintenir ce qui pourrait être La Société Historique Juive la plus viable et la plus active.

À la réunion de Fredericton, le Rabin Harvey Meirovich de Oshawa a parlé de la Congrégation Beth Am de Toronto. Mme Evelyn Miller de la Bibliothèque juive publique a parlé de l'arrivée au Canada de la population juive pendant le 18ème et le 19ème siècle.

Toute la communauté juive de Fredericton a aussi assisté à une réunion dont le but était de discuter l'aspect historique de cette communauté. Certains membres ont eu l'occasion de déployer une abilité oratoire remarquable et aussi de faire une grande preuve d'humour en anglais et en "yiddish".

The Society has played an important role in two meetings this past year. The first was the 18th Plenary Assembly of the Canadian Jewish Congress, held in Montreal in May. The second, in June, was the Conference of Learned Societies, held in Fredericton, N.B.

All arrangements at the Plenary Assembly were made by Society Vice-President Evelyn Miller. A large historical exhibition was mounted on the main convention floor of the Queen Elizabeth Hotel, the Plenary headquarters. Two morning sessions, one of which was a breakfast, were allocated for the discussion of history and archives.

One morning meeting was addressed by Rabbi Howard Joseph, of the 200 year old Shearith Israel Congregation, the first Jewish congregation in Canada. Rabbi Joseph discussed the history of the synagogue and its current transition to a partially francophone congregation, with several different constituent groups, each with its own religious practices and procedures. This address, on tape in our archives, reveals Rabbi Joseph to be a man of exceptional perception and sensitivity.

Mr. Bernard Wax of Boston, Director of the American Jewish Historical Society, spoke to the second session. He gave a detailed and informative talk on the methods adopted by his society to create and maintain what is probably the most viable and active national Jewish historical society, and attempted to answer our questions and suggest directions for our own society. There was some disagreement, which resulted in a very valuable dialogue and discussion. Mr. Wax's speech is also on tape in our archives.

At Fredericton, the Society was allocated one complete day, and with the help of Professor I. Unger of the University of New Brunswick, we arranged for a morning and an afternoon programme. Our secretary, Abraham Arnold, also arranged for us to meet with the Canadian Historical Society.

The morning session consisted of a paper by Rabbi Harvey Meirovich, now in Oshawa, Ontario, entitled "A Model for Congregational History — Beth Am, Toronto". The paper, which appears in shortened form in this issue of the *Journal*, presented an unusual review of the complete life cycle of a congregation, and was well received.

Evelyn Miller, of the Jewish Public Library of Montreal, presented a talk entitled "Enter the Jew — Lower Canada in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries", which we hope to publish in expanded form in our next issue. During the discussion, Mrs. Miller produced a wealth of surprising information which she had been reluctant to include in her paper.

The session with the Canadian Historical Association was held to explore co-operative efforts at the next Conference of Learned Societies, which will be held in London, Ontario, in May 1978. Some interesting ideas and suggestions were put forward.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the events in Fredericton was the interaction with its Jewish community, and with its dynamic Rabbi David Spiro. Quite apart from the traditional but exceptionally generous hospitality of Rabbi David and Edith Spiro, and indeed of the congrega-

tion, an historic meeting took place with the entire Fredericton Jewish community, for the express purpose of listening first hand to its history.

Mr. Fred Medjuck, a local resident for a mere 36 years, delivered a short summary, which he had prepared by cross-examining the long-time residents, to a jammed meeting of every resident not actually bed-ridden, as well as officers of the Society and assorted others. The talk, which was constantly interrupted by factual interjections, was followed by personal accounts by long-time Fredericton residents, who were themselves heckled, interrupted and contradicted by their peers.

What emerged, and we fortunately have it on tape, is a model for oral history. Full of bilingual (i.e. English and Yiddish) humour, the evening at times reached the level of hilarity. Events were described, contradicted, corrected and given from several points of view. One significant event was the tale of the 1,000 "enemy aliens" from Britain, who arrived at an army camp outside Fredericton during World War II, and the unique way in which they drew the attention of the Canadian Jewish Congress to themselves *via* the Fredericton Jewish community.

It is clear that we must diligently seek out the contribution of the many who can tell the story of Canada's Jews.