

Notes On Some Of The First Jews West Of Ontario

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Résumé

Très peu a été écrit à propos des habitants juifs de Victoria qui, autour des années 1858, avaient su créer une communauté juive de la même ampleur que celle de Montreal. La synagogue que ces habitants avaient bâtie et le centre qui s'était créé autour d'elle disparurent vers 1871.

Quelle était l'origine de ces habitants juifs? L'auteur de cet article décrit les péripéties de ceux qui avaient remonté le Fraser et le sort qui les attendait.

David Rome termine son article en soulignant que le meurtre de trois habitants juifs a été décrit par Alan Sullivan dans le roman *Cariboo Road*.

The story of Jews in Western Canada began explosively in 1858, in Victoria, exactly a century after Jews first came to Quebec in 1759. Trading adventurers, miners, bankers, talmudic scholars, *shochtim*—they came up the coast from San Francisco, to settle in Victoria and in Hope and Cayoosh and Berkerville. A remarkable and considerable community arose, second only to Montreal, and infinitely more colourful and ram-bunctious, with Jewish instincts and traditions unaffected by the sea voyage around Cape Horn or across the Isthmus of Panama. Any Jewish community would take pride in such colourful founders.¹

A certain amount has been written about several of the first Jews to settle west of Windsor.² But they are largely unknown to Canadian Jewish readers, for they had no issue, that is directly. The community they established and the synagogue they erected—probably the oldest in Canada today—virtually came to an end as suddenly as it was founded, in 1871. On that date, most likely, it ceased to be the second largest community in the nation,³ and Toronto has never been threatened by Victoria since.

On the other hand, the small community that has arisen in Victoria during the last century does not consider itself a continuation of the Fraser

River gold rush development.

Some of the first Jewish migrants to the colony of Vancouver Island did not set foot on its soil. Eugene L. Dennery, one of the founders and librarian of the San Francisco Hebrew Young Men's Literary Society, came to Victoria and was ascending the Fraser in May 1858 with four other men in a canoe when it overturned. He was drowned.⁴

German-born Isaac Rosenbaum, 28, of the firm of Rosenbaum and Van Allen, came to Victoria from California by the steamer *Cortez* to set up a branch of his books and stationary business such as they were operating at Stockton, California.⁵ The *Cortez* lay in Esquimalt harbour while the sailboat *Alcatraz* was carrying its passengers to Victoria. As the *Alcatraz* rounded McCaulay's Point at the entrance to the harbour it capsized; 14 of its 42 passengers drowned, including Rosenbaum. Someone recovered a journal kept by Rosenbaum and sent it on anonymously to Rosenbaum's partner at Stockton.

These episodes are a reminder of the hazards of pioneer life shared by Jews in the west. There are others.

Morris Price⁶ had come to the colony in 1859. By 1861 he was well established, with property in Victoria, New Westminster and in Cayoosh.

Cayoosh was not the safest place in the colony as far as the menace of Indian massacre was concerned. It was an Indian village and a wayside town on the route to the gold fields. The Indians were treacherous and openly hostile, and white men were always on the *qui vive* for signs of war or uprising.

On February 3, 1861 a resident of Cayoosh wrote to the newspapers of the colony (in the New Westminster *British Columbian*, and the Victoria *Colonist* of February 14):

"A brutal and horrible murder was committed in our midst here on the night of the 1st inst., on the person of Mr. M. Price, a storekeeper of this place. The discovery of the deed has caused a great sensation among the peaceable inhabitants of Cayoosh Flat. Mr. Price being a very peaceable and inoffensive man, having no enemy has seemingly caused the crime to appear tenfold worse. He was found on the morning of the 2nd inst., lying on his back with his throat cut from ear to ear."

The body of the Jewish pioneer was cared for by his brethren of the A.F. & A.M. at Cayoosh until May 6, when it was brought to eternal rest in Victoria. The newspapers of the colony reported:

"The body of this unfortunate man who was so cruelly murdered at

Cayoosh three months ago was yesterday interred in the Jewish portion of the Church Reserve. The corpse, inclosed in a handsome coffin, was placed in a hearse and preceded by the Victoria lodge, No. 1085, of Free and Accepted Masons. A number of friends of the deceased followed the hearse. On arriving at the cemetery, the usual Masonic ceremonies were held, after which the burial service of the Hebrew Church was performed. The remains were then lowered to their last resting place. The whole ceremony was a very impressive one, and excited much apparent emotion in the breasts of many of the participants who had long known and respected their deceased brother. This is the first Jew interred in the Hebrew cemetery of this city.”⁸

The tombstone on Grave No. One of the Hebrew cemetery bears the inscription, “In memory of Morris Price, murdered in Cayoosh, B.C., May 5, (sic), 1861. Born in Prussia.”

The Indians who had committed the murder were caught immediately, with marks of blood still upon one of them. They were executed after trial before Judge Begbie.

The Price tragedy was not unique in Victoria history. The following year, in the summer of 1862, the city was shocked by what its historian W. W. Walkem called “The Massacre of the Jews.” “Dutchy” Harris Lewin, also a pioneer of 1858, and Russian-born David Sokoloski were engaged in packing merchandise to the Cariboo interior. The two Jews met on their way to Quesnel Forks after they had sold their wares at the gold mines at Keithley Creek. They decided to travel together, in the company of a packer, Charles Rouchier. Lewin had \$12,000 on him, the other smaller sums.

A contemporary report tells us that they

“had reached the bridge over the North Fork of Quesnelle at 5 o’clock on the afternoon of the 26th, where they rested and partook of refreshments. Here, on the lower or new trail being wet, they were advised to take the old or mountain trail, which is always dry, but on account of its being more lengthy, has fallen into disuse this year. The victims announced their intention of following the advice, whereupon the three strangers who had travelled with them immediately left the house and, preceeding towards the north fork by the mountain trail, were soon out of sight. The three men, who were dommed never to reach their destination, shortly after left in the same direction and were never seen alive again. Stiff and cold, their

mutilated remains were discovered in the bush a short distance from the road, two days thereafter, ample time having been afforded in the meantime for the perpetrators to escape with the gold robbed from the murdered men. . .

“On reaching a point about three miles from the bridge, it would appear they were set upon by the three men before alluded to, murdered and robbed not only of their treasure but of their watches and jewelry and even their hats. Each man had received three shots, and from the direction they entered it would appear the villains had been secreted on the lower or left hand side of the trail, and at a concerted signal fired simultaneously, each taking his man down, and each firing a second or third shot.

“When the party who went the mountain trail reached a point about three miles out from the bridge, (those searching for them) detected blood and other indications of a suspicious character. Discovering three trails seemingly made by dragging bodies over the ground leading down the hill in the direction of the North River, they followed. At a distance of about 150 yards they discovered the three bodies of the murdered men. . .

“The people appointed one from amongst themselves to act in that capacity (as coroner) when, a jury being chosen, an inquest was duly held.

“The actions of the peaceful populace of the district has gone down into the legal history of the province as characteristic of the most constructive and orderly acts of almost intuitive, popular administration, in marked contrast to the frequent violent acts of “mass justice” on the frontier further south.

“A public meeting was held at the town of the Forks of the Quesnelle on the 29th of July, at which all the inhabitants of the town and vicinity were present. Rev. A. Browning was unanimously elected Chairman and Samuel Goldstone (an active member of the colony’s Jewish community), Secretary. The Chairman stated that a dreadful murder of three esteemed citizens had been committed in our midst; and, as there was no magistrate or any other authority in the place or neighbourhood to assist in the search of, and pursuit after the murderers, it became necessary for every inhabitant of the country to empower somebody to act in this matter with the least possible delay, and he felt no doubt His Excellency the Governor would sanction and approve any measures which might be deemed

necessary in the premises.

“Mr. Griffin moved, and Mr. Harris seconded, that “the chairman and the secretary of this meeting have the power to adopt such measures as in their judgement may appear necessary for the speedy apprehension of the murderers, and that the residents of the Forks of Quesnelle and vicinity pledge themselves to assist each other in carrying out measures this meeting may adopt. That we have reason to believe that the murderers are making their escape, and are on their way out to the country, and in the absence of any officer of the law, deem it advisable to take the responsibility upon ourselves to arrest all suspicious persons, and call upon the Government to bear us out in our acts and to defray whatever expenses may be incurred.

“In the absence of all officers empowered with the necessary authority to issue a warrant for the arrest of suspected parties, at the time when one of the most atrocious murders has been committed upon three respectable traders and packers immediately in the vicinity of this place, we propose to dispatch four armed men in pursuit of the supposed murderers, who, we have from circumstantial evidence every reason to believe, have left for the lower country, and with due vigilance can be taken. And furthermore resolved, that a reward of three thousand dollars be offered for the apprehension of the murderers. The above reward, in case of refusal by the Government, to be paid by the citizens of Cariboo.”

At the time the press reported that Isidore Braverman (a native of Pieschen, Germany) went to the interior to bring back the body of his partner Lewin from the Forks for proper interment in Victoria.

Braverman was deeply interested in Jewish custom and ritual and was for years an active officer of the congregation until his passing in 1905. He had served as cantor during the High Holy Day services in 1868. If we can find no record of such interment in the island city, it certainly was not for want of care by Mr. Braverman.¹⁰

At the time, the murders were a great sensation. But the guilty were not apprehended and the interest faded. It was not until years later that Mr. Walkem resolved the mystery.¹¹ He recalls, “The fact that they carried this gold dust with must have been known to others on the creek.”

“One notorious thug was noticed by me hanging around the camp. His name was Cross-Road Jack, an immigrant from across the line, and for whom a large reward was offered by the United States authorities.”

"It was a cold sharp morning, the day they left Antler, and the snow was light and crisp. They must have proceeded without seeing anybody or without interruption as far as the lower side of Camp Mitchell's Bridge when they were set upon by three highwaymen. . .

The killers were subsequently arrested on the American side for the murders, and found their way to the scaffold. The little Irishman was the last executed in Montana, and when in prison, prior to going to the scaffold, he confessed to the murder of the others already mentioned, and stated that about \$8,000 were lying cached behind a log on the trail, and they are lying there still for so far no one has found them."

The tragedy found its way into British Columbia fiction. We read in Alan Sullivan's *Cariboo Road* (Nelson, n.d.) the following conversation between Judge Begbie and Constable Simmons in Richfield,

" 'What's the trouble now, Simmons?'

" 'Murder, sir. Murder and attempted robbery.'

" 'Michael Trupp again?'

" 'Yes, sir. Three Jews on their way to buy gold. They had a bankroll that would choke a horse, and camped this side of the Forks in a two-man tent.'

FOOTNOTES

1. *The First Two Years, A Record of the Jewish Pioneers on Canada's Pacific Coast, 1858-60*, Montreal; n.d.
2. "The Adventures of Morris Moss," in *Jewish Western Bulletin*, July 11, 1935; "David Belasco, One of the First Jews to Come to B.C.," in *Vancouver Province*, Feb. 1, 1941; "First Days of the Oppenheims in B.C.," in *Jewish Western Bulletin*, Aug. 16, 1957 and March 14, 1958.
3. *Early British Columbia Jewry; A Reconstructed 'Census*, in University of Calgary *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, June 1971, pp. 57-62.
4. San Francisco *Gleaner*, June 25, 1858.
5. Rudolph Glantz. *Jews of California*, p. 59 citing *Mariposa Democrat*, Sept. 24 and Oct. 8, 1857; "Canadian Notes of Long Ago," in *Canadian Jewish Chronicle*, Sept. 19, 1952; *Victoria Gazette*, June 25 and 30, Aug. 2 and Sept. 4, 1858; *Gleaner*, Aug. 6, 1858.
6. W. Walkem, "Murdered by Indians," in *Daily Hebrew Journal*, Jan. 6, 1941.
7. *Stories of Early British Columbia*. Vancouver, *News Advertiser*, 1914. pp. 281-82.
8. *Colonist*, May 7, 1861.
9. W. Walkem, *op cit*.
10. Congregation Emanuel, *Records*.
11. "Stories of Early British Columbia," *Vancouver News Advertiser*, 1914, pp. 281-82.