

# The Brantford Jewish Community, 1881-1911

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## *Résumé*

Le propos de l'auteur de l'article est de vouloir dans celui-ci mettre l'accent sur la Congrégation Juive de Brantford, son influence en matière de vie juive ainsi que la résurgence de cette communauté.

Dans une introduction qui rappelle l'histoire des Juifs de Pologne et de Lithuanie, l'auteur n'oublie pas de souligner à quel point les Juifs en étaient réduits. Pendant l'époque allant de 1880 au début 1900, il y eut tant de répressions comme le mentionne l'auteur:

- forcer les jeunes juifs de 10-12 ans à faire l'armée ou
- l'immigration. (choix de plusieurs).

La plupart des Juifs qui vinrent s'installer à Brantford arrivèrent désargentés, sans connaissance de l'anglais et peu d'aptitudes leur permettant de gagner leur vie dans une société industrielle. Mais ils avaient une richesse: la tradition. Une volonté de vivre dans l'adversité et la sécurité: le noyau familial. Plusieurs d'entre eux furent instruits en hébreu, certains avaient une éducation séculière également en dépit des restrictions qui leur étaient faites. Le choix qu'ils firent fut motivé en ce que la région ressemblait de beaucoup à celle qu'ils avaient laissée derrière eux.

Au plan social, des témoignages de lettres, des documents démontrent de quelle manière ils furent si bien traités — Brantford le Pays Doré — représentant un lieu de liberté, de paix et de chances d'avenir.

Puis l'auteur de l'article fait une énumération de citations venant étayer les propos qu'il a auparavant avancés. En ce qui concerne les premières familles juives venues habiter Brantford l'auteur de cet article nous fait une énumération succincte mais cependant il couvre la période allant de 1881 à 1913. Puis, dans une seconde phase distincte de ce qui précède, l'auteur se penche sur la congrégation de Brantford, sa vie son évolution et les tracasseries multiples qu'il y eut. Ceci n'empêcha pas les membres de la congrégation d'acquiescer un édifice communautaire et religieux le 1<sup>er</sup> juillet 1915, la synagogue actuelle fut érigée en 1948.

Les problèmes cependant furent nombreux surtout en ce qui eut trait à

l'observance religieuse, aux décès, aux bar-mitzvah et pour la cacheroute.

Vers la fin 1940 la communauté juive de Brantford fit parti de façon totale, à la vie sociale, politique et économique de la ville. La congrégation juive de Brantford connut ses débuts au cours de la période allant de 1881 à 1911. Cette communauté dût tout acquérir à la force de ses poignets et assumer les services nécessaires permettant à la communauté de prendre forme et d'être viable: services religieux, synagogue, cimetière, éducation en hébreu pour les enfants etc. . . . Brantford fut en ce sens la "Golden Medina" ce "Pays Doré" ce "Pays de Rêves" où la liberté de choix furent des notions que purent acquérir ces Juifs venus de pays où régnaient les pogroms.

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### THE SOURCE OF IMMIGRATION

In discussing the Brantford Jewish community from 1881-1911, my main purpose is to set the scene for the emergence of the most important influence on Jewish life in our city — The Brantford Jewish Congregation.

The Jews who came to Brantford were a minute segment of the largest exodus of Jews since the time of Moses. They came by the hundreds of thousands from the 1880's through 1914. They came predominantly from eastern Europe, and their goal was America.

Why did they come, from that area, at that time, and in such large numbers?

None came from Western Europe because the French Revolution, which began in 1789, caused France to lead Europe in granting dignity and human rights to the Jewish people. "Wherever the liberating French army went, it singled out the Jewish community for a symbolic demonstration of the concrete meaning of the revolution's ideals."<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, for our people, Napoleon's army was stopped by the Russian winter from bringing its influence of equality to eastern Europe. Eastern Europe, at that time, was under the domination of Russia, and included Poland and Lithuania. The Czars, under the guise of piety, capitalized on medieval superstition, ignorance, and fear of the Jews, as a means of inciting *their* people against the Jews — as scapegoats — to divert their downtrodden, poverty-stricken people from their *own* plight.

Bad as this had been, conditions for the Jews in Russia during the 1880's and through the early 1900's were such as could have meant their total annihilation. It was a period of repression, oppression and periodic pogroms. "Pogrom" is a Russian word whose literal meaning is destruc-

tion and devastation: in practice, it meant systematic, government-instigated local massacres directed against Jews.

Had they been willing to give up their religion, the Jews could have continued to live in the only homeland they knew. "And while life in Russia was a trial, 'to a worm in horseradish, the horseradish is sweet.'"<sup>22</sup> But that "sweet" land offered only the alternatives of death or conversion. The most heartless form of conversion practiced by the Czars was that of forcing Jewish boys into the army as early as 10 or 12 years of age. The final alternative was the one many chose — emigration.

### THE CHARACTER OF THE PIONEERS WHO CAME TO BRANTFORD

These, then, were the Jewish people who arrived eventually in Brantford — the same people who had trembled at the sound of the screaming, looting, raping, burning Cossacks; the same people restricted in education and choice of livelihood; the same people prohibited from free choice of movement and place of residence; and the same people who were permitted merely to exist, or were even massacred *because* they were Jews.

Most arrived with little or no money, speaking no English, and with few talents for earning a living in an industrialized society. But they brought with them a wealth of tradition, a will to live under adversity, the security of the family, the life-sustaining strength of the co-operative character of the Jewish people, and their religion. It is true too, that while many were well educated in Hebrew, some had a secular education also, in spite of the restrictions placed on Jews desiring an education.

### WHY BRANTFORD?

The physical environment in the Brantford area was similar to that of the land from which they had come. But the social and political environment! What a welcome difference! Here they were accepted and respected, and allowed the opportunity to fulfill their basic needs and their highest aspirations. Brantford was certainly the *Goldena Medina* (The Golden Country) about which they had dreamed — a country of freedom, peace and opportunity.

A granddaughter of Isaac Simon (Mrs. Leah Jacobs Notkin) wrote to me: "I believe my grandparents were one of the first Jewish families in the area and greatly respected as 'people of the Old Testament' . . . my mother told me of friendships with the Massey, Cockshutt, Minore and Beatty Families . . . their doctor was Dr. Digby who was a particularly kind and wonderful friend."

Esther Nusbaum Paisner (daughter of Meyer Nusbaum), wrote: "Our relationship with Brantford as a whole was beautiful. My everyday friends were all gentile. No problems. My father and mother were highly respected . . . didn't know what antisemitic problems were until I moved to Toronto."

### THE EARLY FAMILIES

From my research, it appears that the first Jews in Brantford were Hiram Simon and his family, and his brother Isaac and his family.<sup>4</sup> From 1881 [c], when the Simon family arrived, until the end of the century, more Jewish families may have come to Brantford, but I can find no records of these early pioneers. There may have been a Myers family because a Jacob Myers lived on Balfour in the 1883-1886 city directory, and because a young man, Abe Myers, married Lena Simon, a daughter of Isaac, in 1895.<sup>5</sup> That was the first Jewish wedding in Brantford. By 1899, the Simons had left.

Jewish families came to Brantford in the greatest numbers from the turn of the century until 1914, when the outbreak of World War II stopped the flow of European immigration. From records and interviews it appears that these early families had come to Brantford by 1914.

By 1907: Simon, Abraham Rosenfeld, Louis and Sam Henkle,<sup>6</sup> the Allens, Rabbi Backer, Isaac Lunenfeld, S. Moldaver, Meyers (was Tainsky), Fred Strenkovsky, Max White, Wm. Gazer, Shears, Smoklers and others. Isaac Lunenfeld's daughter, Eva, born October 18, 1904, was the first Jewish child born in Brantford.

By 1911, these families are recorded: Corsonskys, Max Harris, Leon Lazarus, Marks, Morrisons, Nadels, Nobles, Sam Nyman, Paruchnik, Louis Rapaport, Stemeroff, Smucklers, Louis Shalit, Nussbaums, Benjamin Zipper, Joseph Lipovitch, Jacob Lutvak, David Katz, Rabbi Gringorten, Losevs, Louis, Shalit. There must have been others.<sup>8</sup>

By 1913, we find: Sam Fox, Kassirers, Sborovsky (later changed to Sky), and Ben Hoffman.<sup>9</sup>

### THE CONGREGATION

There is no record of the number of Jewish people in Brantford by 1907, but, religious services already had been held for a number of years. These early services were held in the homes of the Jewish families. But by 1907, the number of congregants attending services had grown to a number too large to be accomodated in individual homes, so it was decided to use an upper hall on George St. between Dalhousie and Colborne, opposite the

market square. This was the first public Jewish religious service, and marked the official date of the founding of the Brantford Jewish Congregation.<sup>10</sup>

The 50th anniversary issue of the "Brantford Expositor", published July 1, 1927, mentions as leaders in Jewish religious activities in 1907 S. Moldaver, M. Rosenfeldt, Louis Henkle, F. Strenkovsky, Isaac Lunenfeld, and Rabbi Backer, who was in charge of services.

By 1911, religious services were held in the old Conservative Hall on the south corner of Dalhousie St. and west of King St.<sup>10</sup>

The next significant date was October 13, 1911, when the Congregation was incorporated as the Brantford Hebrew Association. On July 1, 1915, a building was purchased at 33 Palace St. which was remodeled to become the first synagogue in Brantford. And on February 13, 1947, property was purchased on which the present synagogue was built by 1948.

At no time, then or since, did we have a Jewish population over 300.

#### **THE EARLY BRANTFORD JEWISH COMMUNITY: ECONOMICALLY AND SOCIALLY**

Economically, it wasn't easy at first, as is true of any immigrant group seeking refuge in a new land. It was essential that they first earn a living. Many of the men were peddlers, either on foot or with a horse and wagon. A few opened stores selling furniture and clothing, some peddlers eventually also opened stores. A number of these early business establishments became the nucleus of some of the finest in Brantford, like Nyman's,<sup>14</sup> Hendles,<sup>15</sup> and Dominion House Furnishings (Whites).<sup>16</sup> Some peddlers and junk dealers went into secondary materials on a larger scale and their businesses flourished as Brantford flourished (Gazers, Strenkovskys, Rapport).

The Allen family theaters are an important part of Brantford history itself, as well as an aspect of Jewish enterprise in Brantford. The Allens came from Bradford, Pennsylvania, and opened a movie theater in Brantford, The Theatorium, in 1906, which was the third built in Canada (the others were in Montreal and Toronto), and eventually built a chain of theaters across Canada and in parts of the U.S.<sup>17</sup>

Socially, the Jews were a close-knit group (most of the time), working together (in fairly close harmony), to provide for their common needs: religious,<sup>18</sup> social,<sup>19</sup> and humanitarian. This aspect was important to newcomers who needed assistance either financially or in becoming successfully integrated into the community. Families who were already es-

tablished here often gave shelter, advice, financial assistance, and other help, until the newcomers were able to find a home of their own and become gainfully employed.<sup>20</sup>

### **THE EARLY BRANTFORD JEWISH COMMUNITY: PROBLEMS**

Earlier, I called Brantford, the “Goldena Medina”, but I didn’t say it was perfect. There definitely were problems related to religious observance.

Weddings, apparently, were no problem. The wedding of Sarah Rosenfeld to Jules Allen, in June, 1910, as reported in the *Brantford Expositor*, must have been an outstanding social event. Two hundred guests attended the wedding in the Conservatory of Music, the Dufferin Rifles Orchestra played for the dancing and crowds gathered outside to watch the guests arrive in their luxurious gowns. But Rabbi Jacobs of Holy Blossom Synagogue in Toronto had to be brought in to officiate, and the food was catered — I imagine it was kosher.<sup>21</sup>

Bar Mitzvahs must have presented problems at first. Dr. Norman Simon, grandson of Isaac, said that his father lived in Hamilton for the year preceding his Bar Mitzvah, for religious instruction. Later, rabbis who lived in Brantford provided religious education.

Deaths, besides being a loss to the family and the small Jewish community, must have created difficulties, because it wasn’t until June 8, 1912 that a plot of land was purchased to be used as a Jewish cemetery. From records in the cemetery office, the first Jewish burial was in 1912 for Jack Salvansky; and the next, in 1914, for Sadie Sborovsky. Later, the family changed its name to Sky.

Kashruth must have been a serious problem as all kosher supplies had to be brought in from Toronto. Leah (Simon) Notkin wrote: “At one time the meat arriving during the summer from Toronto was tainted and the whole family fell ill. Dr. Digby insisted either they eat *traif*, or have serious health problems, so grandfather began to slaughter. He brought in a *Shoichet*, Mr. Ripstern from Detroit and learned the magic skill of “Kosher Killing”. Esther (Nusbaum) Paisner wrote that later: “Once a week meat came into the Harris Grocery Store where there was always a mad scramble — never enough liver to go around.” As my own husband ruefully remarked about those early days, “they ate chicken a lot.” The *Shoichet* left in 1923.

Of the women who wrote to me who were youngsters during the early years, none mentioned anti-semitic sentiments in the city.

The men, however, remember being called “Kikes” in derision and in friendship by their classmates and playmates. One person everyone remembers in this respect, is Abie Feldman, a youngster who lived on Richmond St. “He was an athlete and a ‘scraper’. No one ever called the kids ‘Kikes’ when he was around, or they’d wind up on the sidewalk.” (Quote, Jack Stren.)<sup>22</sup>

Mostly, however, I was told that “the Jews stayed away from everything, so they had no problems.” This was the trend, I gather, until the late 1940’s, from which time the Jewish community became an integral, active, and important part of the social and political, as well as the economic, life of the city as a whole.<sup>23</sup>

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, from the scene I have set, we can see that the story of the Brantford Jewish Congregation had its beginning during the years between 1881-1911. It is evident that while the early pioneers concentrated first on earning a living, they also maintained unity for mutual assistance and pleasure; planned for or established Jewish institutions such as religious services, a synagogue, a cemetery, Hebrew education for the children, etc.; made provisions for Kosher foods; and gave modest aid to Palestine.

Saul Bellow, the Pulitzer prize winner, wrote in his recent book, *To Jerusalem And Back*: “The Jews because they are Jews, have never been able to take the right to live as a natural right.”

In this respect, too, I feel that Brantford was in truth the “Goldena Medina”. Here our people found freedom of speech, freedom to worship God in their own way, freedom from want, freedom from fear, and one more freedom — the freedom to live.

In the unfolding of the story of the Brantford Jewish Congregation, some of the players were “stars”, some were “bit” players, and some were merely the audience — critics.

### NOTES

1. Nathan Ausabel, *Pictorial History of the Jewish People*, Crown Publishers, Inc., N.Y., 1961.
2. Ands, Manners, *Poor Cousins*, Fawcett Publications, Ltd., Greenwich, Conn., 1972.
3. *Brantford Expositor*, Oct. 11, 1913.
4. Letters from Leah Jacobs Notkin, granddaughter of Isaac Simon.
5. Oral history: Sam Nyman.
6. *Brantford Expositor*, July 1, 1927.
- 7 Brantford City Hall Records.

8. *Brantford Expositor*, Oct. 11, 1913, Oral History.
9. *Brantford Expositor*, July 1, 1927.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Articles of Incorporation.
12. Deed to the property at 33 Palace St.
13. Legal document to property at 50 Waterloo St.
14. "Brantford Expositor Souvenir Number," July 1, 1927.
15. Brantford, Ont. City Directory, 1914.
16. *Ibid.*, 1914.
17. *Brantford Expositor*, July 1, 1927, Oct. 11, 1952, Letter from Mrs. Gurston Allen, daughter-in-law of Barney Allen.
18. *Brantford Expositor* articles re: appeal for funds for a synagogue, Oct. 11, 1913.
19. *Hadassah Minute Book*, Oral History.
20. *Brantford Expositor* article re: appeal for funds for a synagogue, Oct. 11, 1913. Oral History.
21. *Brantford Expositor*, June 22, 1910.
22. In my research, I had found slight evidence of anti-semitism. Besides, in all the reminiscences by my father-in-law (Fred Strenkovsky) about his life in Brantford from his arrival in 1906, he never mentioned any anti-semitic problems.  
 You can imagine my shock when I read in the microfilmed April 7, 1914 issue of the *Brantford Expositor* that on April 6, 1914, a by-law was introduced by Ald. Pitcher to the Brantford City Council providing for the setting apart of William St. as a residential district. After questioning by Alderman G. A. Ward, the true purpose of the by-law was revealed — to block the erection of a synagogue.  
 As reported by the *Brantford Expositor* on April 7 and 21, 1914, Ald. Ward and Ald. W. Sutch argued valiantly on behalf of the Jewish Congregation; but Ald. Pitcher and a number of other aldermen opposed the building of a synagogue on William St. with blatantly prejudiced anti-foreign, anti-Jewish statements.  
 The problem was apparently resolved diplomatically by the leaders of the Jewish community at the time when they must have withdrawn their decision to build a synagogue on William St. because we find that on July 1, 1915 a building was purchased at 33 Palace St. on the corner of Albion St. which is but one block away and parallel to William St. This building was used as a synagogue until 1948 when the Jewish community began holding services at the present synagogue at 50 Waterloo St.
23. Minutes of the Sharon Chapter of Hadassah from its inception on Jan. 2, 1918.