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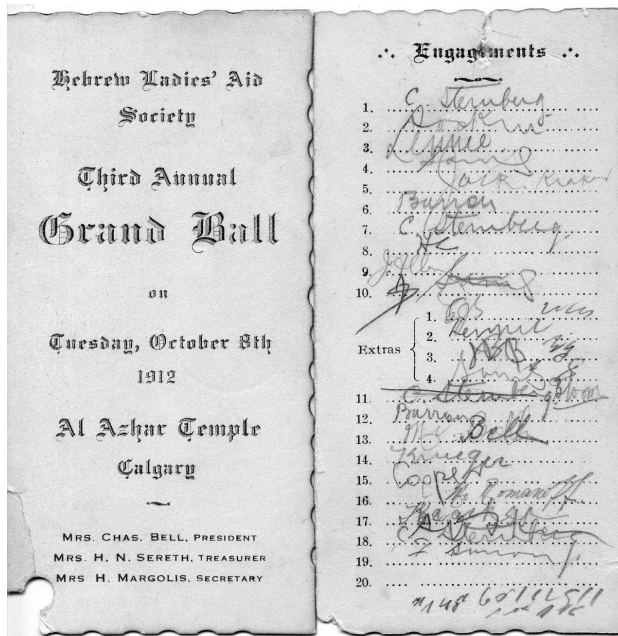
**Dancing into History: A Glimpse into the Jewish
Community of Calgary, 1912–13**

Among the most intriguing acquisitions that can find their way into archival collections are those singular items generally labelled as “ephemera.” It is amazing what a small, seemingly insignificant item, usually the by-product of a single event, can reveal to the modern researcher.

In 2001, the Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta (JHSSA) was fortunate to receive a donation of dance cards from a number of social events held by Jewish organizations in Calgary in 1912-1913. These events had been attended by Cecyle Sereth (1892-1974) and her dance cards were donated to JHSSA by her daughter, Ethel Allen of Toronto, with the help of her nephew Stanley Winfield.¹



Cecyle Sereth, ca.
1917. JHSSA #557,
Jewish Historical
Society of Southern
Alberta.



Cecyle Sereth's dance card, Third annual Grand Ball of the Al Azhar Temple, 1912. JHSSA Acc. 2001-003. Source: Ethel Allen, Stan Winfield, Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta.

These dance cards offer us a glimpse into the relatively new Jewish community of Calgary of 100 years ago. They show that even at this early date, the community consisted not only of new and struggling European immigrants who eked out a living as peddlers, labourers and shopkeepers. The names listed as dance partners on these cards indicate the presence of a generation of more acculturated men who danced to the same tunes as their fellow Calgarians. The cards reveal what might be called a socialite class consisting of managers, proprietors of businesses and professionals whose presence was crucial to the tremendous development of the local Jewish community between 1910 and 1930.

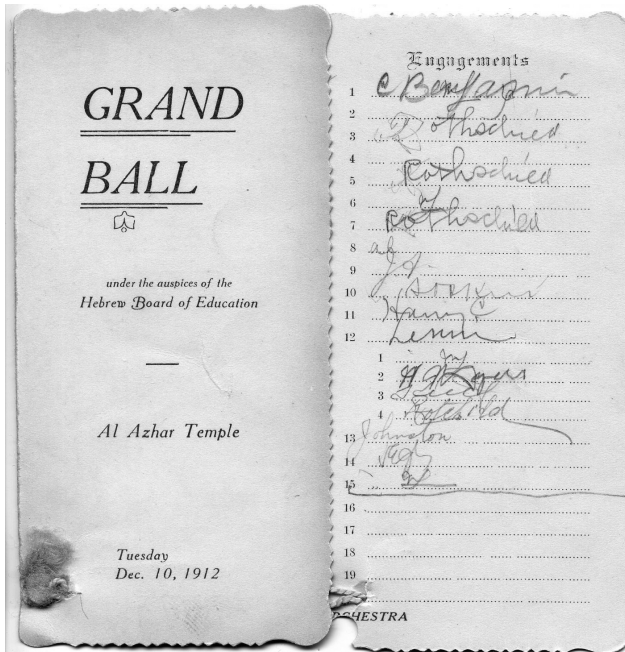
Calgary's first permanent settlers, Jacob and Rachel Diamond, arrived in 1889. Jacob had arrived in Canada in 1884 and had married the Ontario native in 1886. The 1901 census recorded just 10 local Jews, yet by 1905 a Torah scroll had been acquired and land had been purchased for a Jewish cemetery. Congregation House of Jacob was officially incorporated in 1909 and opened its impressive synagogue building in late 1911. By 1911 Calgary had 641 Jews and a sound infrastructure for growing the community.

The general economic climate in Alberta was an important factor in supporting this growth. A number of Jewish entrepreneurs who already had some business experience in other parts of North America were drawn to Alberta in the early 20th century.

Henry Noah Sereth came to America in 1900 and settled in Calgary in 1905. With his brother Alexander, he established Riverside Lumber during Calgary's building boom. As the business expanded, it came to employ hundreds of new immigrants, including Sereth relatives. As his daughter Cecyle's dance cards and Calgary newspaper articles indicate, the Sereths became very involved in local social activities. Stella Sereth Sameth recalled, "The Sereth girls were known from one end of Canada to the other and whenever young men came to Calgary their first aim was to be invited to our home."² There seem to have been many opportunities for socializing as these cards, and an earlier one from a Bachelors' Ball from 1911, attest. The *Calgary Daily Herald* reported on December 11, 1912 that Cecyle (or Celia here) had been voted "the most popular young lady of the evening" at the Hebrew Board of Education ball on December 10th. This Board of Education was an early committee of the newly formed Calgary Hebrew Council or Va'ad Ha'ir. It was created to replace the Congregation House of Jacob committee which had operated Jewish Hebrew classes for children up to that time.

The earliest of the three balls Cecyle attended was organized by the Hebrew Ladies' Aid Society which was formed in 1906 to help new immigrants steadily arriving straight from Europe. The card reveals that Mrs. Sereth served as treasurer in 1912. The *Calgary News Telegram* (October 19, 1912) covered the "brilliant ball", with a full description of the dresses of the 34 female attendees.

The Allen family moved to Calgary from Ontario in 1910 to establish the Canadian Film Exchange and to open a chain of theatres including the Monarch (1911), the Allen (1913) and the Rex (1921).³ Harry (H.J.) Allen came to Calgary with his uncle Barney and sons and lived near the Sereths. He married Cecyle in the Sereth home in February 1914 and they lived in Calgary until their move to Vancouver in 1925. Interestingly, Harry's name does not seem to appear on any of the dance cards. Among the names that are (legibly) recorded are Barron, Mr. Bell, C. Benjamin, Bloom, Harry Cooper, Goldberg, Jack Kroker, C. Sternberg, Romanoff, and the intriguing Mr. Rothschild. Most of these men were involved in communal affairs and had significant business connections.

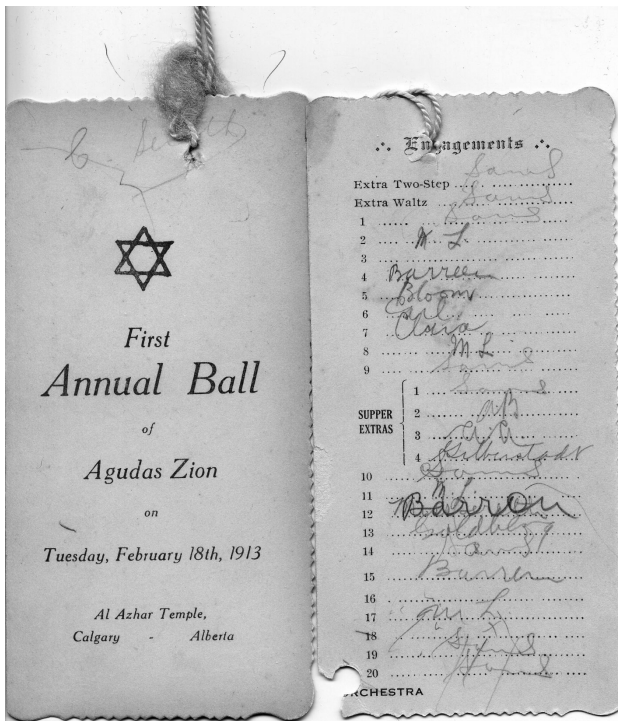


Cecyle Sereth's dance card, Grand Ball of the Al Azhar Temple, 1912. JHSSA Acc. 2001-003. Source: Ethel Allen, Stan Winfield, Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta.

J.B and A.S. Barron came to Calgary around 1911 and both became well known lawyers. J.B. was also known for his business ventures, including the Grand and the Palace theatres. The Barron brothers were also largely responsible for the *Canadian Western Jewish Times* (CWJT), a monthly “devoted to Jewish interests and to Jewish advancement,” which unfortunately only saw a single issue, in April 1914. Charles Bell was co-owner of the King George Hotel, built partly by Sereth’s Riverside Lumber. His brothers Nathan and Alex were also involved in the business community. Charles Benjamin was the manager of the W. Diamond Clothing Company. Both Bell and Benjamin (along with Jay Allen) were featured in the *Calgary News Telegram* Spring/Summer 1913 series of Calgary caricatures – indicating their prominence in the business community. A. Bloom was Advertising Manager of the CWJT and on the board of the YMHA in 1914. H.J. Cooper was active on a number of organizational boards including that of the synagogue and the Va’ad Ha’ir. It is not quite clear which Goldberg danced with Cecyle. According to the local press and to Henderson’s street directory of the time, there was a local Jacob Goldberg family – with a number of sons involved in community organizations – but it is very possible that the Goldberg on the cards was A. Henry Goldberg, founder, with J.M. Sternberg (possibly a relative of the C. Sternberg listed on the 1912 dance card), of the Northern Grain Company in Edmonton in 1907. It is possible that two men were in town to support the organizations hosting the events. Goldberg, who served as best man at Sophie Sereth’s 1911 wedding to John Weinfield, returned to his original home in St. Paul in 1912 to

get married but eventually returned to Edmonton and finally settled in Calgary with his wife Marcia in 1921. The Goldbergs became very active in the Jewish community, especially in Zionist organizations. J.E. Romanoff was on the founding board of the YMHA. According to the CWJT, Mr. Krorker (spelled Krarker) was a frequent visitor from New York. There is speculation whether the Rothschild listed on the dance card might be Edmond, the son of Baron de Rothschild, who is known to have passed through Calgary in 1911.

By 1913, Calgary Jews were closely involved in the political issues of the day. They had formed two different political associations, both well covered in the local press. Some of the names on the dance cards appear in this coverage. The Jewish community felt confident enough to have banded together to protest against a 1911 campaign for mandatory religious training in public schools.



Cecyle Sereth's dance card, First Annual Ball of Agudas Zion, Al Azhar Temple, 1913. JHSSA Acc. 2001-003. Source: Ethel Allen, Stan Winfield, Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta.

This 1913 dance card also attests to the rise of Zionist activity in this growing community. The first formal report of such activity is the *Canadian Jewish Times* (CJT)

report from February 22, 1907 that J. J. Goodman's western tour (from Winnipeg) on behalf of the Federation of Zionist Societies of Canada took him to towns, including Calgary, "where new Zionist Societies are being organized." Mr. Goodman moved to Cochrane near Calgary shortly afterwards. By September 1907, CJT could report on the "unfurling for the first time of the Zionist flag in the Province of Alberta" This refers to the founding of such societies in both Edmonton and Calgary in the wake of M.B. Steine's efforts on behalf of the Federation. Calgary's new Agudas (or Agudath) Zion originally had 46 chartered members. A year later they had collected \$11 in fees and \$5 for Jewish National Fund stamps. President E. Geffen attended Zionist Council meetings in Montreal in 1909. H.J. Cooper served as Secretary. Visiting Zionist speakers soon became a common feature of the local Jewish cultural scene. These visits were well covered in the local press. Mrs. B. Pevsner came in January 1912. Her talk was followed by a banquet which the Allen and Sereth families attended. In July of that year a Herzl Memorial event was held at the Allens' Monarch Theatre. Herzl Memorials became a prominent feature of Calgary Jewish cultural calendar until the establishment of the State of Israel. The December 19, 1913 issue of the CJT reported a total of \$60.70 remitted from Calgary from that year's National Fund Boxes collection.

With the 1913 establishment of the Franklin Press by local Zionist, Abraham Shnitka, our picture of the local cultural scene becomes much richer. Shnitka owned Hebrew font and all the local Jewish organizations used his press to advertise their events. One of the earliest surviving products of the Franklin Press is a Yiddish notice of an Agudas Zion memorial meeting for the great Zionist leader David Wolffsohn on October 25, 1914.

By 1914 the Calgary Jewish community had come into its own. The Sereth dance cards (and the local press clippings relating to the names and the organizations listed on them) demonstrate that within 25 years of the arrival of the first Jewish citizens, the community infrastructure had been firmly established. The institutions and organizations that flourished in larger Canadian Jewish communities also found fertile soil here. Jewish Calgarians quite freely participated in and contributed to the economic, political and social life of the city. The presence of a number of key Jewish families who had immigrated to North America before 1906 and thus arrived in Calgary with some knowledge of English, some assets and previous business experience aided the development of this infrastructure and helped to create links between the Jewish community and the rest of Calgary society.

It is thanks to the preservation of such ephemera that a glimpse at the intimate social life of one person can shed light on the broader picture of a fledgling community.

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These dance cards were first described by the late Jack Switzer, "Calgary Jewish Socialites Hold Grand Balls, 1912-1913," *Discovery* 11 (2001): 4. Most of the information for this article was gleaned from JHSSA clippings from the local press and from information in our subject reference files.

2

The Sereth Story: 57. This is an unpublished typed memoir by the Sereth family from 1974. It includes an English translation of H. N. Sereth's German diary from his early immigrant years as well as biographies of each of his five daughters. JHSSA has a photocopy of the memoir.

3

For a detailed discussion of the Allen family business, see Robert and Tamar Seiler, *Reel Time: Movie Exhibitors and Movie Audiences in Prairie Canada, 1896-1986* (Edmonton: AB, AU Press, 2013).