

Debby Shoctor

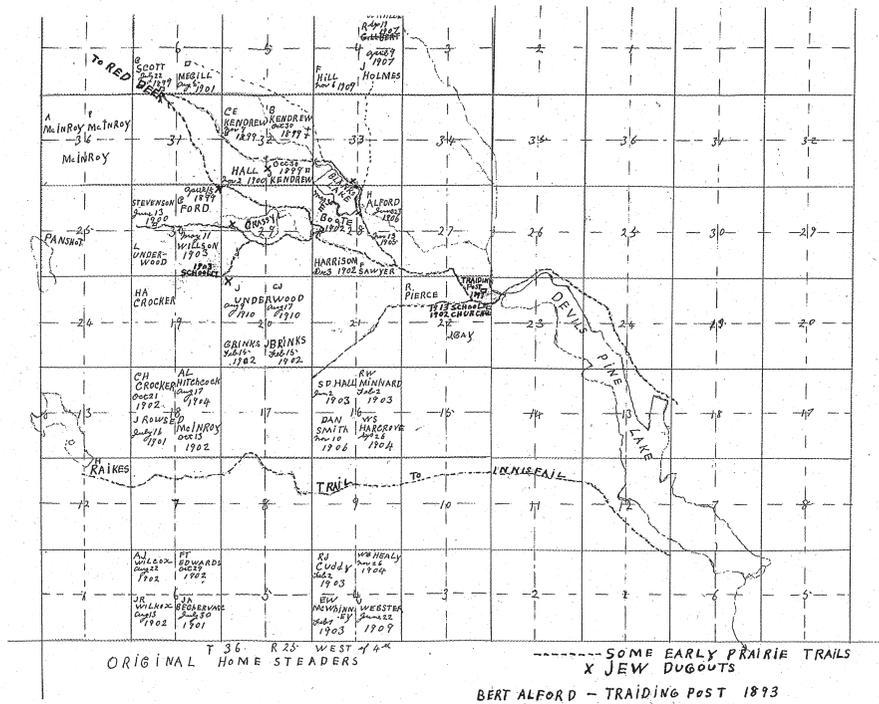
*CEO, Jewish Federation of Edmonton; former archivist, JAHSENA (Jewish Archives and Historical Society of Edmonton and Northern Alberta)*

## **Jewish Life in Northern Alberta's Small Communities**

Jewish life on the Canadian prairie seems to follow a certain prescribed pattern. The earliest Jews to arrive in Alberta were the fur traders, followed by the farm colonists. Both of these were harsh occupations and eventually the fur traders moved to the city and became middle-men or merchants, and the farm colonies failed. These colonists usually moved to the small towns and became general store owners, and eventually moved to join those few Jews who settled in the larger centres of Edmonton and Calgary or even Vegreville, Lethbridge and Medicine Hat, where they built synagogues and established communities. The desire of the members to congregate and educate their children took over from the desire to be wandering, independent entrepreneurs. As Joe Shoctor said in his introduction to the JAHSENA book *The First Century of Jewish Life in Edmonton and Northern Alberta, 1893-1993*, "We came as farmers, peddlers, merchants, labourers, junk dealers, fur buyers, chicken and egg men – stall keepers at city markets. We BECAME doctors, professors, lawyers, judges, dentists, scientists, developers, city councillors, mayors, members of the legislature, industrialists, actors, directors and producers. Remarkably, very, very few of us became gangsters or thieves."<sup>1</sup> (Except for Morris "2-Gun" Cohen, that is.)

So early Jewish life in the hinterland and small towns has evolved into life in the small Jewish communities of Edmonton and Calgary today, which number around 5000 and 8000 Jews respectively. As Shoctor also said, "There were three constants in small town western prairie life: the grain elevators, the Chinese restaurants and the Jewish general stores. The grain elevators and Chinese restaurants have all but disappeared – the Jewish general store is gone! The desire – no, the need – for Jewish and higher education and a Jewish cultural atmosphere denuded small town Alberta of its Jews. The major centres of Edmonton and Calgary were its beneficiaries."<sup>2</sup>

The earliest Jewish settlement in Northern Alberta was in Pine Lake in 1892. This was a Jewish Colonization Association settlement funded by Baron de Hirsch and led by a Rabbi Abraham Blank. It comprised about 15 families or 70 individuals who settled on an uninhabitable tract of land near Red Deer, Alberta. The small lake on which they settled was later renamed Blank's Lake or Blanche Lake after their leader. Former Red Deer City Archivist Michael Dawe has done a fair amount of research on this subject, most of which is detailed in an article he wrote for JAHSENA's *Heritage/Yerusha* newsletter.<sup>3</sup> Another article by Dawe appeared in *Relatively Speaking* the quarterly journal of the Alberta Genealogical Society.<sup>4</sup> In the spring of 2012, JAHSENA sent an expedition to the area to see what was left. There are still traces of the settlers' houses and what we believe are a few gravesites. A map exists in our archives of where the farmers in the area believe the settlements were, and where Rabbi Blank's cabin stood.



Map of the Pine Lake Colony and Jewish Settlements, hand-drawn by Bert Alford, 1893. JAHSENA Archives.

Photos of this expedition are in the JAHSENA archives. Documents relating to the colony can be found in the JAHSENA archives, the Canadian Jewish Congress CC National Archives (CJCCNA) and at Library and Archives Canada. These include records of the Russo-Jewish lands, part of the Jewish Colonization Association collection held by the CJCCNA and available on CJHN.CA; and records of the Department of the Interior, available from the National Archives and the Homestead files of the Saskatchewan Archives Board, and the Jewish Cemetery records available from the Jewish Heritage Centre for Western Canada and the Canada GenWeb Cemetery project.<sup>5</sup>

The fledgling colony had very little support, and after a few hard winters on the colony and many missives to the Russo-Jewish Relief Committee in London, as well as the Canadian government, which sent some minor aid, ultimately, it failed. Michael Dawe tells a story in his article that, “Shortly after the colony started, Rabbi Blank went to Red Deer with most of the community’s money to buy a horse and a gun. Tragically, while hunting shortly thereafter, the Rabbi dropped the gun, which then

went off and killed the horse. The poor man cried out, 'I am ruined!'"<sup>6</sup> The colony started to disband and disperse to other colonies, particularly the Hirsch Colony in Saskatchewan and the US, and by 1896, it had ceased to exist. We believe Rabbi Blank's son, Judah, is buried at Hirsch, Saskatchewan and that the good Rabbi is buried in Winnipeg, but research is ongoing.

A more successful colony was the one started near Sibbald, Alberta by the Montefiore group. This colony was established in 1910 by a group of Jews originating in Russia, who had originally farmed in North Dakota. They built a synagogue and library in 1913 which served about thirty families in the surrounding area as a synagogue, meeting place and school through until the 1930s when the Great Depression forced most families to move elsewhere. The Synagogue later became a private residence in Hanna, Alberta, and was later moved and restored to Calgary's Heritage Park by the Calgary Jewish Community.



Gravestone from Montefiore colony, moved in 1938 to the Edmonton Jewish Cemetery. JAHSENA Archives.

The graves of the settlers were moved to the Edmonton Jewish Cemetery in the late 1930s. Photographs of these graves may be found on the Edmonton Jewish Cemetery website.<sup>7</sup> Other central Alberta farming colonies included Rumsey/Trochu, founded in 1906/07 and Alsask/Montefiore, on the Saskatchewan border, founded in 1910. JAHSENA researcher Reevan Dolgoy conducted a field trip to the colony in the 1970s and he, along with Eve Pascoe and David J. Nelson interviewed as many of its descendants as they could find, and the photos of this expedition as well as the oral histories he recorded reside in the Provincial Archives of Alberta with copies at JAHSENA<sup>8</sup>. More research on this colony was conducted by the Little Synagogue on the Prairie Society, and resides in the JHSSA Archives in Calgary.

Edmonton's first permanent Jewish resident was Abraham Cristall (Abe), who had come from Bessarabia to Edmonton in 1893, a year after it had been incorporated as a town. There is some evidence of Jewish fur traders being in the city slightly earlier than that, but they were a transient few. Abe became a successful businessman, and helped to bring more Jews over from his native Bessarabia. By 1901, there were 17 Jewish citizens in Edmonton. In 1904, Edmonton became incorporated as a city, and in 1905, Alberta officially became a province. That same year saw the arrival of William "Boss" Diamond, Abe's friend and arch-rival, who had originally come to join his brother Jacob Diamond, Alberta's first Jewish resident (Calgary, 1889) in 1892. JAHSENA has the original immigration papers of Abe Cristall, donated by his great-grandson, Tod Cristall, in 2010.

Boss Diamond set up a clothing business in competition with Abe Cristall, but both worked together to lay the foundations of Edmonton's Jewish Community. In 1906, they banded together to form the Edmonton Hebrew Association (Beth Israel Synagogue), the first Jewish institution, and hired Rabbi Hyman Goldstick from Pilton, Latvia, to serve both the Jewish communities of Edmonton and Calgary as rabbi, shochet and mohel. The Rabbi Hyman Goldstick fonds in the JAHSENA archives contains many original documents and artifacts donated by his grandson, Matt Cohen.<sup>9</sup> In 1907, Mr. Cristall purchased land on the south side of the river for the Edmonton Jewish Cemetery and the Chevra Kadisha was formed. In 1912, the community managed to build the Beth Israel Synagogue, the community's oldest synagogue, and the only brick synagogue building still standing west of Winnipeg. The first Jewish Day School in Canada had its origins in the basement of that synagogue.



Beth Israel Synagogue, first in Edmonton on 95<sup>th</sup> St. and Rowland Rd, 1937. JAHSENA Archives.

From 1912 until today, the community has grown and evolved, and many new institutions have cropped up. We now have eight synagogues, two day schools, a senior's drop-in centre and a new Jewish home for the aged, Beit Horim/Our Parents' Home. Our community organizations are multitudinous and going strong and our population of around 5000 is holding steady.

JAHSENA has in its archives items pertaining to the history of all of these people and is currently working on a project to purchase and restore the first synagogue, now a Catholic church, as a museum, archives and community centre. It has been given materials by the Cristall and Goldstick families and has had researchers of many backgrounds and locations looking into the history of our community. It has published a book<sup>o</sup>, made two feature-length documentary films<sup>u</sup> and continues to publish articles as well as a newsletter, *Heritage/Yerusha*, three times a year, with stories pertaining to the history of our community. For more information, please see the website: [www.jahsena.ca](http://www.jahsena.ca), or the new Edmonton Jewish Cemetery website: [www.edmontonjewishcemetery.ca](http://www.edmontonjewishcemetery.ca), or call or email the office at: [jahsena@shaw.ca](mailto:jahsena@shaw.ca), or (780) 489-2809.

**1**

Rosenzweig, Uriel. *The First Century of Jewish Life in Edmonton and Northern Alberta: 1893-1993*. (Edmonton: Jewish Archives and Historical Society of Edmonton and Northern Alberta, 2000), 6.

**2**

Ibid.

**3**

Dawe, Michael. "Blank's Lake Jewish Colony." *Heritage/Yerusha* 11.3 (2009): 8.

**4**

*Relatively Speaking* 41.1 (2013): 20.

**5**

Pine Lake Colony Collection, JAHSENA Archives, PLC.10.1.

**6**

Dawe, "Blank's Lake Jewish Colony," 3.

**7**

[www.edmontonjewishcemetery.ca](http://www.edmontonjewishcemetery.ca).

**8**

JAHSENA Oral History Project Fonds, 1999-2014, Reevan Dolgoy fonds, JAHSENA Archives, JOH.03.1, PA73.456-PA77.258.

**9**

Rabbi Hyman Goldstick fonds, 1906-197?, JAHSENA Archives, GSK.02.1.

**10**

Rosenzweig, *The First Century of Jewish Life in Edmonton and Northern Alberta: 1893-1993*.

**11**

*From Pedlars to Patriarchs: A Legacy Remembered*. JAHSENA, 2004; *Bittersweet Memories: The War Years*. JAHSENA, 2007.