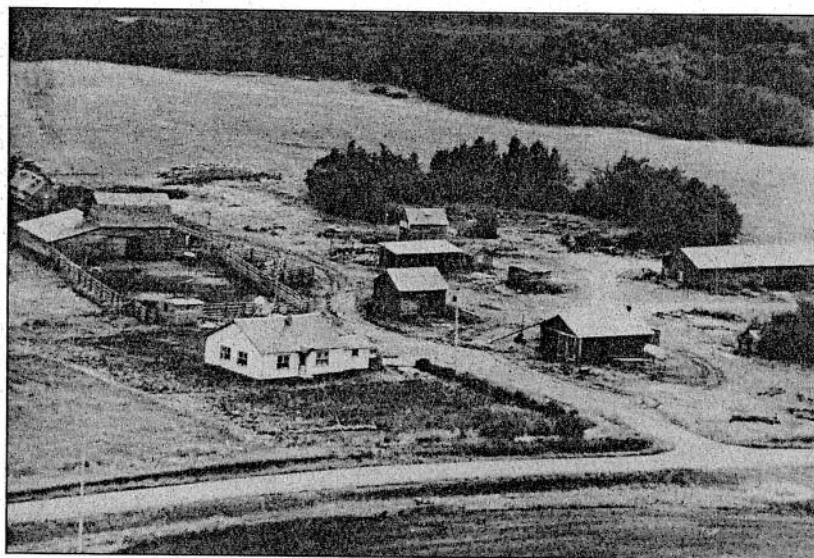




THE SCRIBE

Volume XIV, No. 2

September 1994



in this issue

Back to Our Canadian Roots:
Alberta Roundup

Sam Raskin Farmstead (*story p. 3*)

Rumsey, Alberta

THE JOURNAL OF THE JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF B.C.

THE SCRIBE

Editor's Message

EDITOR Sarah H. Tobe
COPY, LAYOUT Jack Wassemann

The editors welcome submissions for publication relating to areas of Western Canadian Jewish History. All articles should be typed, double-spaced, and appropriately documented.

Statements of fact or opinion appearing in THE SCRIBE are made on the responsibility of the authors alone, and do not imply the endorsement of the editors or of The Jewish Historical Society of B.C.

Please address all submissions, as well as communications on editorial and circulation matters, to:

THE SCRIBE
Jewish Historical Society of B.C.
Suite 206, 950 West 41st Avenue
Vancouver, B.C., Canada V5Z 2N7

Subscription Rates

Annual	\$20
Sustaining	\$25
Sponsoring	\$50
Patron	\$75

Institutions - \$25
(includes two copies of each issue)
Back issues (1978-92) - \$2.50 each

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ISSN 0824 6947

This special Alberta Roundup edition of THE SCRIBE is devoted to family histories, oral histories, biographies, reminiscences and photographs collected from local residents who are all former Albertans. (My apologies to those ex-Albertans who may feel slighted because I missed collecting their stories from them, but time and other restrictions make an all encompassing edition impossible.) The preservation and collection of Western Canada's Jewish history is included in our mandate. In keeping with this tradition, and to continue with our Back to Our Canadian Roots program, we are hosting a photographic exhibit, Land of Promise, from the Calgary-based Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta. To complement the exhibit, locals with roots in Alberta have gathered together an auxiliary display of their precious photographs and memorabilia.

There will be a reception and reunion on opening night, September 22. The exhibits will continue to October 14 in the Zack Gallery, Vancouver Jewish Community Centre, 950 West 41st Ave. See you at the show!

Sarah H. Tobe

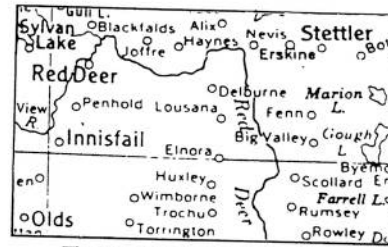
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Cover photo: Sam Raskin's farm was blessed with rich soil and plentiful water (see story next page). J.H.S. OF B.C. ARCHIVES PHOTO

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The Rumsey-Trochu region, ca. 60 kilometers southeast of Red Deer, was the site of some of the earliest Jewish farm colonies in Alberta (see also story, p. 8)

COVER STORY by Cyril E. Leonoff

The Jewish Farmers of Alberta

With the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway across the prairies of Western Canada in 1882, vast agricultural lands were opened to settlement. The policy of the Canadian government was to populate these lands in order to complete the Canadian nation from coast to coast, to prevent American encroachment, and to generate revenue for the railway and resources for the nation. Coincident with this event, Russian discrimination and pogroms initiated a large-scale emigration of Jews from the Ukraine and Romania to "America."

Many of the Russian Jews who came to Western Canada started out as merchants and artisans in the small towns and cities that were

developing on the prairies. But a number, imbued with the Jewish "back-to-the-land" movement, were attracted by the "free" homesteads offered by the Canadian government. Assisted by European Jewish philanthropists, such as Baron de Hirsch, some dozen Jewish farm colonies were established over the three prairie provinces.

A few Jews settled in Alberta in the 1890s. Among them were some individuals and small groups of farmers and ranchers. The first High Holy Day services in Alberta took place in 1894 in the old Masonic Hall of the largest city, Calgary. The congregation was composed of "two residents of Calgary, two from Edmonton, five commercial travellers, and a farmer from near Lacombe."¹

Some of the earliest Jewish farm colonies of Alberta were founded near the villages of Trochu and Rumsey in the Red Deer valley about 120 miles northeast of Calgary. Most of the settlers were from the Ukraine and Russia. Trochu was on the more accessible west bank of the river, and was closer to rail connection. On the east bank, where Rumsey was located, there was no railway into the district until 1911.² The early settlers had to walk or ride into the homesteads from the towns of Olds or Innisfail west of the river for distances of up to sixty miles, swim, or at low water, ford the river. The trip from Calgary took nearly a week by horse team. A ferry crossing was in service between 1907 and 1925.³

The first Trochu settlers arrived by the year 1905 or earlier. The principal Jewish families there were brothers Charles and Max Waterman, Morris Katzin, Leib Cramer and Max Silver.⁴ The colony was located eight to ten miles southeast of Trochu. The area east of the river was opened for homesteading in 1905-06.

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Two brothers, Raphael and Louis Gurevitch, left Russia for the new world in 1902 after serving in the Russian army. Arriving in Eastern Canada, they met with a compatriot, Elias Sengaus. The three worked as labourers on construction projects. Working their way west, the young men, "robust, healthy, adventurous and above all ambitious," worked in a lumber camp in Sault Ste. Marie, but when the camp burned down, they boarded a train going west to Calgary in the year 1904 to go homesteading.

Four days' travel by horse and wagon over bald prairie and grassland brought them into a parkland on the east bank of the Red Deer River "where grass was up to a horse's belly," lakes and sloughs were "fresh and productive with wild life and game," and "wildflowers were everywhere." The three companions spent the first years together "sharing a sod shack and learning to become farmers the hard way."

On their return to Calgary from this expedition, the news spread like wildfire among the many Jewish newcomers who had fled from Russia at the time of the Russo-Japanese War. About seventy-five men filed for homesteads. Almost no one had had previous farming experience, but this did not matter to them. Here was a chance to own land, a privilege they had been denied in their homelands. Thus, "almost overnight," a Jewish colony formed.⁵ The Jewish farmers of Rumsey Colony settled within a radius of eight miles from the village.

The public school districts were established in the early years. Tolman School, No. 2204, built in 1908 four and one-half miles west of Rumsey in the heart of the Jewish district, had some thirty pupils, most of whom were Jewish. Following school hours, Jewish

children attended classes of instruction in Hebrew and Yiddish taught by teachers hired by the Jewish settlers, several of whom served over the years. The most noteworthy was Elias Sengaus, who served as a teacher, mohel (circumciser), and shochet, travelling to the most remote farms to fill these functions until his death in 1956.⁶

In 1917, "the desire to preserve a little of their own culture and customs" motivated the settlers to build a synagogue near the Tolman School. This was a community effort, labour being volunteered and funds donated. The principal carpenters were J. Cohen and "Big John" Gelfond. During the High Holy Days, Jewish farmers and storekeepers converged from a twenty mile radius with over sixty families and filled the synagogue to capacity. The Trochu group was directly across (west of) the river from the Rumsey settlers. However, as the ferry was the only means of crossing in the years that it operated, the Trochu settlers were generally isolated from the others. They held their own religious services and met socially in private homes.⁷

The Jewish community of Rumsey maintained a warm social life centred around the synagogue. Raphael Gurevitch had a portable gramophone "with about fifty records...to supply the two-step or waltz music." Samuel Davis, a Jewish farmer, was a dance teacher. Ben Gurevitch "swung a fine fiddle" on demand for parties and weddings both Jewish and gentile. He was talented enough to later play in the Calgary Symphony Orchestra. Sport was not overlooked. The Rumsey Jewish baseball team was good enough to travel to Calgary and win. Harold Raskin won the middleweight boxing championship at the University of Alberta.

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Hitting the road: Charles & Ethel Waterman and friends near Trochu, 1915.



Tom Sengaus was a "top-notch" high school football player, and won a wrestling championship at Calgary Tech.⁸

The Rumsey and Trochu colonies—fortunate in their very fertile soil and their annual precipitation, so much higher than that of the colonies in the drybelt of Saskatchewan—were favoured with bountiful crops. The major problem was the frequent hailstorms peculiar to the region that sometimes played havoc with the crops. The decade 1910–20 was fruitful. By this time the Jewish population in the district was 238, and 10,000 acres were under cultivation. Rumsey and Trochu at that time were the wealthiest Jewish colonies in Canada. But, in a period of inflated land values, some of the farmers had obtained large mortgage loans and found themselves in a hopeless position during the economic hard times after World War I. This caused many abandonments.⁹

Started independently, the settlements were later assisted by the Jewish Colonization Association (ICA). Those who remained for many years became among the most affluent of all the Jewish farmers in Canada.

In addition to their farming chores, the Jewish farmers practised the trades that they brought with them from the old country. These skills were a considerable asset to the general community. J. Cohen, the carpenter, built several homes in the district. Jacob Wolfson was a blacksmith, and "his left-handed power pounded out many a plow share." M. Kurtzberg was a leather and harness maker. Rudolph Engle was a watchmaker who was involved in construction of the Calgary City Hall clock, which today is still a landmark in that city. Harry Baron opened a shoe cobbler shop in Rumsey.¹⁰

The last Jewish farmer, Jack Cramer, left

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the Trochu district in the 1960s. A number of the pioneer Jewish families of Rumsey Colony established long-time farming dynasties which have endured for three-quarters of a century. When the writer visited the Tolman district in September 1974, 7,600 acres were being farmed by families of the pioneers, including the Sam Raskin family (also encompassing the Gurevitch farms), Ben, Tom and William Sengaus, Harry and Sam Silberstein.¹¹ Until their retirement in 1979, Fred Horodezky and his wife Fannie (Applebaum) operated the beautiful 2 Bar F Ranch, thirty miles north of Pincher Creek, "where his hand picked herd brings...the highest prices because of their quality." As reported in the press when they were feted on their fifty-fifth wedding anniversary in 1976, "Mr. Horodezky is probably the only rancher in Southern Alberta who davens (Prays) three times a day and his spouse the only wife of a Jewish rancher who keeps a strictly kosher home."¹² Sam Rosenthal, son of pioneer William Rosenthal, today operates three farms and ranches near Calgary, Stavely and Wetaskiwin.

In 1910 the farm settlements of Montefiore (Sibbald) and Eyre (Alsask) came into being astride the Alberta-Saskatchewan border, founded by groups of Jews some of whom had originally farmed in North Dakota and Montana. Although good farmers, they unfortunately chose light, drought-stricken, windblown lands. They started on their own, and when the ICA finally came to the rescue their position was hopeless. However, six Jewish farmers clung to the district until World War II. Many of the pioneer Jewish farmers of these settlements returned to the United States, where they engaged in poultry farming in the Petaluma district of California.

Another major Jewish rancher of note in Southeast Alberta has been Harry Veiner, who also served from 1959 to 1967 as Mayor of Medicine Hat.

The dream of a mass Jewish agricultural movement in Canada was never realized. However, the pioneer farmers were important in the history of the Jewish people of Canada. It is clear that Jewish land settlement made a contribution to the growth of the Jewish community in several ways. It attracted many Jewish immigrants, primarily from Eastern Europe. It enabled them to settle on homesteads where otherwise they might have been barred from entering the country. It provided some with a profitable occupation. It gave them an opportunity to established themselves in private enterprise. Jewish farming also served well from a public relations point of view, helping to raise the prestige of the Jewish community throughout Canada. Many descendants of the pioneer farmers are now prominent Canadians in business, industry, politics, the professions, and the arts, making important contributions to the country. ♣

Sources:

- ¹ Rosenberg, *Canada's Jews: A Social and Economic Study of the Jews in Canada* (Montreal, 1939). p. 147.
- ² *Pioneer Days: History of Rumsey and District, Centennial Year, 1967*, p.5.
- ³ *Pioneer Days: Book Two* (Rumsey, 1982), p.763.
- ⁴ Freda (Waterman) Levy, interview, by the writer, Vancouver, May 4, 1983.
- ⁵ *Pioneer Days II*, pp. 555-557.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 539-542, 602.
- ⁷ *Pioneer Days I*, pp. 10-11: Freda (Waterman) Levy.
- ⁸ *Pioneer Days II*, pp. 602-603.
- ⁹ Belkin, "Jews in Agriculture," p.57; *Pioneer Days I*, p. 10; *Pioneer Days II*, p. 582.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 603, 375, 692-699.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 579, 581-585, 585-587.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 62-63; *The Jewish Western Bulletin*, Vancouver, April 1, 1976, p. 16.

— by Arthur M. (Horodezky) Hayes —

Farming the Canadian Prairies

Much of the material for this article is based on the memoirs of my father, Fred Horodezky. He and my mother Fannie moved to Vancouver after they retired from their ranch in Alberta. My mother was 80 and my father was 83 when they bought their home on West 54th Street where they spent the last ten years of their lives. They passed away peacefully within six months of one another. In all of my father's endeavours throughout their 67 years of marriage she was his partner and right hand. Not unlike many other pioneers, theirs was a hard life but it was sweetened by the satisfaction of their inde-

pendence and most of all for not ever having to come to anyone for financial assistance. Hard as life was, they loved this country and their freedom. They never forgot their childhood in Russia.

In his first paragraph my father writes, "I am writing my memories on Arthur's request. I don't think this generation would believe that things like that could really happen. One good thing, my memory is very good. I remember every little detail. As I write I live through that time. Some parts make me very sad." The rest of the information that follows comes from stories my father told me and, of course, from personal memories.

Although I was born and grew up in Alberta, I really come from a far different world—the world of the immigrant: the world of the first generation Jews who came to this country at the turn of the century to escape the oppression of Eastern Europe. Some 70 Jewish



The Horodezky threshing crew: a family affair.

families found their way to the Rumsey-Rowley area of Alberta, many of whom are part of my earliest childhood memories. Whenever families came together it instantly became a special occasion, heightened by the genuine pleasure of seeing one another.

For me especially, to see another child, not caring whether the child was younger or older, was wonderful; the loneliness of life on the farm for a child made each encounter memorable. The grownups adored the children, making such a fuss over us that we truly believed we were the handsomest, cleverest and best human beings ever created. It was not until many years later that I realized that the richness of their spirit and demeanour belied their very meagre finances. Whatever they had, they shared wholeheartedly.

Some of the names I recall with warm affection are Sengaus, Gurevitch, Srolovitz, Shackman, Hanen, Baron, Gelfond, Raskin, Wolfson, Fagan, Blackerman, Babavnik, Engle. They, my maternal grandfather Moses Applebaum, and of course our family, the Horodezkys, acquired homesteads and eventually title to land, a cherished privilege denied to Jews in the land of their birth. With zeal, optimism, boundless energy and little else they pitted themselves against the forces of nature and put down roots in this new land. Their names are inextricably bound up in the development and culture of the Province of Alberta. They lived in everything from tents to sod houses to shacks. They broke the prairie and farmed it, all the while learning on the job. Some learned quickly while others failed and moved on to the city. Those who remained became part of both worlds, not forgetting their heritage; they built a synagogue and engaged teachers to provide a Jewish education for their children. Teachers hired included

Mr. Sengaus, a Mr. Freedman, Mr. Karp and Mr. Woogman.

The Horodezky family will be forever indebted to my uncle Jack (Yankev Hershel), who had the foresight and courage to leave everything he knew in Russia and come to Canada in 1905. Conscripted into the Russian army, this handsome, talented musician who sang and played the mandolin and balalaika became the favourite of the officers. It gave him many special privileges and enabled him to escape to the New World. My father recalled the night that Jack came home resplendent in uniform to say good-bye, bringing his young brothers and sister farewell gifts. Making his way across Europe, he eventually arrived in Calgary to join some 50 Jewish families in the area. Alberta had just become a province of Canada.

Uncle Jack's first job was as a labourer on the construction of the Palliser Hotel. He soon learned to speak English and found employment with the Natural Resources Department of the Canadian Pacific Railroad. The CPR had been given large tracts of land for bringing the railroad west and was in the process of selling the prairie land. It was Jack's job to travel into Minnesota and the Dakotas where he gave talks and showed lantern slides to interest farmers to come and settle in Alberta.

Within a year, Uncle Jack sent for his father and my Zaida, Eleazar Chaim (for whom my son is named). His name appears in the Alberta Land Registry designating a homestead belonging to Louis Horodezky. My Zaida had been a Yeshiva bocher and was a very learned Jew. He and his wife Blumeh had five children—Rose, Jack, Fred, Sarah and Nate. He had been a timber broker; local peasants would sell him

their cut timber, which would then be lashed together and floated down the river in the summer to the sawmills. He had made a very good living and the family had lived in a nice home: my father told me it had a glassed-in porch and a room in which the roof could be opened to the sky where my grandfather built his succah.

This good life abruptly came to an end when a pogrom stripped them of nearly all they had. Zaida was warned by a faithful employee and he and his son Nate escaped with their lives by crawling through a ditch for several miles. The raiders took his office apart board by board destroying everything in sight. What they did not steal they burned. The rest of the family were saved by gentile neighbours who hid them. Although the pogrom was fomented from outside their village, it had found willing accomplices, and the family realized they could no longer live there.

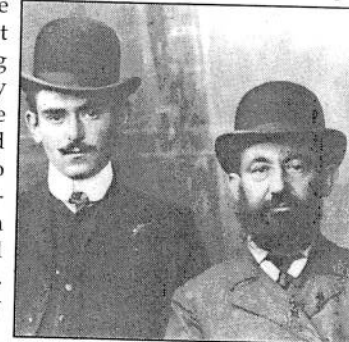
By this time the two eldest children, Rose and Jack, were on their own. While Jack made his way to Canada, Rose eventually wound up in the eastern United States. My father and I visited her about 12 years ago in a retirement home in Los Angeles, a year before she died. She told me the story of how she became a nurse and explained that it was thanks to her forward thinking father.

Living in a small village, there was little else for a Jewish girl to do but plan for marriage, so she went to her father and asked him if she could have her "nadden"—the dowry money she would get when she married. She

wanted it now so she could study to be a nurse. Considering that the year was 1898 and the household a religious one, this would be a major concession. He consented and arranged for her to be tutored. When she matriculated she went to Gomel, where she entered the nursing program at a hospital. She graduated as a nurse, and when she eventually came to North America, she worked as a pediatric nurse for many years.

Shortly after the havoc of the pogrom my Dad's mother died of pneumonia. The family was devastated by the loss and my Zaida could not cope with raising the three young children. He attempted to have them stay with relatives, but the children were so attached to one another that they would not be separated. A year after his wife passed away he remarried. His new bride was a spinster who was immediately thrust into the unhappy situation of having to raise three children who were still grieving for their mother. Within a year, her husband was off to America, leaving her to cope as best she could on small periodic allowances.

In less than a year, it was arranged for my father to accompany Uncle Moishe, Zaida's brother, to Canada. He was to go on Uncle Moishe's passport as his son. They reached Antwerp, Belgium, and were awaiting the arrival of their steamship when Uncle Moishe, while wandering in the city, discovered a violin he absolutely had to have. Not having sufficient money of his own, he prevailed upon my father to lend him his passage money and wait for the next boat, assuring him that



Louis Horodezky (right) and son Jack

he would cable his brother for funds for his passage the following week. My father waited day after day but the money did not arrive. Finally after five weeks at Immigration they took his remaining money and purchased a railroad ticket for him to go back to Russia. My father was 11 years old and had to make his way by himself across Europe, crossing many frontiers without a passport and able to speak only Yiddish and Russian. He had the equivalent of two dollars with which to buy food and had to walk the last fifteen miles. After a two-week ordeal he arrived home skin and bones and it was several months before he was well again.

Uncle Moishe had waited until he arrived in Montreal before he wrote to his brother that he had left Dad in Antwerp. When the letter finally reached my Zaida, it was too late, as Immigration had already sent Dad back to Russia. At this time Zaida was on the homestead, which was eight miles from a post office which he only visited once a month to pick up the mail.

Three years elapsed before sufficient funds arrived for passage to Canada for my Dad, his brother Nate, his sister Sarah, and their stepmother. They went by small boat from Riga to Liverpool and then by the steamship "Mongolia" to Hull, Quebec. They came steerage, packed like sardines, and slept in hammocks. During their 14-day crossing their diet consisted of herring and tea and lots of bread. The balance of the journey to the promised land was a six-day train trip. They sat on slatted wooden benches and cooked whatever they had on a small stove at the end of the car. It was on this train that my father tasted an orange for the first time in his life. He was now thirteen years old.

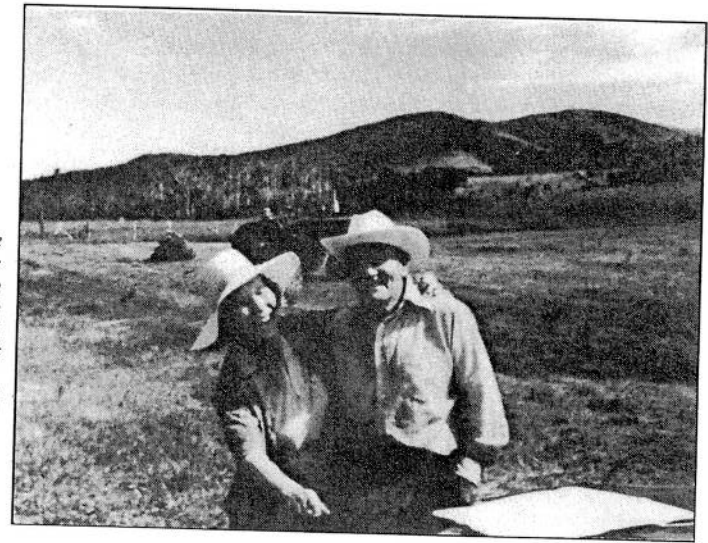
They arrived in Calgary in April, 1910. My father remembered the days fondly: "Father and Jack came to meet us at the station. It was the happiest time that I had ever known. They had nice clothes and looked happy. Father went with us and he spoke a few words of English. I thought it was wonderful that he speaks English. I felt lost—I couldn't understand one word. They told me the first words to learn to say is, 'Boss, please give me a job.'"

Language or not, a job meant survival and my father's first opportunity was as a helper salting hides. They would spread a hide on the floor, salt it, and then repeat the process, placing the next hide on top, then the next, and so on, and by the time the pile got four feet high lifting the hides became an ordeal for him. The job was killing, but he stayed with it; there was no one else to pay the \$18.00 to Mrs. Goldberg for his board and the room he shared with his cousin Moshe Chaikin.

Mayer Malkin (whose son Saul subsequently married my mother's sister Rose), who knew the foreman at the CPR, put in a good word for Dad and he got a job loading ice into the refrigerated cars. He started work at 7 P.M. and worked through the night until 7 A.M. for seven days a week without holidays for a year at 17 cents an hour. With what money was left over after paying for his board and room he helped his father. During this time his younger brother Nate went to school and after school sold newspapers. He was a stellar salesman and able to support himself. Within a year he accumulated \$900, which he gave to his father to drill a well. Prior to this they had had to haul water from a spring four miles away. At this time my Zaida, Eleazar Chaim Horodezky, got title to his homestead.

It was not any great love of the land that prompted my grandfather to homestead. In

*At home
on the range:
Fred and Fannie
Horodezky
on the old
2 Bar F, west of
Pincher Creek,
1958*



my father's words, "In our family they prided themselves that we had no tradesmen, just businessmen. So when father got to Canada it was hard for him to earn money, he couldn't speak the language and he would not work on Saturday.... At that time you had to be on the job for twelve hours six days a week. Jack helped father a lot and it was the reason they took a homestead.... He thought that it would be self-employment, but father wasn't the farmer type."

He was a very educated person in Hebrew. He started school at five years of age and went to the Yeshiva where he stayed until he got married. He never did any manual work until he came to Canada in 1906. His son Jack wrote to him that the Government was giving away 160 acres of land for ten dollars but that work was hard to come by until you learned the language, suggesting that he could probably teach Jewish children. As it turned out,

Calgary had around 12 Jewish children and they could not support a full time teacher. So he had to look for a labourer's job, eventually finding one with the City of Calgary. He started on Monday and worked until Saturday. Saturday he stayed away for Shabbat. When he came to work on Monday they asked him where he was on Saturday. He got one of his Jewish co-workers who spoke English to tell them that he is Jewish and that Jews keep Saturday instead of Sunday. The foreman said he needed somebody for six days and that he is fired. So they went to the Mayor and told him the story, whereupon the Mayor shook Grandfather's hand and told him to go back to work and that he didn't have to work on Saturdays.

He worked for the city until late in the fall when he and his son Jack filed on two of the best quarter sections of land nine miles away from the Jewish settlement at Rumsey, Al-

berta. It was called the Tolman Post Office at that time. Three years later the Canadian National Railway extended its line through Rumsey. Together they had 320 acres and in order to file a person had to stay on the land for six months of the year for three years. In addition you had to break 15 acres on each quarter as well as build some kind of a shelter or shack. The nearest place to find lumber was Stettler, some 60 miles away, and they had very little money to buy it. So they cut willow stringers and made a frame. They dug out a 12'x12' square down about 5 feet. Then they took sod from the plowed furrows and built up walls around it. They laid poles across the top and made a roof out of sod as well. They found enough lumber for a door as well as two small windows. With two coal oil lamps, a few home-made benches and a long table, all sitting on a dirt floor, they lived in the sod house for three winters. Each winter they would cut logs near the Red Deer River and haul them up the slope with horses to the farm. When they had enough logs they began to build a log house. Lumber became available, and three years later they put on the roof and installed the door and windows.

The log house was not quite ready when my father arrived there for a visit in 1910 so he moved into the sod house. It was a cold spring and he remembered ice forming on the blanket near his mouth. One morning one of the oxen put a foot through the sod roof just missing him and covering him with dirt.

The homestead was approximately 60 miles from the nearest railway. One either walked to Stettler or to Olds to catch the train to Calgary. In Dad's words, "We used to walk to Trochu and we would have to cross

the Red Deer River when it was low to get there. We used to stay at the Gutmans or the Watermans overnight. They treated us just like relatives. The Gutmans and the Watermans came from Austria and one of the Gutmans named Alter was a Justice of the Peace in Trochu for a long time."

My father's situation improved as time went on, and in 1915 his brother Jack was promoted to District Representative and he was able to hire Dad as his replacement. He too became a travelling inspector with the CPR. At the experimental station in Bassano, they showed him the various parcels of land, explained what was best to grow on them, and listed the prices. He made Minot, North Dakota, his headquarters and travelled through-

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out the Dakotas and Minnesota selling land to farmers, many of whom were German or Russian. It was a great job that paid him \$200 a month plus expenses. It only lasted a year, however, since the CPR discontinued moving Germans and other farmers of foreign nationality to Alberta until after the war.

My great grandfather Isaac (Shmuel Yitzchak), for whom I am named, emigrated to Canada in 1914. He was an octogenarian when he arrived, but a vigorous and outgoing man, the antithesis of his scholarly son Louis. He rode horseback and even filed for a homestead in the Morrin district. He improved the land for three years and obtained title to it. He went to Calgary for the winter and one day in -40° weather he insisted on going to the steam bath. Walking home from the bath as he regularly did was his undoing; he contacted pneumonia and passed away shortly after.

My father had now saved up several thousand dollars, which he sent home to his father. With this money he and Nate bought horses with which to farm. Prior to this time they had used oxen. In 1917 my father sold his homestead and with his brother Nate bought the Clark half section of land for \$4,000. It was a mile and a half away from their father's land and their brother Jack's. Their land had 150 acres broken and ready for seeding and they became farmers ... and good farmers, at that, paying for their land in one year. They purchased the first tractor in the area, a Titan, and sold some of their horses. This allowed them to break additional pasture land for wheat production. Dad went to Calgary and attended a tractor mechanic's course for a month. When more tractors arrived, neighbours sought out his expertise.

My father writes, "Farming was very hard work. The country was wild and the soil

was gumbo, which was hard to break. I had to use eight horses and a 14-inch blade. I could only break two acres per day, and to do that I had to get up at five in the morning to get the horses from the field and put them in the barn. It wasn't easy for one man to feed them oats and harness eight horses. I would get to the field by 7 A.M. and work until 12 noon. Eat and start again at 1 P.M. and work until 6 P.M. By the time I unharnessed the horses, fed them, and took them back to the pasture it was 7 P.M. After eating supper there were two more hours of chores to do."

In the spring of 1918 my father was drafted into the army, but since he and Nate were farming not only their land but their father's and brother's, and because there would be so much crop to take off, he was granted a deferment until November. It turned out to be a bumper crop, yielding 50 bushels to the acre. With wheat selling for \$2.48 per bushel they became two of the richest young men in the area. They bought a Chevrolet called a "Baby Grand" and became the first Jews in Calgary to own an automobile. They spent the winters in Calgary, and one year, while they were in Calgary, one of their neighbours borrowed a sleigh from Zaida and emptied one of their granaries, stealing 1100 bushels of wheat. They later learned that the thief had moved to Seattle the next year, where he met an untimely end.

The year 1919 brought another big crop, but Dad caught the flu and was put in the Isolation Hospital in Calgary. During this time their Bank manager convinced Nate to buy more land and with wheat at \$2.48 and Flax at \$6 a bushel it seemed like a good idea to him. With a deposit of \$1500 he purchased Sam Shackman's quarter section for \$10,000—a very

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high price when the same land had brought only a fraction of this amount just a very few years before.

Unfortunately, wheat prices started to drop around this time, and by 1921 it had reached 60 cents per bushel. The brothers went from having \$40,000 cash in the bank to being indebted by \$18,000. They survived because of an agency set up by the government, since most farmers were in the same boat. It was called the Debt Adjustment Board. After the crop was harvested and sold, all of the money would go to the Board, which would pay each creditor 10% and give the farmer \$600. Nate left the farm, moved to Calgary, and went into the clothing business, new and second-hand. Times being hard, second-hand clothing was in high demand. Nate earned a good living.

My father had been engaged to my mother, Fannie Applebaum, for several years before the crash in wheat prices. They nevertheless went ahead with their plans and married in 1921, remaining on the farm to struggled with the heavy debt load. In a few short years, he had plummeted from the top of the heap to the bottom. Had he left the farm then, the Debt Adjustment Board would have sold it off to satisfy the creditors.

Despite the nearly insurmountable odds, they were eventually able to redeem the farm and, although Dad quit wheat farming, he was always involved in some aspect of agriculture. For fifteen years he and my mother ran their 2 Bar F Ranch (see photo, page 11) until they retired. It was located in the foothills and alpine meadows of the Livingstone Mountains, and was an idyllic setting one could not help but love. He knew each of his animals on sight and, through his knowledge and under-

standing of animal husbandry, made improvements in cattle raising that were soon adopted throughout the area. He selected the best breeding stock; his cattle were always in demand and brought the highest prices at auction.

During his lifetime my father not only cleared and broke land but farmed it; he broke horses, built roads, was a charter member of the Alberta Wheat Pool, and a delegate to the United Farmers of Alberta. Throughout their married life, my mother was his source of strength and courage and when things went wrong, they picked themselves up and started anew. He became a successful businessman and helped many people over the years. Both he and my mother were very modest people and despite the many obstacles they had overcome and the successes that were theirs, they felt that their greatest achievement was their three children. They were grateful and so very proud to see them all receive university degrees. My sisters and I feel that we were truly blessed to have had two such wonderful people for parents.

Thinking back on the years we had together as a family, a kaleidoscope of impressions flash by my inward eye. As a child looking out at the wonder of the world around me I see the silver ribbon tracks on the gumbo road that stretches for miles on the endless prairie. I hear the humming of the telephone lines and I see the standing wheat sway in the wind like ocean waves. In the stillness of a summer's morning, I hear the sound of the cricket and the meadowlark's beautiful song. I run, carrying lunch to my father, who is on a tractor plowing in a field. He stops, picks me up, and places me in his lap, and we continue in silence and I steer while he eats. His trust in me and I in him ... our spirits soar together for an eternity. ♪

— by Sarah H. Tobe —

Constable Harry of the North West Mounted

For over half a century, former Calgarians Harry Woolfe and his wife, Debbie, have resided in Vancouver. When Harry recently celebrated his 95th birthday, he bore the distinction of being the oldest surviving member of the Royal North West Mounted Police. He is also a charter member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Veterans Association.

In 1905, a new province was carved out of the Northwest Territories—Alberta. That year Jacob Woolfe, Harry's father, came to Canada seeking better opportunities. His family would follow him, in 1909, to settle in Calgary.

"The family had emigrated to London, England, from Russia in 1894," says Harry. "I was born in London on April 29th, 1899. Woolfe was not our original family name. The immigration officer could not translate my father's name, Jucha, or spell Jankel Velvel, so he gave my father the name Jacob Woolfe." His brother Shmuel Chaim came later and was given the name Samuel Hyman. The Grandfather and the other five brothers and two sisters all got the name Hyman in England.

"My father was a cabinetmaker in Russia, and later in England. Around 1911 or 1912 my father used his talents to build the first Shul and also the Mikvah in Calgary. The Shul was on Fifth Avenue East. Around 1909, he had a secondhand book store, J. Woolfe, at 324 Ninth Avenue in Calgary. Eventually he opened a small gunsmith shop on Ninth Avenue, off Second Street East. His hands were of



From the very beginnings of Alberta as a province, Calgary drew newcomers like a magnet, though for many years, some Jewish settlers would continue to shuttle between the farms of Rumsey-Trochu and the future metropolis (see stories on following pages).

gold. He made beautiful pistol handles. He made me a pistol that I value to this day. Old Calgarians would remember the shop with the slogan *Woolfe's Guns Get Wolves*.

"In those days, the streetcars were pulled by horses—trolley horses. The most vivid recollection that I have of Calgary in my youth was when we had the First Stampede, with Guy Weadick as general manager. That was in 1912. I remember that I used to sell papers on the corner of Centre Street and Eighth Avenue. Because of the Stampede, they thought the most appropriate souvenir for the public would be a little watch fob made out of leather, in the form of a pistol in a holster. Those were the days when we all used to wear pocket watches, not wrist watches. I would stand on the corner selling them at 75 cents a piece.

"As a newsboy, I used to deliver the News Telegram, the Albertan, and the Calgary Herald. Bob Edwards was the editor of the Calgary Eye Opener.

"I was a King Scout and proudly wore my badges. My schooling was limited because

I joined the Royal North-West Mounted Police when I was 17.

"The Mounties would come into my father's gunsmith shop to have their guns built or repaired. It became my ambition to join the Force. I travelled to Regina to sign up in 1916. I lied about my age. At 17, I was the youngest member in its history. My registration number was 6607 and my training began. Originally, I was trumpeter, but I did not like getting up

early in the morning and blowing reveille and being the last person up at night, blowing taps... so I tried to find a way out.

"They gave me the opportunity to elect to take my discharge from the Mounted Police or go through schooling and become a Constable. I became a Constable and I had a horse named Nipper. In those days, I earned 50 cents a day and all the oats I could steal from my horse to eat.

"After my schooling as a Constable was completed in Regina, I went to Yorkton, Saskatchewan. Harry and Sam Bronfman had the Balmoral Hotel in Yorkton and the RNWMP barracks were directly across the lane from their hotel. We used to have our meals in the Balmoral.

"The regiment patrolled far north to Fort Pelly and the borders of Athabaska and Kamsack, where I met old Pete Verigin, the

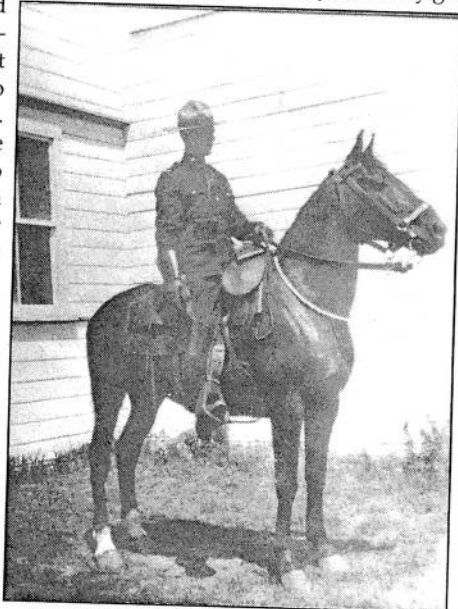
head of the Doukhobor colony; and to Canora and the towns of Wapella, Preeceville, Sturgis and north and east of Yorkton. Yorkton's population was less than 5,000 people in 1917.

"When World War I broke out, the RNWMP wanted volunteers to go overseas to fight. I volunteered and went with our special regiment, the Lord Strathcona Horse Cavalry Unit. The next time I join the army, in the cavalry, and they give the word *retreat*, I don't

want to be bothered with no damn horse, I can run faster myself.

"I went overseas to France, Belgium and parts of Germany. When I was in Belgium, I developed a serious infection. I was not wounded but I needed an operation. Operations in those days... you went in, you came out. The hospital was a house. You would look at the bed beside you that was loaded and five minutes later it was empty and then there was another fellow."

Harry Woolfe was honourably discharged in 1919, when "A" Squadron of RNWMP Overseas Cavalry Canadian Expeditionary Force was demobilized. He has a Service Medal and Overseas Medal from World War I. When the War ended, he returned to Calgary and within a few months "I started to work for Paramount Film Company located at the corner of Second Street



Harry (17) and Nipper at R.N.W.M.P. riding school, Regina, Saskatchewan, 1916

Head of the Doukhobor colony; and to Canora and the towns of Wapella, Preeceville, Sturgis and north and east of Yorkton. Yorkton's population was less than 5,000 people in 1917.

East and Eighth Avenue in the old Princess Theatre building. I started at Paramount as a shipper at \$18 a week. Then I worked with Universal in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1923. They sent me down to Kentucky. The theatres were basically just wooden shacks in mining locations and shanty towns. The train consisted of a passenger car, a baggage car and coal cars that stopped every two or three miles to load coal. It would take all day to travel 24 miles return, so I bought a horse. I had the press books in one part of my saddle-bag and my contracts in the other with my toothbrush and pistol. I had to prove that I wasn't a Revenue Officer in the hill country of Kentucky."

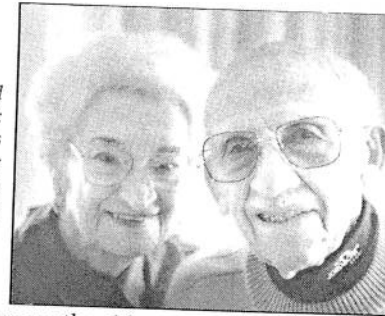
Harry Woolfe and Debbie Marks were married in New York on June 10, 1925, and resided in Cincinnati, Ohio. Debbie was the daughter of another pioneer Calgary family. She came back to be with her family in Calgary for the birth of their daughter Dianne.

"Her father was the Jewish butcher. Debbie's family was much the same as ours. We came to Calgary at approximately the same time. Debbie was one of ten children. I was one of six, three boys and three girls. We knew each other before I was in the Mounties. I wore that red uniform and was a respected individual. You know, she fell in love with that yellow stripe down my pants."

The couple returned to Calgary in the 1930s with their daughter Dianne. Harry became branch manager for RKO Films in 1938.

The Woolfes moved to Vancouver in 1943 and Harry was head of distribution in B.C. for United Artists (the movie-making corporation established by Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks). He was with United Artists for 26 years and in the motion picture business for 50 years until his retirement in 1969. He continued to work in his own

Harry and Debbie: 70 years together and going strong



business for another 16 years.

In 1966, Harry Woolfe joined the newly founded Variety Club of Western Canada. He became the bearer of membership card Number One. The Club honoured him in 1990 with their Variety Pioneer Award.

Descendants of the Calgary Woolfe and Marks families have been respected Vancouver Jewish Community workers. Harry's brother Louis Benjamin Woolfe was a science teacher in Vancouver and many will remember his sister Flori Brown and her husband Myer. Debbie's sister Bessie Diamond was also a driving force in National Council of Women and many major community projects. Her brother, Joseph Marks, was a violinist with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra for 35 years. Another sister, Hettie Abramson, has sung with the Beth Israel choir for 45 years.

The Woolfes, Harry at 95 and Debbie at 93, of sound mind and good humour, are one of Vancouver's oldest Jewish couples. In addition to their daughter, they have three grandchildren and five great grandchildren. Their 70th anniversary will be celebrated in 1995.

Sources:

Interviews with Harry and Debbie Woolfe by Sarah H. Tobe, April 15, 1994 and August 17, 1994; and by Cyril Leonoff and Meyer Freedman, Oral Histories project, Archives of The Jewish Historical Society of B.C. & Yukon, July 8, 1975.

The Sereth Brothers: Pioneers in lumber

My maternal grandfather, Henry Noah Sereth—known as “HN” to all his relatives and friends—arrived in Montreal on May 28th, 1900, at age 36 to begin a life in the “New World.” He was accompanied by his younger brother Alexander, 26. They had come from Zbarash, a small city in Galicia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where they had been in the lumber importing business. HN kept a diary from the day they left Lemberg (now Lvov) in what is now the Ukraine, until November 5th, 1904, when he was working as a salesman for the Elk Hills Lumber Company at Arrowhead, B.C. The diary records his travels and travails through much of the eastern U.S. and as far south as Alabama, his sadness at Alexander’s decision in July, 1900, to return to Europe, and his determination to remain and succeed. In 1903, HN headed west for Seattle where he found employment as a tallyman for the Western Mill Company. His diary entry for August 3rd, 1904 reads, “Seattle. I quit my job, received forty dollars and I will leave for Arrowhead, B.C. where I will be a tallyman for three dollars per day.”* This job heralded the beginning of a saga that brought the name Sereth into prominence in the North American lumber business, particularly in Western Canada.

After a year with Elk Hills, HN became a commission salesman for the company, and

* Translated from the German

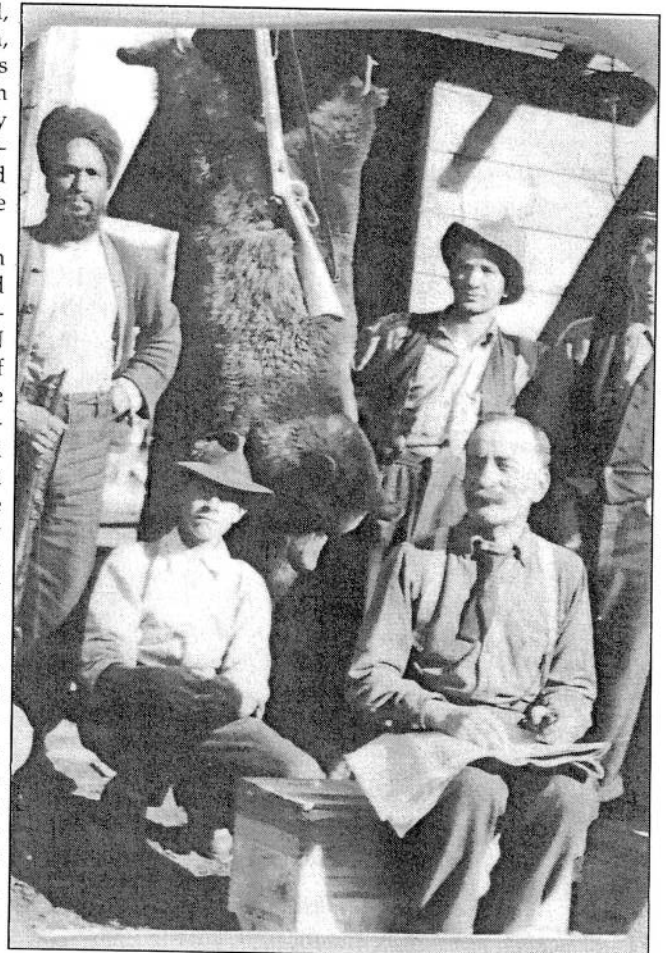
on one of his forays into Calgary, negotiated the sale of 150 cars of lumber to the Eau Claire Lumber Company. On his return to Arrowhead, he pondered the piles of abandoned sun-bleached lumber in the mill yard and it struck him that they should be saleable. HN had no difficulty purchasing the lot at a very cheap price, which he paid for with his commission on the previous sale, had the stock planed at the mill and sent it all, without prior notice, to Eau Claire. This chutzpah paid off. Because HN’s price was based on normal shipping charges on a board foot basis and the well dried lumber being consequently underweight, both sides made an exceptional deal, and Arrowhead was able to clean out its yard of rejected timber. HN cleared \$7,000, a tidy sum in 1905, which enabled him to send for his wife Rosa, their five daughters, and to persuade his brother Alexander to return.

The Sereth brothers built their first saw mill at Michel, B.C., in 1905, and by 1910 were not only buying and planing abandoned dry stock from all the sawmills in the Crows Nest Pass area, but had acquired timber licenses to do their own logging as well. In the interim, the Riverside Lumber Company was established in Calgary to retail the mill’s output, and the Southern Alberta Lumber Company to own and operate their lumberyards throughout Alberta and B.C. In 1912, the brothers incorporated Adanac Construction Company to acquire land in Hillhurst, Bridgeland and Roxboro, all areas within the city of Calgary, and the Cheadle Farming Company, which owned and farmed land just outside of the city. Unlike the other districts, Roxboro was something new: home sites with graded streets, sidewalks, curbs and electric light poles already provided and trees planted.

THE SCRIBE

My mother, Sophie Weinfield, and my aunt, Cecile Allen, (both née Sereth) received, as wedding gifts, homes in Roxboro that were built by Adanac—the two bridegrooms, John J. Weinfield and Harry J. Allen, assumed the mortgages.

By 1916, the two Sereth families were well established Calgarians and had accumulated considerable wealth. HN was a founding member of the House of Jacob Synagogue and donated much of the lumber for its construction, and my grandmother Rosa was a founding member of the Calgary Symphony and very active in the growing Jewish community. However, in that year, a piece of federal legislation proved disastrous for the Riverside Lumber Company—a moratorium was placed on debts owed by farmers who were serving in the armed forces. A large percentage of Riverside’s customers qualified under the act. This loss of revenue caused Adanac to forfeit its properties through tax default. Hard times followed for the brothers, to be eased only in 1919, when they made a deal with the federal government to supply the timber for the construction of wharves in Montreal. They were assisted in this endeavour by one Richard B. Bennett, Member of Parliament for Calgary East, who was also the



Henry Sereth at sawmill,
with staff and bear.

“HN” is seated with pipe and newspaper.

company lawyer. How these matters were arranged is another story, but the Sereth brothers made a substantial profit on this deal and

the Southern Alberta Lumber Company was resuscitated.

During the war years, much spruce timber had been logged along the B.C. coast for use in airplane construction. Many logs were rejected and abandoned. The Sereths negotiated the purchase of some 18 million feet of rejects along the Skeena River, which were floated to Vancouver. Some of the timber had been destroyed by teredos (a salt water worm), but the Ford Motor Company bought what was salvageable for use in car construction. The "Skeena Deal" fully re-established the Sereths, and in 1922 the Southern Alberta Lumber Company went international, with its head office in Seattle, where HN directed the company as president. Alexander moved to Vancouver with offices in the Pacific Building. The company advertised as "Exporters of Fir, Spruce and Hemlock Lumber." Between 1923 and 1925, the Sereth brothers were the biggest lumber wholesalers in Canada, if not North America, handling up to 50 million board feet of lumber per month. They shipped the first cargo of lumber from B.C. shores to Japan for the rebuilding of Tokyo after the earthquake of 1923. The Sereth brothers were now millionaires—but not for long.

During the 1920's, a real estate boom developed in Florida, creating a tremendous demand for lumber. With their sources of stock and a continuing ship charter with US Steel, the Sereth brothers were shipping as much lumber as was physically possible to Florida when, in 1925, disaster struck. Four of the brothers' cargoes were sitting on the dock when a hurricane blew up and swept them all to sea. With no hurricane insurance, the Sereth brothers found themselves in serious financial

difficulty. The lumber had been on consignment to a U.S. company that had allowed advance drawings prior to final sale, leaving the brothers indebted not only to that company but to the supplying mills as well. In 1926, two of the Canadian mills took legal action, forcing the Southern Alberta Lumber Company into bankruptcy. The Sereth brothers were wiped out.

In time, HN regained his footing as a lumber broker in Seattle. He retired in 1935, but his retirement years were far from idle. His five daughters and many grandchildren kept him occupied, as did his efforts in bringing to the United States many relatives who otherwise might have perished in the Holocaust. He had a marvelous sense of humour—a cousin of mine recalls the story of how our grandfather, while walking along a railroad track at dusk on his way back to one of his isolated mills, suddenly came face to face with a bear. Certain that this was his last moment, he began to recite the Shema, with his eyes fixed on the huge animal. The bear, up against the immutable Word, bolted into the woods! Henry Noah Sereth died in Seattle in 1944.

Alexander, ten years younger than HN, went into business as a lumber broker on Vancouver Island, and by 1941 had created the beginnings of another lumber empire, the A. Sereth Lumber Co. Ltd., with its head office in Vancouver, owned and operated by Eureka Sawmills Ltd. and Parks Logging Ltd., both in Nanaimo.

Alexander died in Vancouver in 1953. In 1956, his son Arthur sold the assets of the A. Sereth Lumber Co. Ltd. to the Puget Sound Pulp and Timber Co. of Bellingham, Washington, thus ending a proud family association with Canada's lumber industry that had lasted over fifty years. ♣

— by Julian B. Smith —

The Mayor of Eighth Avenue

My father Harry was born in Gomel, Belarus, in 1894, one of a family of eleven. He had three brothers, Abraham, Morris, and Billy, and seven sisters, Eva, Annie, Bessie, Esther, Fanny, Sarah, and Bella. His father Judah and mother Chassia lived with their children in a small house on a huge estate 20 miles from Gomel where Judah was manager of a vast apple orchard. The owner of the estate, apparently a congenial and benevolent gentleman, was absent most of the year, leaving my grandfather in charge.

While the children were young, a *yeshiva bokher* lived with the family as a tutor, but when the eldest child reached school age, my grandfather decided to move into Gomel, where Abraham could go to Gymnasium. Remaining on good terms with the estate owner, he arranged to buy the entire fruit crop and resell it. In the spring when the blossoms were at their height, he would assess the future crop and make an offer, praying there would be no drought or hailstorms during the summer.

When the fruit was ripe, he would move his entire family back to the estate where all summer long they would pick, sort and pack the apples and send them off to Moscow. Of course, he had to hire extra pickers, young girls and women mainly, up whose skirts all the young fellows, my father and uncles included, enjoyed peeking while the girls were high on the ladders filling their baskets. When the harvesting was over, the family would pile into a wagon and head back to Gomel. Ac-

cording to my father, the family did not live in the ghetto but in the centre of the city in a house he rented from a Russian.

In the summer of 1903, with discontent among the peasants rising, Czar Nicholas II once again distracted them from their misery by blaming the Jews. Egged on by petty officials, the hooligans and riff-raff of Gomel staged a pogrom, attacking Jews in their homes and synagogues, burning and looting. They attacked women, clubbed children, and cut down the men. Those who could, hid in cellars, praying that they would not be discovered. Others escaped by foot or in wagons.

With grandfather Judah away at the estate, Grandmother Chassia and her eleven children hid in their cellar. Every day for a week the Russian landlord or his wife brought them food and water. When things had quieted down a bit, the landlord suggested they would be safer at the estate 20 miles away. The next day he arranged for them to be hidden in a big hay cart and driven there. On the way, however, they encountered a crowd of hooligans dressed in black, brandishing sticks and throwing stones. Abraham was hit on the head and fell off the back of the cart. Morris quickly jumped off to help him and both ran like deer into the woods while the driver, whipping the horses on, drove the hay wagon right through the hooligans, scattering them as it lumbered past. Three days later, Abraham and Morris turned up unscathed at the estate where the family had found temporary refuge.

When it was safe for the family to return to Gomel, they found their house ransacked, their furniture reduced to sticks, and their beds a wilderness of feathers. Then and there Judah resolved that he and his family would leave Russia to make a life for themselves in the New World. They would go to Calgary,

because his friend and neighbour, Charlie Malkin, had left Gomel the year before and had already established himself in a little shop on Stephen Avenue, later to be urbanized into "Eighth Avenue."

Grandfather Judah decided to take 15-year-old Morris with him, leaving Harry behind with grandmother Chassia and the other children, intending to send for them as soon as he got settled. And so Judah and Morris left Russia by way of the Baltic Sea, sailing to Bremen and then on to Halifax, steerage. They landed early in 1908. There they boarded a C.P.R. hard class colonist car and began the longest train journey of their lives.

In Calgary, Judah learned that the amazing story Charlie Malkin had written him about Canada was true: 160 acres of land could be bought for just ten dollars. Not only that, Morris was also eligible. Father and son wasted no time. They found their way to the Land Commissioner's Office and there waited in a long queue for almost two days. When their turn came, the official—or "balaboss," as my grandfather called him—was

only too pleased to oblige, granting them a splendid half section near Two Hills.

Grandfather Judah laid down his twenty dollars. The clerk asked his name. He replied, "Judah Shumiatcher." The "balaboss" asked how "Shumiatcher" was spelled. My grandfather looked at him bewildered. The clerk, shak-

What's in a Name?

The origin of the Shumiatcher family name deserves mention. After the destruction of the Second Temple, most Jews had made their way along the Levant and across the length and breadth of Europe. Many settled beside the Rhine and there established flourishing communities. Among the cities in which such Jewish communities prospered were Speyer, Worms and Mainz. By the end of the 11th Century, these communities were firmly established and municipal authorities were well disposed toward the Jews and granted them economic rights and a high degree of autonomy. Accordingly, Jews assumed prominent roles as traders and entrepreneurs, and they maintained a high standard of living. Jewish cultural and religious life developed first in Mainz, which became a leading Torah centre, and then overflowed into Speyer and Worms.

Rabbi Gershom Ben Judah Me'or ha Golah worked hard to weld the three communities into a federation. He convened a synod on the Rhine that was attended by learned representatives from these cities, for two centuries, remained closely associated. Collectively they were called SHUM, an abbreviation used to designate Speyer, Worms and Mainz, according to the first letters of the Hebrew names of each of these cities. With the passing years, SHUM's doctrinal supremacy declined, but the communities continued to exist, despite sporadic persecution.

Later, at the end of the 17th Century, when Peter the Great decided to transform his medieval country into a modern industrial nation, he invited and imported foreign artisans, tradesmen, weavers and scholars to Russia. Among those who came to Russia during his reign were many Jews, some of whom were from Speyer, Worms and Metz of the old federation of SHUM. They settled around Gomel, becoming known as the Shumiatchers. The village of "Shumiach" can still be found on old Russian maps.

ing his head, wrote their names as J. and M. Smith and the two left the office, happily clutching their homestead papers. Soon thereafter, my grandfather and young Morris, full of enthusiasm and hope, set out with a horse and wagon loaded with supplies and equipment, their new names on papers tucked into their pockets, to work their new land in the new world.

But grandfather Judah knew about orchards; he knew nothing about clearing land and planting wheat. Nevertheless, he and Morris pitched a tent, dug a well, cut firewood and began to clear a patch of land on which to build a sod shack, without windows, where they would spend the winter. And what a winter it was. Somehow they managed to survive, but they were unable to clear the required amount of land in order to retain title to the property, which they lost by the end of the year. They then moved back to Calgary, where they found work in the Riverside Lumber Company owned by the Sereth brothers (*see previous story*). The Sereth brothers took a liking to my grandfather and loaned him the money to bring the rest of the family over.

Grandfather Judah wrote glowing letters to my grandmother in Gomel telling of the plenteous opportunities in Canada and instructing his son Abraham to prepare the family for the voyage to Halifax and the trip across Canada. Their ship docked at Halifax in April 1909, and when they finally arrived in Calgary, my grandfather and Morris were waiting at the station.

According to my cousin Morris Shumiatcher of Regina, "As soon as they alighted from the wooden CPR colonist coach, my grandfather Judah took Abraham, my father, aside and told him in Russian that his

name was no longer Shumiatcher but Smith, that Morris was also Smith, and from now on the whole family would be known as Smith. It was the Canadian way."

Abraham—the student of the family, who had been studying English day and night for the last year—now told his father that he knew how to spell Shumiatcher in English and that he was going to keep the family name.

And so it was. His three brothers were Smiths; his seven sisters were Smiths, his father and mother were Smiths, but Abe stubbornly remained a Shumiatcher.

With the rest of his family safe in Canada, Judah now offered his services as Shamus of the Beth Jacob Synagogue, which had been founded the year before his arrival. The tasks of maintaining the place, safeguarding the Torahs and the prayer books, and keeping the building tidy, all fell to my grandfather. And when the Hebrew Free School or Talmud Torah was organized in 1912, he was one of the first teachers.

With the five eldest children working at various jobs, the family was able to take over a small confectionery called The Wave Ice Cream Parlour. But as storekeepers they made neither waves nor profit. What with treating all their friends to cigars, cigarettes and ice cream, they went broke within a year and a half and lost everything they had invested.

My father Harry worked in the store for a while, but when he turned 15, his older brother Morris, 17, who had been working in a furniture factory, was able to get him a job there. The factory produced frames for upholstered furniture and operated on a quasi-assembly line basis. Harry was put to work on the assembly line, hammering nails in as the furniture frames came by. He had never wielded a hammer before and periodically he

The Shumiatchers, Calgary, 1919: Harry and Hilda, third row, fourth and fifth from left; Judah with Chassia holding Annette, seated second row, centre; Morris seated second row, left; Abraham, fourth row, right; his son Morris, seated first row, second from right.



would miss a nail or hammer one in crookedly. Perhaps even more than periodically. Every time this happened, the foreman would come up to Harry, take the hammer from his hand, spread his left hand out on the table and bang the hammer down on one of his fingers. Being a greenhorn from Russia, Harry thought that this was the way things were done in Canada and so said nothing, but suffered in silence. Four days passed and at last Friday rolled around. Everyone gather around the Sabbath table. When Morris saw Harry's battered hand, he was infuriated. On Monday morning, Harry took his place on the assembly line. Morris kept an eye on him, and when he saw the foreman take the hammer from Harry and spread Harry's left hand out on the table, Morris dashed up, grabbed the foreman, dragged him outside, and beat him. Both

Morris and Harry made a quick exit and began to look around for new jobs.

Harry got one delivering papers and soon was able to open a shoeshine stand which he operated out of a doorway on Eighth Avenue, the main street of Calgary. By dint of hard work over the years, he expanded and developed that shoeshine parlour into two of the finest news and tobacco shops anywhere in Western Canada; HARRY'S NEWS AND TOBACCO at 109 Eighth Avenue West and WORLD NEWS located a block away.

My cousin Morris recalls that, "In the depths of the depression, Harry gave me my first after-school job. At Harry's News and Tobacco Shop—a landmark as important as the Hudson's Bay Store and the Bank of Montreal on Calgary's Eighth Avenue—he put me to work displaying the magazines along the

sidewalk on Saturday mornings and sweeping the floors with green dustbane. There was the *British Mail* to sort and place in every customer's box. Each week they came at a fixed time, as though to their post office, to pick up their newspaper. If the store was out of them, Harry would run to the other shop, even in forty-below weather, to get his customers their papers. For years, Harry served the English and Scottish settlers who came to his shop for their English pipes and English tobacco. But most of all, they came to pick up a cheerful word from the young, successful Jewish lad from Russia who made them feel more at home in his shop than they felt at any other place in town. Harry knew every one of his customers by name; what is more, he knew everything about their families. His photograph appeared on every fifth page of the Calgary telephone directory, and so well-known and so well-loved in Calgary did he become that he was called the "Mayor of Eighth Avenue."

In 1936 my father and mother decided to move to Vancouver, for two reasons. First, they had fallen in love with the city on their first visit in 1926. Second, it had something Calgary didn't: a university, which my sister Annette, who had just turned sixteen, was keen to attend. The year before, my father had gone to England and arranged to become the exclusive agent in Vancouver for all British newspapers, subsequently setting up the IMPERIAL NEWS COMPANY to handle these papers, as well as other American and Canadian magazines. And so we all piled into his new Dodge sedan and drove west, my father turning around every so often along the way to sing/ask, "Is everybody happy?", to which Annette and I and my mother Hilda would reply with gusto, "Well, I should say!" ☞

The Switzer Family Saga - 1

— by Lola Aceman Pauer —

Grand Matriarch

In 1905, when Poland became unsafe, Bella (née Switzer) and Abraham Singer left their homeland for Canada. Reading that the Canadian Pacific Railroad was offering land in the west, the couple stayed only a short time in Toronto before moving to a farm in Calgary. But before her departure from Poland, Bella had made a promise to the ten brothers and sisters she had left behind; as soon as possible, she would try and send for as many as possible of them, to join her in Canada.

Bella kept her promise. In Poland for a visit, she set in motion a family exodus the likes of which had never been seen before! In 1910, on her return to Calgary, Abraham and Bella bought a building. They converted it into a 20-room boarding house. Working 16 hours a day, she started saving with the CPR Immigrant Bank. When she had her first \$100, the price of a ticket from Poland, her first relative, nephew Charlie Switzer, came to Canada. Today, at 98 years young, he resides in Calgary. (LOCAL INTEREST: his daughter is Frances Panar and he is stepfather to Billy Davids).

The promise of continuing the family immigration was now extended to those relatives living in Canada. Each one was responsible for earning and saving enough money to bring another family member to Calgary. Abraham and Bella had by now acquired three boarding houses and between 1911 and 1949, in keeping with her "dream," welcomed an astounding 800 members of the Switzer family to Canada!

THREE GENERATIONS:
Bella Singer, left; daughters
Diane Aceman, beside her,
and Rose Franks, right;
Diane's three children,
(from left) Lola, Paul, Byron;
and (front, centre) Rose's
daughter, Leslie; 1943.



Two relatives, unable to leave Poland during the war years, survived the Holocaust. The story is told that before they were taken to the camps, they were asked to remember "Bella Singer, Calgary, Canada." Of these survivors, Sid Cyngiser now lives in Calgary, while Joe Aceman resides here in Vancouver.

Bella Singer's husband Abraham passed away in 1942, but she continued with her business and saving lives. Her charitable work is well known across Canada. Many family members now reside in British Columbia. Diane Aceman and Rose Franks are her daughters and, along with grandchildren, great-grandchildren, great-great-grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and great nieces and great nephews, they form part of the more than 900 family members who live all over the world. Today's Singer, Switzer, Bleviss, Belzberg, Fishman, Aceman, Cyngiser, and Aizenman families owe their very existence to Bella and Abraham Singer.

Bella Singer died in 1983 at the age of 103. The "Mema," as she was affectionately called, was a simply beautiful woman whose caring brought happiness to those she touched. ♣

The Switzer Family Saga - 2

— by Miriam Switzer Winston —

A Loving Couple

My father, Meyer Switzer, and my mother, Etta Bleviss, were cousins, born in the same year, 1889, in the same town, Radom, near Warsaw. By the age of twenty they had fallen in love with each other and were engaged to be married. But before the marriage could be solemnized, Meyer was conscripted into the Russian infantry. In spite of family entreaties, Etta would

marry no one else and was determined to wait for him. The eldest daughter, she watched all her younger sisters marry, but Etta remained adamant. In all, she waited nine years. At the end of World War I, Meyer returned and they were happily married, both now being a mature 29, and the next year their first daughter, Lily, was born.

By 1921, my father's youngest brother, Charlie, who had immigrated to Calgary some years earlier and was living in Auntie Bella and Uncle Abraham Singer's rooming house, had been able to save enough money to send them tickets. Auntie Bella Singer's younger brother Meyer was also to come with them.

The trip across Canada on the train was long and difficult. There was no money and little food. In each large city—Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg—the Jewish people met the trains and brought food and small amounts of money.

When the four of them finally reached Calgary, they moved into the Singers' rooming house, paying rent as soon as father was able to find work, which he did at the

Horodezky farm in Rumsey. My mother and Lily stayed behind with Auntie Bella.

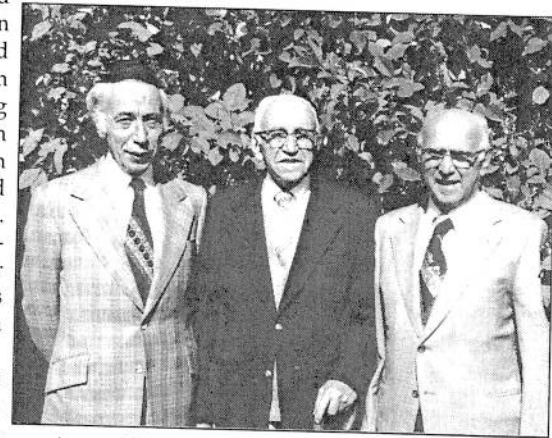
While my father was working in Rumsey, his younger sister, Aunt Lily, whom he described as having a "face like a picture," arrived in Canada and came out to visit him. It was not long after that she and Nate Horodezky were married. Later she would move from the farm to a large house in Calgary, taking in her younger brother Ralph and my grandparents,

who lived with them until they died.

When there was no farm work to do in Rumsey, my father got a job laying railroad track for \$1 a day. It was gruelling work and he soon fell ill. Fortunately his youngest brother Dave had recently arrived from Poland and he took over the job so that father could feed the family until he was well enough to work again.

Eventually my father moved back to Calgary to be with my mother and sister. My mother had a hard

life. Not long after arriving in Calgary she and Lily contracted smallpox and later diphtheria. They were both extremely ill and had to be quarantined. Every day my father would leave



AIDING NEW IMMIGRANTS: Newcomers most often were refused loans by the banks, for lack of collateral. Ralph (left), Meyer (centre), and Charlie Switzer—along with Avram Belzberg, the Sheftel brothers, and others—started the Polish Jewish Loan Association, which made loans to those who joined, at no interest. This helped the new immigrants to get established. In the last ten years, this organization has been revitalized and is now the Calgary Jewish Loan Association.

them fresh water and food in the milk cupboard by the door. Some years later tragedy struck when Lily, only twelve years old, died of an inoperable brain tumor. My parents had six children in all: Lily, Betty, Dinah, Bill, Anna, and me, Miriam.

As the years passed my parents moved several times. Father and his partner Louis Belzberg went into business together. They bought a horse and wagon and they went around the countryside buying and selling used furniture or anything they could get. Eventually, as business improved, they established The Capitol Furniture Store on Eighth Avenue East in downtown Calgary. They sold furniture and held "new and used" auctions. The Belzberg/Switzer partnership lasted 65 years, to end only when The Capitol Furniture Store was taken over by the City of Calgary. It became the Glenbow Museum.

My parents' partnership lasted for 66 years. When my mother was in the Beverly Nursing Home, my father came to live with us. He walked across the street to see her every afternoon, bring her something to eat and the Jewish newspaper. They held hands, talked and read together for two or three hours. Then they would hug and kiss and say good-bye for another day.

When my father died in 1984, he was, at 95, the oldest living Jewish World War I veteran in Canada. After his death, my mother would ask me, over and over, "Is Daddy still waiting for me?" I would remind her that she had waited for him for nine years and I was sure he would wait for her. As it happened, he had to wait only two years.

By 1986, these loving pioneers had contributed to the Canadian population five children, 18 grandchildren, and ten great grandchildren. ♫

OFFICE UPDATE

Thanks for the Grants!!!

The following approved grant applications will enable us to carry out our archival functions and to initiate new projects:

Canadian Council of Archives Grant: \$5,185.

This Government of Canada contribution to the Arrangement and Description Backlog Reduction Cost-Shared Cooperative program will help us relate our Archivist's work with the Frank/Landauer collections.

VanCity Corporate Donations Program Grant: \$5,000.

VanCity has given positive endorsement to our Jewish War Veterans Oral History Project as part of their "Bridging and Enriching Generations: Supporting Links with our Community's Elders" program.

The project will be sponsored by the Jewish Historical Society of B.C. in cooperation with the Shalom Branch of the Royal Canadian Legion. Seniors and youth will be encouraged in creative and meaningful collaboration to create a lasting record of the experiences of Jewish veterans through oral histories, transcriptions and publication.

David Wolochow of the Legion has already conducted a number of oral history interviews, and Cissie Eppel, herself a Legion member, is expected to assist with this project.

Community Archives Assistance Program Grant: \$2,500.

This program will make funds available to help the Society move its archives to larger premises and develop systems which will make the archival collections more accessible to the public.

"**MORE THAN GOLD.**" We have just received a new supply of our popular video, "MORE THAN GOLD" (which traces the settlement of Jewish people in British Columbia and Yukon from 1858 to the present).

We invite those who have been waiting quite a while for copies of this video to call in your order, or drop in to our office and pick one up.

The price is: \$29.95 each, for non-members
\$24.95 each, for members



by Earl Hardin

"Every Adult in Town Was a Surrogate Parent"

One of the most focused Jewish communities in Western Canada assembled in and around Vegreville, an agriculturally based town 95 kilometers east of Edmonton. Before the population passed the 2,000 mark in the 1940's, 30 Jewish families had lived in the area. At the conclusion of World War II about ten families remained in the town of Vegreville alone, closely knit by synagogue activity and their enthusiasm for the establishment of the State of Israel.

There had been a Jewish presence in Vegreville ever since the town was relocated beside a new railway line in 1906, the year the first Jewish settler, Philip Seigler, arrived. He was the proprietor of a livery barn and delivered mail from Vegreville to St. Paul de Metis. This was done under the most precarious and difficult conditions—it took three days to make a one-way trip. In 1911, two more Jewish settlers came, Joshua Newhouse and Joseph Shaw, who formed a partnership and opened a general store. The Newhouse family then moved to Lamont but the Shaw family remained and together with three brothers, Moses, Roy and Morris, took over the Clements and Son store for several years. Joe Shaw was

noted for his activities in the town and acted as a Councillor for many years.

In 1917, the Harry Olyans came from Edmonton and Abe and Tanya Klimoff from Winnipeg. Together they took over the Vegreville Bakery.

By 1919, the Jewish Community in Vegreville had been formalized with a synagogue on 47th Avenue, off 49th Street.

After a few years, Mr. Olyan and family left to live in Chipman, only to return and take over the wholesale grocery still known today as Central Wholesale Limited.

Lewis Bricker and family came from New York and settled in Lavoy but they were considered members of the Community. Morris Milner ran a store on Main Street next to the National Hotel and also ran a soap factory. The Harry Bloomfields briefly owned a wholesale grocery. Saul Laub and family came in 1921 and had a tailor shop near the bakery. The Segal family came in 1924. Mr. Segal was a painter of great skill. An intelligent yet modest man, his interior decorations in the synagogue to be built in 1931 would be retained for the entire life of the structure.

Other members of the Olyan family came to town: Mr. and Mrs. M. Olyan, sons Pat and Saul and their families. In 1927, Louis Milner and family came from Lamont and took over the National Hotel, changing the name to the Prince Edward Hotel, and also ran a general store on the premises.

Through succeeding years, several Jew-

ish families came, stayed for a while and moved away—Louis Berg, Rabbi Golubchuk, the Shtabsky and Loomer families, and Dr. and Mrs. Billig.

The Myer Adlers came in 1927. Abe and Sarah Wener came from Vermilion with their family: Joe, Rose and Charlie Podersky, Laura and Earl Lyons, Zillie and Sam Binder, Emil, Sonja and Miriam. Emil played hockey with the senior club when they won a provincial championship. In 1929, Dr. Sam Hardin and his bride Marie arrived and he started a dental practice above the Wener Bakery. The Tunis family (see separate story) came from Lamont, settled first in Lavoy, and then in Vegreville in 1939.

By 1931, the Community had grown in numbers and the decision was made to build a larger place of prayer, on Main Street and 49th Avenue. With its high ceiling, embellished with Mr. Segal's graceful designs, the acoustics were sensational. There was also a large basement auditorium where Bar Mitzvah and Community festival celebrations were held.

George Black came from Holden and operated Black Motors. The Jack Kleins came in 1931 with their sons, Allan and Hymie. Both became hockey stars, and one season led the Vegreville Rangers to a provincial championship. Other arrivals included the Ernie Panars, Joe Panars, Joe Simburgs, and the Goldsand family, who farmed near old Vegreville. Ethyl (Simburg) Riskin was there for the duration of World War II while her husband Sam was overseas as an army dentist. Sol and Bessie Lucow came in 1948, the Vinsky family in 1951, and Roy and Esther Taback with sons Joe and Bob in 1955. George and Hanna (Milner) Smith also spent the years 1949-52 in Vegreville.

However, the Community reached its zenith in the 1940's. The synagogue was packed for holidays, not only by residents of the town, but also by "landsmen" from all the villages within a radius of 80 kilometers. Harry Olyan was the recognized head of the congregation and Oscar Tunis the secretary-treasurer. No rabbi was necessary; Abe Klimoff and Jack Klein led the prayers with the most wonderful voices and warmest personalities. Oscar Tunis and Sam Hardin made sure those in the back rows were paying attention. And who could ever forget Louis Bricker who at Yom Kippur used to bring the congregation to tears with his magnificent operatic voice and dramatic presence?

In the foyer of the synagogue was a classroom where Monday through Friday Mrs. Becky Olyan ran Cheder classes—strictly as a volunteer—for all the youngsters, teaching Yiddish, davening, and Jewish history. She was filled with praise for the Zionist pioneers, expounding the biographies of Theodore Hertzl, Chaim Weizmann and M. Ussishkin. It seemed that all the kids in the generation of those Chedar classes were boys, and half the group consisted of the four handsome Adler brothers. Jack Klein—also as a volunteer—taught the Bar Mitzvah haftorahs with loving care.

The establishment of the State of Israel was the highest priority. All the women worked enthusiastically in the Rose Bricker Hadassah Chapter. Naturally, the Community felt a more personal involvement when Joe Tunis and Hymie Klein took off to fight in the War of Independence. Such was the interest, and the level of contribution, that speakers from Eretz Yisrael would take a side trip from the big cities to stop in Vegreville. These gatherings were usually held in the Olyan home

*Passing down The Word:
Oscar Tunis helps
grandson Mickey
carry the burden
of the Torah on
his fledgling shoulders
(Harry Olyan in
background).
Simchat Torah,
Vegreville Synagogue,
1954.*



and no Jewish man, woman or teenager would miss the event.

There was no such enthusiasm when the religious fund raisers came. When a phone call came from the next town warning that the "Shnorrer" was on his way, word swept like wildfire from store to store down the two-block commercial stretch of Main Street, and all the merchants disappeared somewhere. Only Sam Hardin was stuck in his office with patients, and the Hardins usually had the privilege of having the man to dinner.

Another ritual was the weekly arrival of the Kosher meat shipment from Edmonton, which came by bus when no one had some other reason to go to the city.

Despite the dedication to Jewish issues, many participated in the community at large. Harry Olyan was on the hospital board and was for a time chairman of the school board. George Black was a town Councillor and was instrumental in the building of the first swimming pool. Oscar Tunis was on the board of the provincial Boy Scout organization, and along with Sam Hardin, was a founding member of the Vegreville Rotary Club. Sam Hardin was very involved with the Masonic Lodge and went on to become the first Jewish Alberta Grand Master. Marie Hardin was a fixture in Eastern Star, the Hospital Auxiliary, and I.O.D.E. Bessie Tunis was president at the Women's Institute. (continued on page 33)

A Vegreville Memoir by Lee Kramer

Oscar Tunis served in the Polish army during the First World War. Just before hostilities ceased, he was taken prisoner and detained in Italy for three years. Shortly after being released, he married Bessie Halpern in Poland in 1921.

In 1926, Oscar emigrated to Canada and, in 1927, was followed by his wife Bessie and their two children, Lee and Joe. He found employment in Lamont, Alberta until he started his own business in 1929 in Lavoy, a village eight miles east of Vegreville, population 150, where only one other Jewish family lived. The business consisted of a grocery store and a Massey-Harris farm machinery agency.

The family moved to Vegreville in 1939 and became very active in the Synagogue and other Jewish institutions. Their second daughter, Polly, was born in 1939.

In August of that year, Oscar Tunis and a Ukrainian boyhood friend from Poland, Fred Muzyka, formed a lasting partnership. Buying out a general store in Vegreville, they continued in business together until they both retired at the end of 1971. Although both Oscar and Bessie and Mr. and Mrs. Muzyka have since passed away, the children of both families have kept in touch and retained their friendship to this day.

The Jewish community in Vegreville was very vibrant and active, consisting of about 30 families from the town and its surrounding area. Oscar Tunis served as their Secretary-Treasurer for 15 years. As well, both Oscar and Bessie were very diligent workers in the general community—Oscar was a Charter Member of the Vegreville Rotary Club, serving as its Secretary for eight years; a Life Member of the Vegreville Elks Lodge; and a member of the Provincial Board of the Boy Scouts Association. Bessie was a Charter Member and Past President of the Rose Bricker Chapter of Hadassah, Past President of the Women's Institute, Life Member of the Order of the Royal Purple, and member of the Vegreville Hospital Auxiliary.

It was a close-knit community, always observing the holidays and special occasions and hosting guest speakers who came on behalf of the Jewish National Fund, United Israel Appeal, and Hadassah-Wizo. Saturday nights were the scene of rummy games in each other's homes—the betting limit being 10 cents and no more!

In 1948, son Joe, who was attending the University of British Columbia, volunteered for Machal in Israel. Going on to serve with the Israel Defence Forces during the War of Liberation, he remained in Israel, married, and is now the father of three children and grandfather of six.

Daughter Lee moved to Vancouver in 1947 and is now Mrs. Arthur Kramer, still residing in Vancouver. Polly came to Vancouver in 1959, was married here, and is now Mrs. Howard Baker, living in Seattle, Washington. The Bakers have one daughter and one grandchild.

With most of their family living on the West Coast, Oscar and Bessie sold their store in 1971 and retired in Vancouver. In June 1973, an era in the history of the Vegreville Jewish Community came to an end when the property of the Synagogue was sold and the building demolished.

At a final gathering in the Synagogue on June 10th, 1973, the present members of the community were joined in a reunion with former members and their descendants. Members recalled the history of the community since 1906, after which Oscar Tunis conducted Mincha services (see photo next page), the final service in the Synagogue, which ended with the blowing of the Shofar.

The proceeds of the sale of the property were forwarded to the United Israel Appeal of Canada with the request that the funds be used towards the building of a Synagogue in Israel. This was done. Today there is a Synagogue in Alumim, Israel, with a plaque inscribed as follows:

"Dedicated to Alumim by the Members of the Vegreville Hebrew Association of Vegreville, Alberta, Canada, during the 1973 Yom Kippur War"

In 1968 Sam Hardin published the first history of the town, a collection of material gleaned mostly from the archives of the Vegreville Observer.

By this time, numbers were beginning to diminish. After considerable discussion, a decision was made in 1973 to sell the synagogue property, which had become very valuable. Before agreement could be reached about disposal of the proceeds, the Yom Kippur War broke out and in an instant the money was off to Israel. It was eventually used to build a synagogue there.

For the next three years, high holidays services were conducted at the Masonic Temple, and then all those who stayed joined Edmonton congregations. The Milner sefer torah was given to the Provincial Museum. The Hardin sefer torah was presented to the Beth Shalom Synagogue.

By the late 1980's, only two families remained. Nipper and Essie Olyan still ran the Central Wholesale, the largest grocery distributor in eastern Alberta. Sid and Doreen Adler operated a much expanded and modernized Adler's Department Store.

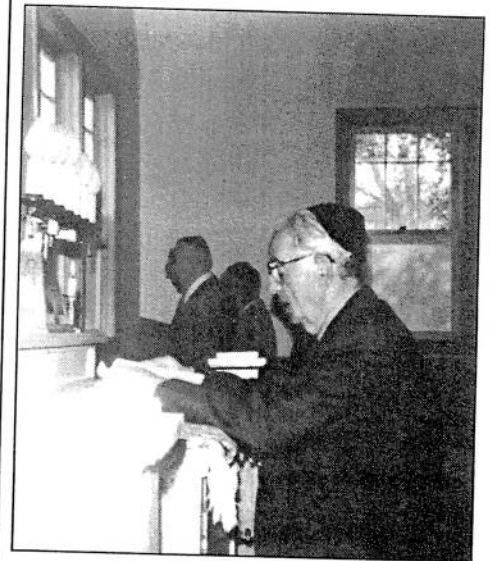
Among those Vancouver residents who still identify their origins in Vegreville are Joseph Segal, Lee (Tunis) Kramer (see story previous page), Helen (Laub) Weinstein, Hannah (Milner) Smith, Nathan Smith, Simma (Milner) Holt, Miriam (Wener) Bromberg, Ida (Wener) Moss, Joel and Brian Wener, and Marie, Herschel and Earl Hardin. Coming from nearby Viking, Bill, Sophie and Paul Comisarow also now reside in Vancouver.

Hopefully, a childhood in that sort of close-knit community leads to a sense of identity and self-confidence. It couldn't be put any

better than it was by Simma Holt in a 1974 Vancouver Sun editorial written when the news carried stories about a flood in Vegreville. In the midst of her column she reminisced, "We knew our parents' pride when they saw our joy and knew we were secure within the framework of their discipline and love. Every adult in the town was a surrogate parent; they reprimanded us if we misbehaved..." Indeed, in that small Jewish community, every adult assumed the mantle of protector, mentor, and disciplinarian for each of us. ♣

Sources:

"A History of the Jewish Community in Vegreville," in *The Vegreville Observer*, June 28, 1973, page 2. Simma Holt, "History of Greater Vegreville," in *The Vancouver Sun*, May 2, 1974, page 38. Dr. Samuel H. Hardin's history of Vegreville, 1968.



End of an era: Oscar Tunis conducting final Mincha Service at Vegreville Synagogue, June 10, 1973 (see story previous page).

by Hannah Hirt

Fanny Samuels: A Celebration of Creativity

I first interviewed Fanny Samuels five years ago as part of an ongoing project for the Jewish Historical Society to record the histories of our senior citizens. Of Fanny's many qualities that impressed me at that time, the one that I found most remarkable was the outpouring of creative works that had seemed to emanate from her spirit and from the ends of her fingers since childhood. When I went to visit her this week before finishing this article, I wondered: now that Fanny was 98 years old, was she still able to express herself in this way?

The nurse at the Louis Brier Home unlocked Fanny's door for me when she didn't respond to my knocking, and there was Fanny, asleep, and two inches from her hands was a needlework project in progress—a beautiful challah cover in white satin on which she was embroidering large Hebrew lettering using gorgeous metallic threads—a feat in itself. This, in a nutshell, describes Fanny Samuel's life—a life of self-imposed goals and a dedication to beautiful creations.

Fanny was born in Poland, the first child of one of the arranged marriages that were the custom in those days. She described her mother as coming from a cultured family. Extreme poverty characterized her father's family. When her maternal grandfather was able to get a job as a shoet in Lugansk, Ukraine, she was taken as an infant by her mother to live with him. Her father, meanwhile, was taken into army service for 5½ years. Fanny was

raised by her grandparents while her mother went to work as a "white seamstress." This meant that she sewed and embroidered all their fine linens and bedding while living in their homes. The modelling for her life's work began from birth—women create beautiful things. Her first brother was born when she was 3½. Fanny described a series of pogroms perpetrated on the Jews of her town. She remembers in great detail being hidden by neighbours under sheep hides, and travelling to and from Poland by very treacherous means to escape the slaughters.

In 1907, her father, Chaim Schloss, left for England and then for Winnipeg, where a stranger he met in England told him to go! Other family members had gone to New York. Fanny, her brother, and her mother followed. She described spending three weeks in Antwerp where, when she was asked by other children to join them in street games, her mother thrust a crochet hook and thread into her hands rather than allow her to play. "Idle hands lead to trouble" was imprinted early on Fanny's mind.

The family didn't know a soul in Winnipeg and Fanny amused herself crocheting. Fanny remembers being assisted by a Mr. Cherniak who looked after the family's immediate needs. Her sister and two more brothers were born in Winnipeg. She attended school and was an eager student, but at age 13 she was told she had to go to work. Employed in a garment factory to remove bastings, she managed to tear enough fabrics that her boss told her she would do well to go back to school! She went to night school, which was free, took secretarial training, and found work. At 16, when her mother died, Fanny became responsible for running her father's

household with its five children. Two years later, she became engaged to Joe Samuels, who, with his brother, had a business in Mundare, Alberta. Her siblings were placed in the Jewish Orphanage and she moved to what she described as a "hell hole of a town," where she spent the next 13 years. She felt very responsible for her brothers and sister and with the generous help of her husband, she brought them to Mundare and eventually they all became independent.

The difficulties of leading a Jewish life in these far flung hamlets on the prairies are known to us. Fanny was determined to bring up her children in the Jewish tradition. She described the arrivals and departures of itinerant Jewish travellers at her home where they knew they could have a shabbos dinner. A clerk was hired for the Samuels store who had enough knowledge to teach their children Yiddish. Her own love and knowledge of the language expressed itself in the constant flow of wonderful Yiddish expressions as she told her story. Fanny and Joe had two sons in Mundare—Norman and Victor. She spoke with great pride of how she dressed them—the clothing she made herself, fashioning her own patterns because none were available for children. She went into minute details about the materials, clear testimony to her aesthetic and tactile pleasures.

For years the family went to Edmonton for the high holidays, contributing to the building of that community by donating money for bricks for the new Tal-



*Fanny Samuels at 98:
still creating, still of service,
no "idle fingers," ever*

mud Torah. They finally moved there in 1927 when her husband and his brother bought Christie Grant Department Store. At long last she was living amongst Jews, and Fanny threw herself into community work. Here at last was an outlet for all the energy she had to give. Hadassah work was most important to her. She helped establish the first kindergarten at the Talmud Torah and went on to become active in the parents organization. She also became a member of the National Council of Jewish Women.

Throughout her busy and productive social life, Fanny continued to treasure the hours she had to herself, and it was during these times that she created wonderful knitted and crocheted clothing, art objects, and bazaar ar-

ticles. She spoke of a Torah cover she made for her synagogue and a beautiful curtain which hangs in front of the Torahs.

A third son, Herschel, was born in Edmonton.

After her husband's death in 1972, Fanny moved to Vancouver, where she had family. Although she had adjusted to changes all her life, this was more difficult. She was 76 years old, and she found many Vancouverites less open to newcomers. Her motto throughout life had been to take people as they came, and so she did. She had an extended family here and for this she was thankful. One of the most difficult things for her was to have two of her grandsons choose an ultra-orthodox way of life in Israel. She came to realize that they had chosen their own goals, just as she had modelled for them throughout her life. Her grandson, Rabbi Kalman, had chosen through establishing Shalva, to devote a great portion of his time to do for others what they could not do for themselves. When I asked Fanny about her personal philosophy she said "If you can do someone good without making them feel obligated, do it." Now, others of her extended family were doing just that.

When Fanny arrived in Vancouver she joined Beth Israel Synagogue, always asking the question: "What can I do?" Rabbi Solomon answered by requesting her to make Torah binders and a new cover for his megillah. She joined Hadassah Golden Agers and became active once again. As a well spoken person, she shared her work, her thoughts, and her ideas.

Approaching 90 and beginning to need some assistance, Fanny came to live at the Louis Brier Home. The crafts room came alive as Fanny got busy. She brought her own paints, brushes, easel, and off-loom macramé racks,

and donated them for everyone's use. A new adventure began as she expressed a desire to learn to weave. No experimental place mat was the goal of this creative woman. Instead, she embarked on weaving a "Talis" for her great-grandchild, and then another, and another. Exquisite matzo covers were her next projects, and knitted dolls of every description. The magic of her creative accomplishments fill the pockets of loneliness which have surfaced throughout her life.

Today, at 98, she is still looking forward to new projects—"wherever life will lead me," she says. Her parting remarks to me in Yiddish were, "Ich hob nisht kein teiness tsu Got." Loosely translated, this means, "I don't have any complaints to God." ❧

Members, Researchers...and Those Who Could Never Find Us!

We have moved to a new location:

Room 206
on the second floor
of the Vancouver Jewish Community Centre
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Archivist Dianne Rodgers
is available Mondays and Fridays
10:00 am to 4:00 pm

Office Manager Miriam Warren
is in the office Monday, Tuesday & Wednesday
1:00 pm to 5:00 pm

— by Esther Nobleman —

Memories of Medicine Hat

From 1926 until 1946, Medicine Hat was my family's home. One brother, Manuel Raber, still lives there and owns Raber Department Store.

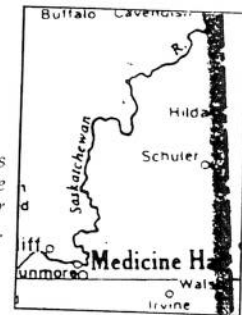
My father, Max Wolf Raber, came from a small Russian "shtetl" near the Polish border. As a youth he was conscripted into the Russian Army. The Cossack officers were very anti-Semitic and took special delight in horse-whipping the Jewish boys. My grandfather Gutel Raber was appalled at the raised red welts on his son's body when the boy came home on leave.

Somehow, he got a false passport in the name of "Max Rabinovitch." In 1906, on his next leave, my father escaped at night, amidst gunshots from border guards, and found his way to the home of an uncle in London, England. From there he came to Winnipeg.

My mother, Lena Pearl Segal, was from Odessa. Her father, Mendel Segal, was a well-to-do contractor. After the Odessa pogroms, they also fled, via Vienna and Paris, to Winnipeg, around 1906-07.

My parents met in Winnipeg around 1908 and married there in 1910. She was 19, he was 24. They left Winnipeg to start a general store in Melville, Saskatchewan, which was then a prospering town.

Papa was a merchant there and later in small country towns: Leader, Estuary, and Burstall, Saskatchewan. When the crops were good we prospered. When crops failed, which was often, we moved westward, following "the line" (railway).



Medicine Hat was the end of the (railroad) line for the Raber family.

Soon there were six children, three sons and three daughters. Sam, the eldest, needed to study for his Bar Mitzvah, so a red-headed tutor, Mr. Mintz, was imported from Winnipeg to Burstall. He also worked in my father's store and lived in our home. English education was provided in a one room school for all grades.

My parents realized the children needed a better English and Jewish education. Ben, the next brother, would also need to learn Hebrew soon. Medicine Hat, (its population at the time was 9,000) was the nearest city, not very far across the Alberta border. Again we moved.

The city sits on a huge natural gas field that yielded cheap power for industrialization. Rudyard Kipling once visited there and called it "the town that was born lucky" with "all Hell for a basement." With completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway it became an important divisional centre, surrounded by good ranching and farmland. The Canadian Government granted a quarter section of land for \$10. The offer brought thousands of British and Central European immigrants, some Jewish, to Western Canada. By 1912 there were enough Jewish families in Medicine Hat to form The Sons of Abraham Congregation. A

few stayed on the land. Most became small businessmen.

When my parents drove into town with a car full of children, Mama cried out in delight: "Look at the trees! And grass, too!"

The flat prairie road suddenly descends into a green oasis valley. The wide, swiftly flowing South Saskatchewan River cuts through the city centre. Neat little homes with lovely gardens nestle among treed parks, and together they creep up the hillsides on both sides of the bridge. Market gardens stretch here and there along the river. After living in so many prairie gopher holes, this was the Garden of Eden. We settled in happily.

But Papa's store in Burstall, Saskatchewan, would not sell. Then the crash of 1929 and the depression years changed Papa's plans to have a business in Medicine Hat. For years he had to live alone behind the store, driving the 60 miles from Burstall to join the family every weekend.

He never failed to get home. He made it over the rutted gravel roads during the worst prairie dust storms with tumbleweeds clinging to the windshield; through hail, through blizzards, through car-high snowdrifts he came home. He always carried a shovel and chains, and many times had to dig his way out of deep snow. Often he was pulled out of the mud by farmers' teams of horses. The rural postman, Amos Goodfellow, waited every Monday morning to follow my father's car tracks. He would say: "If Max can't make it, no one can."

But time with Papa was quality time. He always told us bedtime stories (often from the Bible). There was always a treat in his open valise—perhaps the "funny papers" or a chocolate bar. And we got 10 cents allowance for a movie.

My brothers did have their Bar Mitzvahs. We all went to Cheder, and we all graduated from Alexandra High School. Very few families could afford to send their children away to university but eight or nine did become professionals.

Mama was cook, gardener, chicken plucker, seamstress, songstress, Hadassah (life) member, and community worker. Above all she was the hostess-with-the-mostess. Our house at 360 Second Street was like Grand Central Station. The doors were never locked. Fanny Veiner (mother of Shirley Fitterman and Natalie Austin of Vancouver) came early and often remained reading until late, when everyone had gone to bed. Early one Sunday morning, a tall white-uniformed sailor stood at the bottom of the stairs, calling: "Hi—anyone home?" It was Asher Smith (now of Vancouver), brother of the late Esther Lipovsky (of Vancouver). Another time, Tommy, an RAF airman called upstairs, suitcase in hand (and uninvited): "Hello. I've got a '48,' you know," and in he moved. Mama was entranced with his piano playing. People "just out for a walk" dropped in all the time. The parade through our home was constant: out-of-town friends, travelling salesmen, Sheliach's soliciting funds, Jewish families from surrounding country towns in for the High Holidays or for Pesach; farmers and customers; many unemployed, honest men who dropped off freight trains on their way through during the "March on Ottawa," asking for food and always getting it (at least egg sandwiches on Mama's home baked bread); schoolmates who loved Mama's cookies; and always dinner guests.

Something was always doing: piano practice, ping-pong, bridge, children's games on the lawn; dancing lessons for my brother Manuel and his friends from me; teens' dance

parties; and every night, songs from the "Hit Parade" (I called them our dishwashing songs).

We had to make our own fun. We swam and dived in the public pool. Papa made us a skating rink in the back yard. We hiked over the prairies and down into the coulees, always watching out for rattlesnakes. There were certainly no summer camps.

But once Papa drove us out to Cypress Lake, Saskatchewan, to camp. He dug a trench for our tent during a heavy rain, then drove all the way back to his store in Burstall, a trip of about 200 miles. Then he picked us up the next week. It was glorious.

Every summer, bonfires glimmered along the river banks as we roasted Medicine Hat's famous sweet corn and sang songs. Often we would swim miles downriver to the bonfire, letting the swift current carry us along.

The Jewish Community had little money. Rabbis were poorly paid and they came and went. The first, who served the earliest community, was a Mr. Hardin who soon moved to Edmonton. Then came Rabbi Kopolovich; Rabbi Katz; Rabbi Prasow, Rabbi Gold; Rabbi Emil Klein; Rabbi Reznick, and perhaps others whose names I do not remember. Esther Prasow, the Rabbi's daughter, organized a Young Judean group and taught us to dance the Hora and some Hebrew and Yiddish folk songs as well as "Hatikvah."

Jews from country towns came in for the Jewish holidays: the Ben Grands and the Philip Borthicks from Fox Valley, Dr. Norman and Hannah Hirt from Maple Creek, Saskatchewan; Sam and Clara Krasnoff and sons Murray and Bernie from Hilda, Alberta. The boys went away very young to be educated in Winnipeg. The Krasnoffs, who were often at

our home, eventually moved to Medicine Hat. Then there were the Litwacks and Yacowers, farmers near Burstall, Saskatchewan, and many more.

Although a congregation had existed in Medicine Hat since 1912, there was no synagogue. Services were held in rented homes or halls. Then, in 1938, Esther Conn determined there should be a shul. She purchased an old garage and convinced the community to remodel and refurbish it. In the first wedding celebrated at the new shul, Esther's daughter Minnie was married to Jack Belzberg (Minnie, now widowed, lives in Vancouver).

The Synagogue became the focus for events. The large downstairs housed a social hall, a kitchen, a stage, and classrooms. It was used for Bar Mitzvahs, Chanukah and Purim concerts, visiting fund-raisers and entertainers, and always for card socials. Kosher food for Bar Mitzvahs came from Calgary or Winnipeg and everyone brought home baking. Kosher meat also came from Winnipeg but sometimes the Rabbi was also a Shochet and could slaughter chickens.

During World War II, several of our young Jewish boys and some girls enlisted in the armed forces.

My brother Manuel was an officer in the RCAF. He was listed "missing in action, presumed dead" for six months. He had been wounded and shot down over Belgium on his last flying mission. Only he and the pilot survived. They were hidden by the Belgian underground until an informer revealed their presence. The Gestapo threw him in prison. They suspected he was a Jew, pointed a gun in his back, and several times threatened to shoot him. In desperation he wrote a letter to the German Luftwaffe Commander in the area demanding that he be treated according to the

*The Rabers of
Medicine Hat:
(back row, from Left)
Lena (mother),
Sam, Molly, Ben,
Max (father);
(front row) Esther,
Nellie, Manuel.
early 1930's*



Geneva Convention. A Belgian guard posted it for him. That probably saved his life. He was sent to Stalag Luft III, where there was constant tunnelling and a huge escape attempt. Only three men made it.

When Russian forces neared, the entire prison population was marched for three days without food, with dogs at their heels, in the cold winter. Many fell. Eventually the German guards fled and the prisoners joined up with the Russian Army. A whole story could be written about Manuel's experiences and how, with his few words of Yiddish-accented German, he was appointed official food scrounger for the entire prisoner force.

The first word we had that Manuel was alive came when the postman rushed up to my father on the street waving Manuel's postcard from the prison camp. What a sensation it was! The press, Mayor Hector Lang, friends and neighbours all came to our house to rejoice. Such was the small town atmosphere then.

For many years after the war, Manuel served as Commanding Officer of the local Air

Cadets, and he always tries to attend Prisoner-of-War reunions wherever they are.

My siblings Ben and Sam Raber live in Los Angeles, California. My sister Molly Saltman lives in Palm Springs, California, and my sister Nellie Shindelman lives in Winnipeg. I live in Vancouver.

Sadly, a flood in the Sons of Abraham's basement in 1993 destroyed all the community records and photographs. Only a small Cemetery Committee notebook survived, dated 1941 to 1955. My brother Ben was the Secretary, and when he moved to Los Angeles, the minutes ceased (at least in this book).

Look for some documents, names of deceased, and grave site plan, together with a brief history of moving graves from an old Jewish cemetery to a new site. They should be in the forthcoming Alberta Roundup Exhibit.

There is also a historical outline of the earliest Jews in Medicine Hat and vicinity, written by Dr. Leo Lewis (now of Calgary). It is on file with the Jewish Historical Society here and in Calgary. ♫