

Jewish Archives and Historical Society of Edmonton and Northern  
Alberta



# Heritage-Yerusha



First Edition

Winter 1996

## A Message From the Chair

They were the first generation of Jews to come to Western Canada; mostly Eastern Europeans, escaping the rising tide of pogroms and anti-Semitism. They arrived with little more than faith in God and a hope for the future to sustain them. Life was a struggle for the newcomers, the language and customs strange, and long hours of hard work providing for the barest necessities.

But even under most difficult conditions, these earliest Jewish pioneers in this land did not abandon their religious beliefs, customs and traditions. Even then, our ancestors and other adherents of our ancient heritage, gave what they could to charity, performing acts of Tzedakah. And as those pioneer communities grew, they began to create and build the institutions and organizations that enrich our own communal life today, some 100 years after the first settler arrived.

The purpose of our Archives and Historical Society is to gather, sort, catalogue, preserve and present the history, religious and cultural heritage of the Jewish people of Edmonton and Northern Alberta. This material will be available for research, genealogical study, publications and periodic exhibits and serve as a central resource for students, teachers, authors, historians and others.

In addition to the history of the organized Jewish community, we

intend to document the many accomplishments of individual Jews, both within and outside the Jewish community, who, in the professions, academia, the business world, the arts and sciences and other fields of human endeavour, have contributed to Alberta and Canada in great measure for beyond our numbers.

We invite the entire community to join us in this exciting voyage of discovery; to help us provide another meaningful part of a precious legacy for our children, grandchildren and future generations.

*Uri Rosenzweig  
Chair of Jewish Archives and  
Historical Society of Edmonton  
and Northern Alberta.*

## The Forest Prays

This story is from Jacob Baltzan's memoirs. He wrote them in Yiddish recording his life from 1904 to 1908 when he lived on the Lepton Colony, Saskatchewan, as a Jewish pioneer farmer. In 1991 his memoirs were translated by Sam Frohlich, and in 1994 his son Hymie published the book privately. Hymie and family continue their father's tradition of involvement in Jewish life. We thank them for their permission to publish this excerpt from the book and we shall share more of Jacob's stories.

This beautiful episode cannot be omitted. It gave me such inspiration and lifted me to the highest level of ecstasy to know the innermost feelings of a friend.

I noticed one of our neighbours emerging from the woods, a smile of self satisfaction on his face. The short mackinaw coat he wore was full of snow that had shaken from the tree branches.

As I passed by, he stopped to tell me that one of his parents had passed away in old Romania. He wished to say kaddish, but there was no minyan (ten men). That is why he stole away early in the morning to the deepest part of the woods and stopping near a large tree, he enjoined the forest as his minyan. There he prayed, read some psalms, and recited the kaddish.

I asked him how he felt about saying kaddish in the woods. His answer was that he felt real joy. It seemed to him that the trees answered, "Amen".

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One cold, bleak morning I spied on him (not a nice thing to do, but I could not contain my curiosity) as he went into the woods and I followed him at a distance. He paused near a large tree deep in the woods and started saying something. At one point he grasped the tree and with extreme devotion loudly proclaimed, "Magnified and sanctified be God's great name". Snowy leaves, made light by the frost, flew in the air like feathers. It seemed as if souls, long departed were flitting about and amongst them the soul of departed parents. It was so awe inspiring that I answered together with the whole forest, "May his great name be blessed forever and to all eternity" and I could swear that the trees trembled and the whole forest prayed.

Where could one obtain the talent to describe in writing this heart-rending picture? I shall never forget the inspiration, the spirituality that I drew from the scene of the forest praying.



The photograph above is of Jacob Baltzan and his family who were prominent members of the Edmonton Jewish Community and were active in all aspects of Jewish life. *Photo courtesy Provincial Archives of Alberta.*

## Stories to Live By

by Ed and Joy-Ruth Mickelson

We are a diverse people, we and our forbears have come from many countries and continents, and our lives have been shaped by different experiences. The vision of the Edmonton and Northern Alberta Jewish Archives and Historical Society is to preserve, protect and present our history with its diversities and similarities. This modest journal is but one way that the Society can provide a forum for us to achieve its mission.

We recall the efforts of past community members who dedication to preserving and recording our history was significant and we thank them. Among the many, we are indebted to Eve Pascoe as the

officially appointed archivist of the Edmonton Jewish community, for collecting, collating and organizing material. Since Eve's departure for Toronto there has been a gap of twenty years when little has been done. The present Society owes its inception to tireless efforts of Uri Rosenzweig, who, since his return to live in the Edmonton community, has single-handedly communicated, cajoled and co-opted members onto the Society's committee.

We are a very small committee and to fulfil some of our hopes we need people who are able to work on projects. We are also in urgent need of financial support. Everyone reading this editorial can help by becoming a new member of the Society. If you support our goals please fill in the form and send a

cheque. We wish to thank those who have already joined, especially those who became Founding Patrons. We also thank Bonnie Tregobov of the Jewish Historical Society of Western Canada and Mr. Jay Joffe, President of the Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta, who advice and experience has been solicited and who came to Edmonton (on a bitterly cold night) and spoke to our committee.

At our first few committee meetings Uri arranged several presentations so that we could learn from those in the field. Dr. Sandra Thompson, Dr. David Goa and Dr. Michael Payne on the Alberta Archives staff, presented their thoughts and professional knowledge to us. Dr. Payne's reminder "that unorganized material

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rarely get used" is cautionary. He also told us that a good balance is needed between the stories on institutions and the stories of people.

We have spoken of diversity and, even on small committees, different ideas about presenting material arise. The ideas on this editorial commentary are ours (Joy-Ruth's and Ed's,) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Society.

Life-stories are invitations, to join the experiences and the memories of the storyteller. Our memories are important, they reflect our own personal past, our own unique way of perceiving things. We carry our past with us into our own present and future. We try to understand it, for it helps us construct the meaning we bring to our lives. None can say: "That's not how it was." We all bring our own lens, our own focus, and our own filter, and we can rightfully say: "This is how it was for me. This is my truth."

We believe in the power of individual stories and we are aware of the power of institutional stories. As with personal stories, institutions sometimes have stories that are rarely told; they may also have "cover stories" and "sacred stories"

When we present ourselves and our institutions we might wish to be mindful of these possibilities.

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### **From Trader Ed and Other Stories of the Canadian North and the Old Country**

By Elhanan Hanson

"I decided to move farther north as the territory around Fort McMurray was becoming depleted - too much



Elhanan Hanson came to Alberta From Russia in 1913. He lived briefly in southern Alberta on a farm , and in Calgary, and then came to Edmonton with his family. Here, he was involved in the "ideological and political discourse of the community's early years" (Sanders, 1992). Elhanan was also well-known as a store-owner and Yiddish author. His book "Trader Ed and Other Stories of the Canadian North and the Old Country" was based on the life and adventures of his nephew, Nehemiah (Ed), who was sent by Elhanan to work and trade in northern Alberta. This excerpt is translated from Yiddish by Esther Leven of Winnipeg in 1989. *Photo courtesy Provincial Archives of Alberta.*

civilization moving in for the trapper and the trader."

That was what Trader Ed told one of the managers of a large wholesale house in Edmonton "the gateway to the far North", with whom he had transacted thousands of dollars worth of business. The manager stopped to think this over and then asked: "And where do you plan to move to, Ed? What territory do you have in mind? You must know that all the closer places already have three or four traders!"

As he said this he got up and approached the large wall map asking Ed to join him and continued: "Notice the Athabaska and McKenzie River territories covering a vast span of wilderness for about a thousand miles. Show me just where you plan to settle."

Silently he approached the map, thought for a moment, and pointing to a dot on the map without any hesitation stated: "See this point on the long waterway from Fort

McMurray to Aklavik? This is Fort Chipewyan, two hundred miles north of Fort McMurray on the west bank of Lake Athabaska which stretches for five hundred miles to the east as far as Saskatchewan and divides Alberta from the barren lands of the Northwest Territories. Lake Athabaska is about fifty miles wide but at the east end, at this spot," pointing with his finger, "the two rock banks join together and form the Stony Rapids which are about forty miles to the east of Pond du Lac. I would take over these two points at the side of the main waterway. There are good fur territories, barely exploited. The only traders in the district are the Hudson's Bay Company and the Shagry Brothers. There is enough there for me too."

The manager was surprised to hear such a lengthy dialogue from Ed and after a few moments asked: "How much provisions do you need and when will you be ready to start on your way?"

"At least two wagonloads of 'grubstake', ammunition, trappings

to Fort McMurray and by water to the spot. Don't forget that it is now the end of August and by the middle of September the water transportation in those areas is closed, so we must hurry."

"Alright! Don't worry! Go and place your order. I assure you there will be no delay on our part."

Extending his hand to Ed, he said: "Well Ed, goodbye and good luck. You'll need it!"

Trader Ed was a man in his forties, over six feet tall, broad shouldered and well built. From exposure to the frost and snow storms of the north his face was tanned a copper color and he looked like an Indian. In his north country outfit with parka and mocassins or mukluks on his feet and his deliberate walk it was hard to take him for a Jew.

Trader Ed came to Western Canada from Russia after the Russian Japanese War, together with his parents. He was about Bar Mitzvah age at that time. They had emigrated from a little town in the far reaches of White Russia to a small town in the vast Canadian west. Needless to say they came penniless and his greenhorn father worked very hard to sustain his family of eight. Nehemiah was the eldest, but young as he was he went to work at whatever he could find. He was strong and healthy and was willing to do any job, no matter how hard, to earn a dollar. His name, Nehemiah, was changed to Edward and then shortened to Ed.

After years of different kinds of work an uncle took him into his business. As he was really not suited for a city job his uncle decided to open a trading post for him at Fort McMurray. Quiet Ed adapted easily to the primitive north. To deal with Indians and even with the white trappers did not require high pressure salesmanship. The far north made even the most

talkative more silent and this suited Ed well. His uncle found him a suitable match, a mate suitable in all details - tall, healthy and the quiet type.

The post prospered and after about eight years his uncle turned over the business entirely to Ed. Trader Ed became well known among the Indians and all the trappers and traders of the far north.

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The voyage from Fort McMurray to Pond du Lac took a whole week. The boats travelling in those little known waterways were ill-equipped for passenger comfort. Jokers could call them vessels for kneading dough. The boat was pulling behind it a long row of barges loaded with goods, harness dogs and a few passengers who had to make the trip, among them Ed and his wife and small child.

The two hundred miles from Fort McMurray to Fort Chipewyan along the Athabaska River was a pleasant journey. The tall banks covered with the glorious colors of autumn were spectacularly beautiful and the water was calm. But this changed abruptly at the entry to the lake.

## The History of Jack Spaner

Written by his son  
Bernard Spaner

Jack Spaner was one of four brothers who walked out of Bassarabia before 1900 to escape conscription into the Tsar's army. Alone at 13 he made his way through Vienna (where he remembered a parade of Franz

Joseph and thought it much more impressive than that of George V down Portage Avenue in Edmonton in 1933). Picked up by ORT in London selling spectacles from a tray, he was trained as a tailor in Ireland, came to Canada soon after to join his older brothers who had preceded him to Kenora, Ontario. There they set up a tailor establishment before proceeding westward at the turn of the century.

You must realize that most of this is hearsay, stories gleaned from my father on walks in the woods around Grande Prairie forty years later. This history comes to me in brief flashes of reminiscence and I cannot vouch for its accuracy.

In any case, the four brothers arrived in Edmonton before 1908 and bought land in Edmonton. Since they were involved in buying and selling furs they were convinced that a better location for such a business was Edson, which was developing west of Edmonton, closer to the mountains and closer to the source of pelts. Soon after their stay in Edson, the brothers decided that since the business could not support them all, to go their own way, sold the business and split up. One went to Vancouver, one to Prince George, one back toback to Winnipeg and Jack tried his luck in the great American city, Chicago. While in the big city he met my mother Dora Shapiro and married her. Since life in Chicago was too confining and a candy store he bought there proved to provide a rather unhappy lifestyle for him, within six months he took his wife back to Edson. There he fathered two children Tyrrel and Sidney.

Meanwhile, a trail had been broken through the eastern slopes of the Rockies to the new homesteading area on the Peace River plains

Oral history is not the mere collection of trivial anecdotes, or the recording of dates or other factual information, this is more effectively done through written material. Oral history provides the community with a "human dimension".

For example, if we are interviewing a person who was in retain business forty or fifty years ago, we want to know what it was like being Jewish in business at that time; what kind of relationship did he/she have with customers and other businesses; what were the perceptions of communal life during those years and what were the challenges of maintaining Jewish identity in a small community.

A major challenge facing the oral history committee is to try to "focus" the interview. Our objective is to collect, sort, catalogue and preserve the history of the Jewish community in Edmonton.

If you have material that you feel would be of interest, or if you would like to participate in the oral history initiative, please get in contact with committee chair Dan Kauffman or any member of the committee - Gillian Horwitz, Joy-Ruth and Ed Mickelson, Cory Felber, Carol Ritch and Reevan Dolgoy.

All members of the community are encouraged to become members of the society. Membership is our sole method of fundraising at this time.

**If you are interested in being involved in the work of the Society, please call Chairman Uri Rosenzweig at 481-1997 or Vice-Chairman Dan Kauffman at 487 0877.**



The Podersky home in Lacombe  
Photo courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Alberta

## It Was Wonderful Growing Up Here and It's Still Wonderful

*The following narrative is composed of excerpts taken from an oral history. Millie Singer shared her stories of her life in Edmonton in conversation with Gillian Horwitz on September 12th, 1996. With the exception of those printed in italics, the words are Millie's.*

I was born here at the old General Hospital. All of us were born in Edmonton, as were my children. My Mother, Anna Pollock, was born in New York City. She came out here when she was about sixteen with her family. I don't know why they chose Edmonton, but her father was an adventurer. They were a well-to-do family in New York City and he used to be in the chicken business there. When

he split up with his partner he decided he was going to come west. So he brought his family out [with their ] beautiful antique furniture.

My father was born in Chicago and they came here when he was two. They came to Lacombe and they homesteaded. Their name was Podersky. He left home at twelve. His father said go to school or get out, so he got out and came to Edmonton. He was selling rags door to door. Then when he was only sixteen he started auctioneering - furniture, diamonds - he did Irving Kline's place with the jewelry. He used to run a dray, like a big wagon, and when the trains came in with people, coming from all over, he used to go and meet them and take their furniture.

And that was the first time he met my mother, and they got married when he was twenty-one and she was twenty. They worked hard, and then Danny was born and then my

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late brother Freddy, and Edie, and I was the youngest. We used to live on 112th Street. That's the first house that I remember; but my memories start around five - six, about the time I started at Oliver School in the very early years 1926/7. I remember the old Hudson Bay downtown with the old wooden sidewalks out front. There was also an old market there and that was fun. There were chickens and dogs running all over the place, it was a real old country market. And my father's first store was a white wooden building across from where the Macdonald is now, on the other side of the street. From there they progressed into the store behind the Macdonald and by then my brothers were in the business. They were in the furniture business for over sixty years.

*Millie has always been a great sportswoman. Golf was her favorite sport and one in which she excelled. She contrasts her interest with that of her mother.*

My mother was never really into sports but she did belong to Jackson's Gym. She had a pair of black sateen bloomers and sleeveless top and it said Jackson's across the front.

When they built the High Level bridge, I went to school every day across that bridge to go to high school. And we used to have the streetcar on it. And you would swear you were going on air, because you couldn't see the ends of anything - it was a blank. It was a wonderful ride. And we used to ski down the golf course and down the river when I was growing up. And we used to ski behind the car. After the bend you could fall in if you didn't watch where you were going because it always used to be open in the winter; that's where they used to

cut the ice for the Arctic Ice Company. Then we would hike up [the bank] to the cabin where they sold hot chocolate. We did a lot of things around the river, it was part of our life.

We used to go to the lake. We used to go to Alberta Beach because of the Kramers. Adela and Ed Kramer used to live here, they were old-timers also, they had a hotel at Alberta Beach. So we used to rent a cottage out there and there was a pastry and a tea-room and Saturday night dances and it was all very glamorous. There was a wood stove and outdoor bathrooms. My dad used to come out at the weekend with the car full of food and mother and Della were wonderful, they'd laugh their way through everything.

*Community was, and still is, important for Millie, her parents and her family. This sense of community was instilled at an early age.*

We all worked for each other because that's the way the Jewish community functioned. I went out with my blue box when I was fourteen. My mother was such an involved person in the Jewish community. She was president of Hadassah, Council, you name it, and she always involved me with what she was doing and then I got my own involvement.

*Much has been written about Henry, Millie's husband, and Millie has seven books filled with journal articles, newspaper cuttings and photographs about his involvement with the community, sports and music. She shared some of her own memories of his early days and their life together.*

He started out giving his first

concert at five as a musician. He was very talented. He only had piano then and he wanted 'berbunchkes' - that's what his mother called the drums. And he had an uncle who bought him a set of drums and he played for the Salvation Army so he could use their equipment. He left his home in Saskatoon at sixteen and went to Toronto. He had to work for six months to get into a union. He left home with a toothache and his brother's winter coat! For six months he sold drapes door to door, coffee door to door, what he could do, until he got his card from the musician's union. Then he worked up at Eaton's. They had a music department and he demonstrated vibraphone and drums.

*Millie has some amusing memories of the famous Henry Singer sales:*

Oh the sales were hilarious! I have pictures. Henry used to have a barrel of ties and you'd reach in for a dollar. All the ties that you could pull out he's ask for a dollar. Henry used to write his own ads. The cat and dog ads were really a satire on the community. The mayor and the aldermen [would be in them] and other well-known folk - there were no sacred cows in Henry's life! This city always had good music and it always had good theatre. I think it was always a cultural city. There were always people who wanted a symphony orchestra and an opera and an art gallery, and it was here. It was a small city so you can see what we accomplished in those days. We also had a lot of little theatres. I think that next to Toronto we had the most number of live theatre groups, and the same with jazz and country music.

It was wonderful growing up here, and it's still wonderful. I love this place.

**SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP**

We wish to thank the following members of the community who are supporting the society through their membership contribution.

**FOUNDING PATRONS:** Len Dolgoy & Cathy Miller-Dolgoy, Joe Doz & Dr. Cynthia Blackman-Doz, Justice Sam & Jean Friedman, Eva Gorasht, Norman & Roberta Hanson, Irving & Diane Kipnes, Ed & Dr. Joy-Ruth Mickelson, Larry & Tulane Rollingher, Uri & Marjorie Rosezweig, Louis & Tryna Rudolph, Dr. Eric & Elexis Schloss, Farrel Shadlyn & Lisa Miller, Dr. Theodor Shnitka, Joseph H. Shoctor O.C.,Q.C. & Kayla, Howard & Debra Sniderman, Dr. Jake & Ruth Superstein.

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I (We) would like to become part of the continuing quest into our historical past by joining the Jewish Archives and Historical Society of Edmonton and Northern Alberta in the category marked. A Charitable Receipt will be issued. Memberships for other than individuals include spouses unless otherwise requested.

Enclosed is my cheque for \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
Payable to the Jewish Community Centre (JCC) Archives Donation.

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I am interested in serving as a volunteer  
 I have historical material that I would like to donate for preservation and research in supporting the aims of the Society. Please call me.

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**Please Mail to: Jewish Community Centre, 7200-156 Street, Edmonton, AB, T5R 1X3**