

<u>תגלית</u> The Journal of the <u>הגלית</u> <u>HISTORICAL SOCIETY</u> of Southern Alberta

VOLUME 19, NO. 3

JHSSA AGM

Handbills of History Abe Shnitka's Franklin Press Documenting Calgary Jewish Community Life, 1913-1935

Featuring guest speaker Archivist Debby Shoctor Jewish Archives and Historical Society of Edmonton and Northern Alberta (JAHSENA)

The program of the 19th Annual General Meeting of the JHSSA will feature the treasure trove of the Franklin Press posters created by owner Abraham Shnitka for various organizations in Calgary's Jewish community. This large collection of the material produced by the Franklin Press in Calgary was donated to JAHSENA by Mr. Shnitka's son, Dr. Theodore Shnitka.

Abe Shnitka is well known not only

Wednesday, October 21, 2009 7:30 pm, Calgary JCC Auditorium

for his Franklin Press, but also for being appointed King's Printer in 1935, resulting in his move to Edmonton. The posters he created in Calgary were usually printed in Yiddish and English. They reveal the wide scope of cultural and political activity in our community in the early part of the last century.

The AGM program will feature a brief description of the Shnitka collection and of JAHSENA's activities by archivist Debby Shoctor. JHSSA President and Abe Shnitka's great nephew, Sheldon Smithens, will talk about Abe and the Shnitka family. Many of the Franklin Press posters will be featured and facsimiles of the posters will be on display.

The AGM program will also include the election of a new JHSSA board of directors and the presentation of certificates to those in our community who have turned 80 in the past year. The evening will conclude with re-



Debby Shoctor

freshments and an opportunity to chat about those good old days. Everyone is invited to attend.

Inaugural Jay Joffe Memorial Program

Sunday, Nov. 22, 2009 See details on page 3



New! History Quiz Test your knowledge of local Jewish history. See Page 5



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This issue of Discovery is sponsored by Jewish War Veterans of Canada, Post #2, Calgary. Their support is greatly appreciated.

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MAY 2009

Benjamin Simon – Confectioner, Junk Dealer and Russian War Hero

by Jack Switzer

In August of 1916, Calgarians were surprised to learn that one of their Jewish citizens had a distinguished battlefield career.

The Calgary Herald reported that Benjamin Simon, of Canadian Hide and Fur Company, had told a Calgary police court magistrate that he had fought in the Russian Japanese war of 1904-05, and had won two prestigious Russian decorations, the Cross of St. George of the first class, and of the third class.

Simon was in court for a violation of the city's second-hand-store bylaws. He was charged with buying stolen goods, and failure to keep proper sales records. The dealer told the court that he was new to the second-hand business, and was not familiar with the bylaws. He offered to help police find the thief who had brought him the stolen goods.

The record-keeping infraction cost Simon a fine of one dollar, and the stolen property charge resulted in a suspended sentence.

The *Herald* article said of Benjamin Simon: "His body is riddled with bullet wounds and saber and bayonet scars received in battle. ... Simon won the cross of the first class by locating a concealed Japanese trench ... and leading the attack which resulted on the sweeping out of the Japanese troops.

"The cross of the third class he received for the clever capture of a Japanese spy, who met the fate of all military spies who are captured." The young soldier was later captured by the Japanese and taken to a prisoner-of-war camp. (The war, fought mainly in Siberia and Manchuria, was going badly for Russia, who agreed to an American-brokered truce, the 1905 Treaty of Portsmouth.)

Benjamin Simon soon immigrated to Canada, and reached Calgary about 1910, along with his wife Bertha and their three young children. He was then in his early thirties. The couple opened a confectionery, at 1008 First Street S.W.

Simon and a partner, Harry Eisenstadt, took over Canadian Fur and Hide from a



The Simon family – Bertha, Jack, Sadie, Hymie and Benjamin in Simon's Fruit and Confectionery, 1914. JHSSA 167

Max Cohen. In addition to buying raw fur and hides, the company had a secondhand section, and also held a license as a junk dealer. Simon stayed in the hide and scrap metal business until his retirement about 1946.

Simon died in Calgary in 1951. He was survived by his wife and three children, Sadie (Mrs. Sam Pearlmutter), Hymie Simon, and Jack Simon. His obituary noted his 1904 war experience, and said that Benjamin Simon had "achieved the highest honours awarded to soldiers at that time."

All four levels of the Order of St. George, Russia's top military decoration, were reserved for officers and were rarely awarded. Two related decorations, each with four levels, were available to enlisted men. These were the St. George Cross and the St. George Medal.

The St. George Cross was awarded for extreme bravery in battle, while the St. George medal merely required merit in combat. We have no data for the number of Cross and Medal decorations awarded in the Russian-Japanese war, but during the Tzarist years of World War I (1914-1917) some 200,000 St. George Cross awards and nearly a million St. George medals were given to Russian servicemen, seriously devaluing their prestige.

About 40,000 Jews fought in the Russian-Japanese war; nearly 3,000 were killed, wounded or taken prisoner. The best-known Jewish soldier was Zionist icon Joseph Trumpeldor, who joined up in 1902. Trumpeldor lost an arm during the siege of Port Arthur, but continued to fight after his recovery. Like Simon, he became a prisoner of war.

Trumpeldor was awarded all four levels of the Cross of St. George, making him the most decorated Jewish soldier in Russia. In 1906 he became the first Jew to become a Russian army officer. He moved to Palestine in 1911. The one-armed veteran helped organize the Zion Mule Corps in World War I, and saw action helping the British army at Galipoli. Joseph Trumpeldor died in 1920 leading the defense of Tel Hai, a Jewish farming village, against hostile Arabs.

Trumpeldor left Russia behind and went to *Eretz Israel*. Benjamin Simon chose Canada as his new home, and never endured the struggles of the early Zionist pioneers. Both were decorated for their bravery, and may have been comrades at Port Arthur, some other bloody battlefield, or in a Japanese prison camp.

Inaugural Jay Joffe Memorial Program at the Beth Tzedec Jewish Film Festival, Sunday, November 22, 2009

The JHSSA is pleased to announce its inaugural Jay Joffe Memorial Program, which will take place at this year's Beth Tzedec Jewish Film Festival. This program was established by our board of directors to honour the memory of our founding president, the late Jay Joffe. Jay's passion for educating the community about its history was evident to all who knew him. The goal of this program is to present cultural programming that will help foster an interest in and a love for history. Donations to the JHSSA can be directed to the Jay Joffe Memorial Program Fund to ensure that such programs can continue on a regular basis.

This year's inaugural Jay Joffe Memorial Program will feature, in cosponsorship with the Beth Tzedec Jewish Film Festival, the documentary film *Home on the Range: The Jewish Chicken Ranchers of Petaluma,* to be followed by a live performance by cowboy Scott Gerber (who appears in the film) singing Yiddish and cowboy songs.

It promises to be a unique event and a fun time for all.

To purchase Film

Festival passes or tickets for individual events, call the Beth Tzedec synagogue at 255-8688.



Above left: Image from "Home on the Range." Above right: Scott Gerber.

New Books in Our Library

The past few years have seen the publication of a number of books that are of interest to those researching the history of Canadian Jewry or their own family history. Recent purchases and donations have seen the growth of our Harry and Martha Cohen Library and we have had to add new bookshelves in our office. All JHSSA members are encouraged to borrow books from the library or to sit and browse through some of the reference works.

We are grateful to all those who have honoured their loved ones by donating funds toward the purchase of a library book. For a donation of \$36 or more, a tribute card is sent and a bookplate is placed in a library book marking the occasion. The following is a list of some the books that have been added to our library recently. We welcome any recommendations of additional titles. If you would like to review an interesting book dealing with history or genealogy for *Discovery*, please contact our office.

Avotaynu Guide to Jewish Genealogy, edited by Sallyann Amdur Sack & Gary Mokotoff, 2004. This large volume is an excellent source of information for all who are involved with personal Jewish genealogical research. It discusses both the "art" and science of genealogy. Produced by the publishers of *Avotaynu*, the primary journal of Jewish genealogy, it is a reliable source of information. Its chapters cover general topics, sources of information and current available resources as well methodological tips. There is an extensive section devoted to research by each country, written by local experts. The appendices include charts and maps.

Getting Started in Jewish Genealogy, by Gary Mokotoff & Warren Blatt, 2000. This slim volume is a very useful read for anyone embarking on family history research. It provides an overview of methods, tools and resources and also lists common difficulties and errors.

Google your Genealogy: unlock the hidden power of Google, by Daniel Lynch, 2008. This 340-page volume is a very useful guide on how best to use computer search engines for genealogical research. It also contains helpful tips for better use of Google. It is richly illustrated with sample search results. This is an important tool to help beginner researchers avoid common pitfalls.

A Guide to Jewish Genealogical Research in Israel, by Sallyann Amdur Sack, 1995. This is a handy reference tool if you want to add another dimension to your next visit to Israel. Israeli institutions might hold valuable information even if none of your relatives ever lived in the Holy Land. The archives of such places as Yad Vashem, Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, Jewish Agency, Leo Baeck Institute, or the Jewish Legion Museum contain important resources. The Jewish National Library and Beth Hatefutsoth, the Museum of the Diaspora with its Dorot Genealogy Center and Diaspora Research Institute, are worth a visit even if you are not actively researching your family history. The book was written in 1995, so it would be wise to obtain current addresses and visiting hours before

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Coming of Age: A History of the Jewish People of Manitoba by Allan Levine, Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, 2009

Reviewed by Jack Switzer

It's easy to knock Winnipeg – the flat landscape, the long, cold winters, the urban desolation of the near-north end, the mosquitoes and humid heat in the brief summer season.

It's also easy to praise the city for its vibrant arts and culture – the ballet, symphony, art galleries, theatre stages and festivals that outshine even Calgary's pretensions. And despite its slow growth, the city has jobs, affordable housing, two universities and diverse ethnic traditions that proportionally dwarf any other Canadian city.

Winnipeg's Jewish history presents a writer like Allan Levine fertile sources for describing such ethnic diversity. Winnipeg's 17,000 Jews formed nearly eight percent of the city's population in 1931, the peak year, proportionally, for Jewish presence. Over 15,000 lived in Ward Three – the north end – almost a fifth of the area's people. (The biggest

population number for Winnipeg Jewry was 1961, with 19,400 Jews forming 4.4 percent of the city's population.)

The Jewish population has gradually declined (to about 12,000) and some might call the book *Getting Old* instead of *Coming of Age*.

Levine's history – which includes chapters on Jews in smaller communities and on Jewish farmers – covers the same material (beginning about 1882) that earlier writers like Harry Gutkin and Abe Arnold wrote about some years ago, but the new book is far lengthier and fresher, as it extends through to the current decade.

And Levine's work is thorough and detailed. Readers familiar with Winnipeg will recognize the street names, the businesses, the schools, the clubs and myriad other "Jewish" places included in Levine's work. For example, there is material about St. John's Tech, the

> north-end public high school attended by most Jewish youth until the 1950s.

Levine does not overlook Winnipeg Jewry's occasional conflicts and scandals. Radical groups, strikes, and secular-religious disputes are included. He writes about the revolt of the kosher butchers and other kashrut problems. He even recounts a scandal. recent which most Winnipegers would like forgotten, involving accusations of pedophilia against a prominent religious teacher.

About a third of the long book is devoted to the last three decades of Winnipeg Jewish life. The chapter "Go South Young Jews" is an excellent history of the decline of the north end, the closing of most of its Jewish infrastructure, and the problems faced by the sometimes bitter remnant group of seniors and young families faced with the rapid relocation of community services to the south end.

Levine gets into the nitty gritty, like the workings of the deal that saw three north end Conservative synagogues merge into the Etz Chaim congregation, in the former Rosh Pina building.

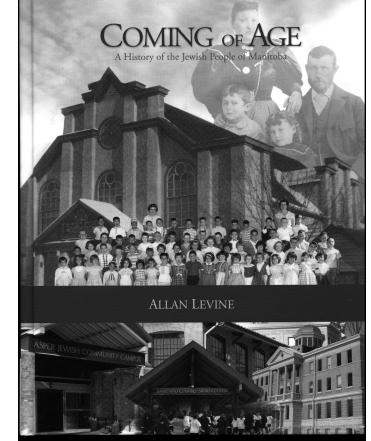
Of course the obverse stories – the ascendancy of the south end and the decision to build the city's new Asper Jewish Community Campus and its consolidated Hebrew school in the far southwest – are also examined in detail.

The book is long – 500 pages – and has a large format and many photos, some in color, that might relegate it to the coffee table rather than the home library. The chapters are thematic but each contains many sections that cry out for separation. Some new paragraphs are printed in bold type, but there are no sub-headings to tell the reader what the next pages contains.

Biographies dominate the final chapters. Many are associated with important events or organizations, but many are pure hagiography – displaying excessive reverence. The material on the Izzy Asper family is an example. But this is a flaw of many local histories and might be expected in a work sponsored and underwritten by a donationdependent group like the Jewish Heritage Center (which includes the local historical society) and its patrons.

Coming of Age is a worthy and valuable addition to the small canon of Canadian Jewish historical works. And if you remember Winnipeg, all's the better.

The book is available in our library and can be purchased from major book stores and through the JHCWC website.



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2009 Calgary Jewish Community History Quiz

We know that readers of *Discovery* are avid history buffs and many are old time Calgarians, so we have made this history quiz quite challenging. Readers are welcome to visit the JHSSA office in the Calgary JCC to research the answers to the quiz, but we will not be providing any answers to phone queries! After the points are tallied, we will draw a name from all the entries with the most correct answers. The winner will receive a copy of our publication, *A Joyful Harvest* – which happens to contain many of the correct answers to these questions. Good Luck!

Deadline: November 20, 2009 Answers may be sent via email to jhssa@shaw.ca or dropped off at the JCC front desk for the JHSSA office.

Readers are welcome to submit questions for future quizzes.

The correct answers and the names of the winner(s) will be available in the Winter issue of *Discovery*.

1. Of all the buildings used by Jewish organizations in Calgary, which was in use for the longest period?

2. Who was the longest serving Rabbi in Calgary's history to date?

3. In which sport did both Saul Glin and Boris Vaynsteyn earn championships, about 30 years apart?

4. Which member of the Jewish community had a part in the movie *Superman III*, filmed in Alberta? What was the role?

5. G. Garbovitsky and J. Galperin were the toast of Calgary during the 1930s and 1940s. In what field were they noted?

6. Which well known city planner and architect was the grandson of Calgary's first permanent spiritual leader, Rabbi Simon Smolensky? For

which famous series of downtown Calgary landmarks was he responsible?

7. Which American Jew's name is associated with an ill-fated Alberta mining town?

8. With which historic Calgary event is the name of Phyllis Switzer associated?

9. Which well-known Jewish Calgary entrepreneur appeared in a silent movie starring Mary Pickford?

10. What are four landmarks or institutions in southern Alberta that are named after local Jewish residents?

11. Which Jewish community landmark is marking its 30th anniversary this year?

12. Which is the most recent building to be erected by a Calgary Jewish organization?

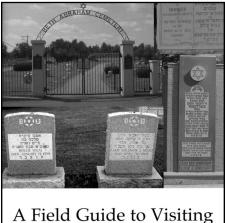
13. In what previous year did the Calgary Jewish community enter a float in the Stampede Parade?

14. Which Calgary Jewish family was involved in the soft drink industry? What was the name of the firm?

15. Which Calgary Jew (s) were involved in each of the following areas prior to 1980: tobacconist, antiques, restauranteur/kosher caterer, furniture store owner, kosher butcher, hotel owner, movie theatre owner, liquor merchant? (each correct name of the person or the business will earn a point)

A Practical Guide to Jewish Cemeteries, by Nolan Menachemson, 2007

A Field Guide to Visiting a Jewish Cemetery, by Rabbi Joshua L. Segal, 2005 Reviewed by Roberta Kerr



A Field Guide to Visiting a Jewish Cemetery A Spiritual Journey to the Past, Present and Future by Joshua L. Segal, Rabbi

The Harry and Martha Cohen Library of JHSSA has two cemetery guides, quite different in tone and format, both offering valuable information to readers.

Although Menachemson's A Practical Guide to Jewish Cemeteries bills itself as "... a simple guide to how Jewish gravestones can be read ..." (vii), it might be better titled "A Modern Historical Guide." Of its 250 pages, less than 50 actually deal with reading headstones and monuments. The rest contain information about famous Jewish cemeteries (including an extensive list of concentration camps); burial locations of famous Jews; the maintenance and preservation of cemeteries and headstones; headstone photography; frequently asked questions regarding burial practices and sites both ancient and modern; and a glossary. Much of the

New Books in our Library

visiting. A quick scan of this book might reveal new avenues of research.

Field Guide to Jewish Cemeteries – see the review of this book on page 5.

A Practical Guide to Jewish Cemeteries – see the review of this book on page 5.

Canada's Jews; a people's journey, by Gerald Tulchinsky, 2008. This 630-page book is an expansion and update

of the author's two works from the 1990s: *Taking Root* and *Branching Out*. It offers "a synthesis of how the Canadian Jewish people got to where they are now, from immigration to integration, in a country in transition from colony to nation." It is a worthwhile read for anyone interested in understanding the development of our community in greater depth.

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I am interested in serving as a volunteer		
I have historical material I would like to donate		
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Coming of Age; a history of the Jewish people of Manitoba, by Allan Levine, 2009 – see the review of this book on page 4.

Fabled City; the Jews of Montreal, by Joe King, 2009. This illustrated book is a fun read even if you are not from Montreal. It is a collection of historical vignettes, gossip and trivia sure to delight any history buff. The author is a journalist/broadcaster who also served as director of communications of Montreal's Jewish Federation for 20 years. The book is peppered with historic photographs and documents.

The Story of Saan, by Albert D. Cohen, 2002. This book was written to celebrate the 55th anniversary of SAAN stores. It follows Mr. Cohen's 1985 work, *The Entrepreneurs*, which told the story of Gendis, Inc. Many in Calgary will have memories of the SAAN stores and the Cohen family's connection to them. This book outlines the history of the family's early businesses, including their years in Calgary, and incorporates thoughts about Albert's personal business philosophy and stories of his adventures doing business in Japan.

YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, 2 volumes, edited by Gershon Hundert, 2008. This encyclopedia is an important source of information about places, organizations, people and the cultural and political life of eastern European Jewry. The entries are written by top scholars in their field. To make maximum use of this excellent reference tool, it is necessary to use the index since it is not always clear which items receive a main entry.

Samuel Helman owned an impressive classical library collection. Following his death in 1981, 2,000 of his books were donated to the University of Calgary. Source: JHSSA interview with Sabine Helman, 1990.

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A Summer of History

The Calgary Jewish community was able to participate this past summer in several notable historic milestones.

June 28 saw the official opening at Heritage Park of the Montefiore Institute – "The Little Synagogue on the Prairie." More than 2,000 people attended the dedication, making it one of the largest Jewish assemblies in Calgary's history.

A number of dignitaries, led by Lieutenant Governor Norman Kwong, praised the Little Synagogue board, community volunteers and the many donors who had made it possible to find, purchase, move and restore the 1916 building.

Students of the Calgary Jewish Academy performed parts of a musical play based on the Montefiore Institute project; they were followed by Klezmer music. Tours of the Little Synagogue concluded the official ceremony.

Heritage Park says the Institute – the Montefiore Jewish farm colony's community centre – is now the secondmost visited site in the historical village.

A few days later the spotlight was turned to the Congregation House of Jacob – Mikveh Israel, celebrating its centennial this year. The congregation, along with Calgary Jewish Community Council, sponsored a float in the Calgary Stampede parade, only the second time the event has included a Jewish presence. The float design noted the achievements of the Jewish community and of notable Jewish citizens. At the rear was a Torah scroll highlighting the verse: "...and you shall love your neighbour as yourself."

Over 600 persons joined volunteers from House of Jacob-Mikveh Israel and the Calgary JCC at a Kosher Stampede Breakfast, held at both the synagogue and the Jewish Community Centre.

Local dignitaries helped the volunteer cooks flip pancakes, served with eggs and hash browns. The congregation's Stampede float was on display. The music of the Calgary Fiddlers and DJ Isaak Kreyner helped enliven the Stampede atmosphere.

The Synagogue and Community Council Stampede committee hope to continue the Kosher breakfast as an annual event.



Calgary Stampede Parade entry. Source: Larry Katz.

Thank you to the following people who have contributed to our Tribute Card program January-September, 2009. Their support helps us maintain our activities. Cards can be ordered by contacting Carey Smith at careysmith@shaw.ca or 403-253-5152 or through the JHSSA office.

Ethel Allman David & Sonia Bickman Frances Bondaroff Emanuel & Donna Cohen Rob & Lisa Cohen Morris & Ann Dancyger Jerry & Faith Dubisky Aron & Ida Eichler Jack & Brenda Eisenberg Milt & Maxine Fischbein Elliot & Dena Gelfand Ralph & Sheila Gurevitch Rennie Hapton Barbara Joffe Joan Joffe Jonathan Joffe Sharna Laven Barbara Libin Jean Libin Phil & Harriet Libin Lucien & Carole Lieberman Miriam Milavsky Gerry & Charlene Molotsky Therese Nagler Phil & Judy Parker Amanda Pyle Sylvia Polsky Eliezer Segal & Agi Romer Segal Marcel & Minnie Segal Stanley & Carey Smith Sheldon Smithens Fran Viner Helen Walker

A Practical Guide to Jewish Cemeteries

Continued from Page 5

detail is interesting, and would certainly be appreciated by anyone seeking historical, general or background information.

Rabbi Segal's A Field Guide to Visiting a Jewish Cemetery is more practical in approach: in memory of the author's parents, the dedication page includes photographs of their headstones, with line-by-line translations. The guide assumes fluency in neither Hebrew nor Yiddish, and makes note of the Yiddish equivalents of common Hebrew names and inscriptions. Although the quality of some of the book's photos could be improved, the inscription close-ups are helpful reminders of the difference between stone-carved letters and paper-printed ones. A chapter entitled 'Monuments 101' outlines the basics of how to interpret a headstone. Subsequent sections detail tombstone art, issues of dates, variations on inscriptions (including how to find information that appears in the middle of a line rather than at the beginning), and even how to spot and 'decode' errors.

Before a European trip, the Menachemson guide would be worthwhile: driving west from Manitoba on the #18 highway and seeing the Hirsch colony's cemetery gates, I'd recommend the Segal.



JHSSA Tribute Card – Ben Maerov, 1923.

JHSSA News — — —

Mel Nagler^{z"1}

The JHSSA has lost a great friend with the passing of long serving Director Mel Nagler^{z"1}. Mel's was always the voice of considered reason on our Board. The JHSSA relied on his expertise to guide us in financial matters. For many years Mel joked about charging the Society rent for the hundreds of copies of our first book, Land of Promise, stored in his basement until they were finally all sold. Mel was proud of his efforts on the behalf of the JHSSA and his contributions were appreciated. He will be missed.

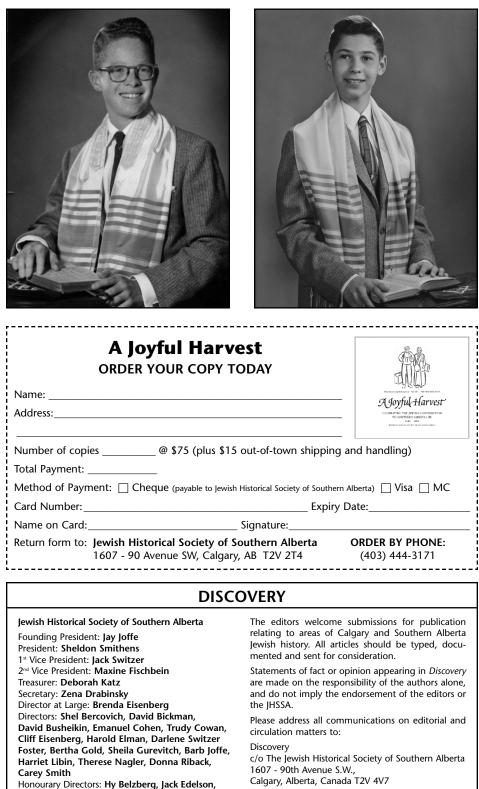
The Surazh Connection

A group of lewish history buffs in Vancouver with ancestral connections to the town of Surazh, near Gomel, in Belarus, are interested in organizing a group visit to the town as a follow-up to a presentation made by a Jewish Distribution Committee representative who is serving in Belarus. A number of prominent Calgary families also stem from that area. Anyone with information about their family roots in Surazh or those interested in joining such an organized tour are asked to contact our office, jhssa@shaw.ca or 403-444-3171. We will pass the information along to the Vancouver group.

National Oral History Project

lewish archives and historical societies from all over Canada have been contacted by the National Centre for Jewish Heritage of the UJA Federation of Greater Toronto for their help with a new national initiative. The UJA Federation of Toronto is hoping to compile a list of all oral histories that have been completed with Canadian Jewish veterans and Holocaust survivors from across the country. Earlier projects have compiled interviews with survivors. Now the National Centre for Jewish Heritage would like to do the same with the veterans and will be working with the Dominion Institute as partners to engage in this initiative, with the help of a large federal grant, to conduct over 1,000 interviews with veterans. IHSSA has been asked to share information regarding interviews we have conducted in the past and help compile a list of veterans to be interviewed.

Can you help us identify these Bar Mitzvah boys?



Henry Gutman, Mel Nagler²⁷¹, Mel Polsky Archivist: Agi Romer Segal Office: Naomi Kerr, Roberta Kerr Editors: Jack Switzer, Agi Romer Segal, Maxine Fischbein

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