



# JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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## Esther and Peretz Hirshbein – Calgary's Yiddish Celebrities

*by Jack Switzer*

Two of the brightest stars in the Yiddish literary firmament have major ties to Calgary. Poet Esther Shumiatcher was raised here. In 1918 she met and married her husband, Yiddish writer Peretz Hirshbein, in Calgary. They lived in the city for a brief time in the early 1930s, and were frequent visitors to the Canadian west.

Esther Shumiatcher was 19 when she married Hirshbein; he was 38, and had achieved considerable fame in Europe and America as a Yiddish poet, novelist, and playwright. Born in 1899, Esther was the 4th of 11 children born to Judah and Chasa Shumiatcher in Gomel, Russia. Her father and brother Morris came to Alberta in 1908; the rest of the family, shepherded by oldest brother Abraham, joined them in Calgary in 1909. All but Abraham changed their family name to Smith.

Peretz Hirshbein was born in 1880 in what is now eastern Poland. Following a brief stint as a Yeshiva student he began writing stories in Yiddish and poems in Hebrew. In 1904 he moved to Warsaw, where such Yiddish luminaries as I.L. Peretz and Sholem Ashe encouraged him to become a dramatist. In 1906 he formed and directed the influential Yiddish drama group in Odessa, touring throughout Russia.

He continued his prolific writing career after reaching New York in 1911. A five-volume collection of 26 Hirshbein plays appeared in 1916. As a popular lecturer, he visited Winnipeg in 1917 and Calgary in 1918, where he was sponsored by the Jewish (Yiddish) Literary Society. Here he met Esther (nee Ethyl) Shumiatcher. They were married on December 15, 1918.

While the wedding guests were toasting the Hirshbeins in Calgary, Jewish theatre critics in New York were praising a major production of Peretz' play, *A Farvorfn Vinkl* (A Secluded Corner). Yiddish theatre historians consider this production the start of a serious, mature phase in the genre. (Much previous Yiddish theatre had been melodramatic, star-based, and of the tear-jerker type.) The play ran for fourteen weeks, very long for the Yiddish theatre.

The couple began a two-year long world tour in 1920, travels which included visits to the South Pacific, South America, and an extended stay "in the jungles of Africa among the Zulu tribes," as well as more conventional stops in Europe. Their travelogue was serialized in the Yiddish press and appeared as a book *Arum der Velt* (Around the World).

Hirshbein's best-known Yiddish play, *Grine Felder* (Green Fields) was published in 1923. Soon after, he and Esther began a very long travel odyssey, spending six years in various locales such as Japan, China, and India, where they spent over a year and studied with Mahatma Gandhi. During this time they also visited Palestine, lived in Paris for some time and stayed 15 months in the Soviet Union.

In 1930/31 they spent several months in Calgary, living at the home of Esther's mother, Chasa Smith, at 1137 - 6th Avenue SW (family patriarch Judah had died in 1923). The writers were frequent guests and speakers at Yiddishist events in Calgary and Winnipeg. Both of Winnipeg's Jewish papers—one Yiddish and one English, had numerous articles about their activities during this period.

Early in 1931 *Grine Felder* was pre-



Peretz and Esther Hirshbein, 1919. Photo – Annie Paperny & Clara Blackstone

sented in English as *Green Meadows* in Winnipeg by a University of Manitoba Jewish drama club. The playwright was present for opening night. In December the English version was produced in Calgary to honor Hirshbein's 50th birthday. It starred Sarah Pravatiner, his sister, and was directed by his brother-in-law, Abraham Pravatiner, then principal of the Peretz School.

Sarah Hirshbein Pravatiner, listed as an actress on her immigration documents, worked as a teacher at the Yiddish school. The Pravatiners lived here from September, 1930, to June, 1933, when they returned to New York.

The Hirshbeins also settled in New York, where they continued writing. Their only child, Omus, was born in 1933. In 1940 the family moved to Los Angeles.

Esther was the first in her family to revert to the Shumiatcher name. Her nephew Morris Shumiatcher notes, "What

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*It's your membership and continuing support that enables us to publish Discovery. Thank you.*

# David Cohen, the Wandering Jew

by Myra Paperny

The major exodus of European Jews to North America was the flight of refugees from poverty and persecution to the safety of a free land. Once here, these immigrants usually established themselves permanently in a single location, accepting the harshness of adapting to the new world as fair exchange for the greater freedom and opportunity of the chosen land.

However a few arch-individualists maintained their status as mythical "wandering Jews" continually searching for new areas to explore and conquer. My grandfather David Cohen was certainly one of these nomadic souls.

Born in Kovna province, Lithuania, in 1878, he was a short self-assured individual. He first emigrated to London, England, where he painted houses and hung wallpaper in Whitechapel, the old Jewish district. There he fell in love with another Litvak, Katie Goldberg. She had huge dark eyes, small fine features and heavy black hair, which she wore pulled back into the pompadour style of the day.

Although she had arrived alone in London, she had the same steely determination to make it in the new world. Her story was not an unfamiliar one; during pogroms in her shtetel she had been a special target for the marauding Russians. While her parents had always managed to hide Katie from the lecherous invaders, in a crawl space under their small house, they eventually dispatched her to landsleit in London.

The couple married October 18, 1902, and left almost immediately for South Africa. Despairing of the situation in Lithuania, David's family had recently migrated there. The group included his parents—Isaac and Leah Cohen—his younger brother Morris, and three sisters—Mary, Cecilia, and Tilley. Morris soon moved to Canada.

Reunited with his family, David paused only long enough to father two daughters—Lily and Jessie. A most enthusiastic letter arrived from his brother Morris, now in Canada. Dave said goodbye to his wife and family and made the long voyage to Canada.

Katie and her two children finally joined him in 1907, in Winnipeg. She wept openly as the wind and drifting snow whipped round her long skirt as she stepped off the train with her daughters.

"We left Gan Aden (the garden of Eden) for this desolate place?" she reportedly cried.

Their second child, Jessie, always remembered swooping down to grab a handful of the white stuff on the station platform. "Mama, mama, sugar," she said. Then she too let out a wail as the snow touched her lips.

The two brothers, David and Morris Cohen, travelled with their wagons peddling dry goods and other essentials to farmers living in northern Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Katie remained in Winnipeg long enough to give birth to their first son, Teddy.

The call of the unexplored regions then drove the Cohen family to the Peace River country of northern Alberta. While his brother managed the business from Edmonton, David Cohen made his headquarters in Smoky Lake (south of Athabasca), insisting that his wife and children remain in Winnipeg.

Despite warnings from her Winnipeg friends, stubborn Katie packed up her brood and her newly-acquired household furniture and trekked northward too.

The family arrived safely in Smoky Lake, but the barge carrying all their personal belongings and furniture remained frozen in the middle of the river for the entire winter.

During spring thaw, fearing that the furniture would soon float free and disappear down the river, several thoughtful neighbors rushed to the rescue. Unfortunately, their enthusiasm was excessive. Instead of presenting Katie with her cherished collection of solid, carved mahogany furniture, all that remained was a heap of firewood. Katie wept briefly, then packed once again for Edmonton and civilization.

In 1908, after a brief pause in Vancouver for more supplies, the expanding family took the boat trip north to Prince Rupert, B.C. The town was not yet incorporated. Here, on Third Avenue, Dave, brother Morris, and friend Isidore Director established the first Jewish business in northern British Columbia.

After two years the three Cohen children dared to hope that this home was permanent. Unfortunately, while Katie was in hospital delivering their fourth child, nine year-old Lily suffered a severe attack of quinsy tonsillitis and died. (In the pre-antibiotic era, abscessive tonsillitis was a dangerous infection.)

The newborn, Elliot, always remembered his birthday, June 29, 1912, with great pain. No celebrations were ever

allowed on that day because of the death of his sister. (Lily Cohen's grave is one of the earliest in the quaint old Vancouver Jewish cemetery on Fraser Street.)

Yet another exodus followed this tragedy. New cars were always Dave's weakness, and he bought a huge Buick to convey his family over the Big Bend highway from Vancouver, down through the United States, and back up into Alberta.

The Cohen children became advance scouts on these primitive roads and narrow mountain passes. They stood hollering around the corners, warning oncoming vehicles of their approach. This way their Papa avoided the harrowing task of backing up for miles along the twisty hairpin passages.

Since Papa loved nothing better than navigating North America—packing a tent on top of the car—the family spent summers on unfamiliar highways and secondary roads investigating mineral springs where Mama could take the waters. They also dropped in on relatives in Chicago, Pittsburgh, and other points.

Next, the family settled briefly in Leduc. With the advent of two more children, Hazel in 1915, and Hymie in 1917, they moved to Edmonton, where Dave and Katie ran ladies' wear stores. The Cohens remained there long enough for the older boys to attend the University of Alberta and for the daughters to marry.

Although the Cohens had a large social circle in Edmonton, in 1933 Dave was once again overcome by "shpilkes"—pins and needles. To fulfill his grand dream, he sold his home and business and dropped off the youngest child, Hi (then fifteen) with the oldest married daughter Jessie, in Ponoka, where she lived with husband Michael Green.

Then he and Katie emigrated to the ultimate homeland—Palestine.

Dave and Katie Cohen stayed there only one year; they had not anticipated the Arab riots in which many were injured and killed. They returned, slightly chagrined, to set up yet another country store in Hay Lake, Alberta, north of Camrose.

Hay Lakes Mercantile was a combination grocery, dry goods, farm implement, hardware store plus two gas pumps. The village had a single main street while several houses and farms lay scattered like a confused flock of geese across the outlying prairie.

There was no running water, the elec-

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## David Cohen

Continued from Page 2

tricity was unreliable, and the rutted corduroy road down to Camrose was impassable after a heavy storm. It was so remote that their elder daughter marked the telephone pole closest to the turn-off with a slash of bright lipstick. That system was efficient until a fierce hailstorm destroyed the identification mark. The Cohens lived above the store and the place was a fascinating destination for visiting grandchildren.

After establishing a second store in Camrose before World War II, the senior Cohens finally retired to Edmonton, where their younger daughter Hazel (married to Ted Cristall) lived. Katie Cohen finally had the leisure time to entertain huge numbers of friends with her celebrated cuisine. Adored by children and grandchildren alike, she remained there until her death in 1943.

David remarried and spent his final years in Vancouver near his brother and daughter Jessie. His youngest son, Hy (married to Lillian Finkleman) also relocated to Vancouver.

Both older sons were active founders of the Banff School of Fine Arts before they left for the United States. Ted (married to Betty O'Shay), who changed his name to Corday for theatrical purposes, directed, wrote, and produced TV soap operas in New York and Los Angeles. Elliot (Marian Lipkind) was an eminent cardiologist in Los Angeles.

Although his children were often overwhelmed by the powerful personality and

mercurial temper of their bon vivant father, the older grandchildren loved the the dramatic Passover seders he conducted, as well as the incredible tales of his travels. He played gin rummy with them (and always won) and pinochle with his brother and son-in-law. He also followed his lifelong interests in politics and gardening.

At age 65 Dave suffered a heart attack while painting the exterior of a commercial

two-storey building he had recently purchased. He died the following day.

While only one child survives (Hy Corday), David Cohen left many descendants and remains a larger-than-life myth in family chronicles.

*Myra Paperny is the daughter of Jessie Cohen Green and grand-daughter of David and Katie Cohen.*



David Cohen Family, 1926. Seated (l-r): Katie, Hy, David. Standing: Jessie, Elliot, Ted, Hazel. Photo - Myra Paperny.

## Esther and Peretz Hirshbein

Continued from Page 1

kind of poet would Esther Smith be?"

Her literary career is well summarized in *A Century of Yiddish Poetry*: "Her first Yiddish book *In the Valley* (1920) was followed by *Streaks of Light* five years later and *Hours of Love* in 1930. During that decade she published both in such nonpolitical journals as *In Zich* and in the left-wing *Hammer*, *Freiheit*, and *Red World* among others. She also wrote critical essays ... in Los Angeles her *Poems* (1956) appeared."

Like many poets, she suffered relative neglect when compared to the writers of more popular literary genres. For example, the *Encyclopedia Judaica* devotes almost a page to the life and work of Peretz Hirshbein; Esther Shumiatcher gets 14 lines.

Peretz Hirshbein's fortunes rose and fell with the fortunes of Yiddish the-

atre. In 1918 there were 24 professional Yiddish stages in the United States—half in New York. Amateur groups flourished in Canadian Jewish centers, including Calgary. Live Yiddish drama's decline began about 1930, with the growing popularity of radio, movies, and the assimilation of Yiddish speakers into the larger society.

Peretz Hirshbein died in 1948, at 68 years of age. Omus was just 15, and Esther struggled financially and emotionally for several years. Her brother Abraham occasionally sent her cash gifts. Their correspondence, with Esther's notes of gratitude, are found in the A.I. Shumiatcher files at the Glenbow Alberta Archives.

Esther Shumiatcher Hirshbein visited Calgary only occasionally after Peretz' death. Late in life she married Irving

Fineman, a novelist and screenwriter. She died in 1985. Her son Omus Hirshbein, a musician, lives in New York, where he is a symphony orchestra administrator. He was the recipient of the 1997 Jewish Cultural Achievement Award in Performing Arts.

Peretz Hirshbein's plays are still being produced. January 14, 2000 was the closing date for a three-month run of *Grine Felder* at New York's Mazer Theatre. Adapted as a musical, it was presented in Yiddish with English and Russian translations available. His poem *A Malach Veint* (An Angel Cries), was recently set to music and recorded by the Klezmatics on a popular compact disc.

*Sources, JHSSA Archives, Glenbow Alberta Archives, Agi Romer Segal. The JHSSA has first-edition copies of Esther's Lieder and Peretz' Arum der Velt.*



Did a Rothschild dance with local heiress?

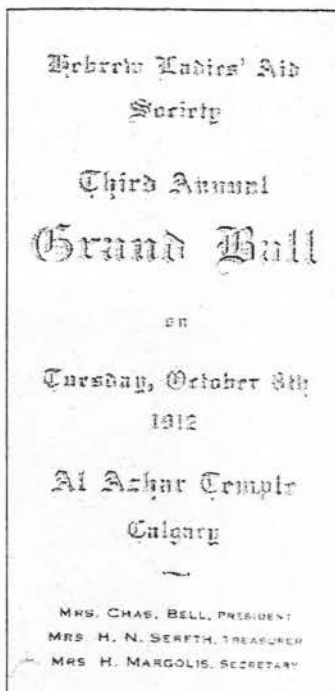
## Calgary Jewish Socialites Hold Grand Balls, 1912-1913

by Jack Switzer

Dance cards from three 1912 and 1913 social events in Calgary give us a glimpse of a seldom-studied aspect of local Jewish history, the busy world of young Jewish socialites.

The cards are those of Cecyle Sereth, then about 20 and one of five daughters of Rachel and Henry N. Sereth, then Calgary's wealthiest Jewish family.

The dances were "Grand Balls", all held at the Al Azhar Temple, 508 - 17th Avenue S.W. They were sponsored by Agudas Zion, Calgary's first Zionist club; the Hebrew Ladies' Aid Society; and the Hebrew Board of Education.



Names on the cards are somewhat difficult to read and trace, but the few we know were relatively young, well-

off managers, proprietors and professionals, members of the emerging second-generation Jewish middle class.

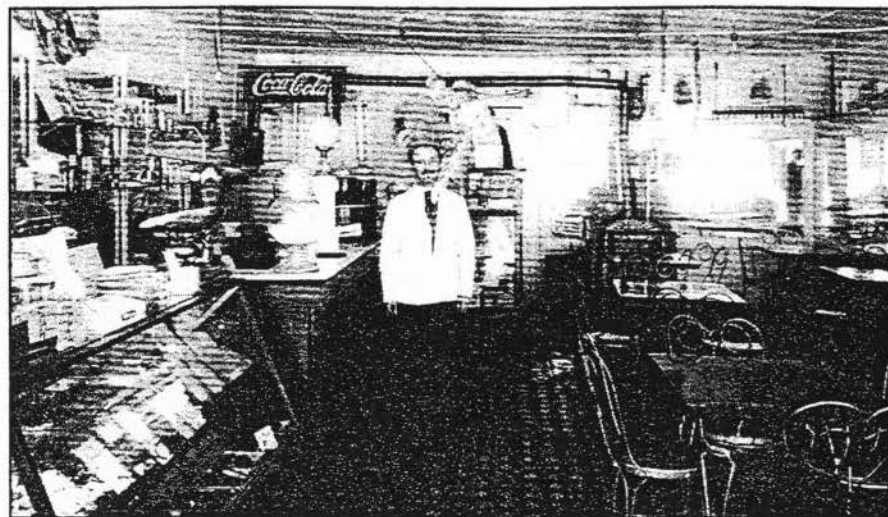
One name—Rothschild—is a mystery. Did the daughter of Calgary's wealthiest Jew dance with the son of the world's wealthiest Jew? A news item noted the visit to Calgary of an "E. de Rothschild and manservant", as well as a secretary, in September, 1911. This may have been James Armand Edmund Rothschild (1878-1978), who was later to be a British war hero, Zionist leader and Member of Parliament.

There were no Jews named Rothschild living in Calgary at the time. We could find no mention of a Rothschild visit about the times the three Calgary dances were held, and our speculation may be unfounded.

In 1914 Cecyle Sereth married Harry Allen, whose family ran Canada's largest theatre chain from Calgary for several years. The dance cards were owned by their daughter, Ethel Allen of Toronto, and were sent to the JHSSA by her nephew, Stanley Winfield.

Sources - Ethel Allen, Stanley Winfield, JHSSA Archives, Glenbow Alberta Library.

## Business History Project



Dr. Carl Safran's father, Isaac Safran in his confectionery, 1920s. Source - Dr. Carl Safran. This is one of the many replies with histories and photos we've received from this project.

The JHSSA's Business History project is well under way, and has produced many replies to date. We will publish excerpts from these submissions in the next *Discovery*.

The business project is being co-

ordinated by Sheila Gurevitch. If you or your family ran any type of business in southern Alberta, we are anxious to hear about it and to view your photos. Please mail them to Sheila at the JHSSA office.

# A Precious Heirloom Survives

by Irene Ross

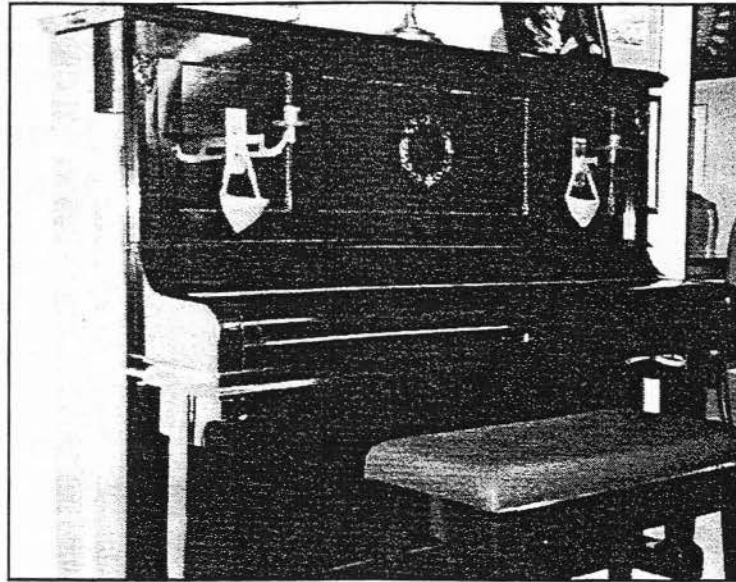
Our house is a nice home. It is relatively modern, having being built in 1978, and like many houses in Calgary, it is still really quite new. From the front door you enter the living room, decorated with paintings and ornaments, but it is the piano, against the inner wall of the room, which attracts attention. It is black, and upright and has the unusual feature of having two candelabras over the keyboard. There is something about the piano which always draws comments and questions. That piano holds precious memories of my mother and grandmother and is a testament to brave and courageous acts, and to terrible times. Of all the beautiful and meaningful things in our house, the piano must represent one of the most important links to my family.

Let me begin. May 1940. Amsterdam, Holland. The Germans have invaded and two weeks later I was born at my grandmother's house. My mother had been warned not to go to any hospital as there was increasing danger, and hospitals were needed for wounded soldiers and civilian casualties. There were rumors that Jews were at great risk, but little was known of the terrible events already occurring.

Within two years everything changed. Jews were wearing the yellow star and were restricted in every aspect of their lives. Arrests and deportations were common. My mother faced an impossible decision. Her parents—my grandparents—were elderly and frail. My grandmother was blind and my grandfather not well. The Dutch underground was trying to save as many as possible, but there were few avenues of escape.

As I look back over these long years, I know it was at that moment that my mother demonstrated the greatest courage and love for me and her parents. Through a series of different contacts, my mother secured a position with an older non-Jewish lady of some social standing. She obtained false papers

through the underground and had to leave Amsterdam. In what must have been a most devastating decision, she arranged for me to be hidden in the north-western part of Holland with a non-Jewish family whom she had never met. She must have known she might never see me again.



She was later to relate that many families perished because they could not part with their children.

A hiding place was found for my grandparents but this did not last long and they were forced to move to a boarding house, as they were too feeble and unwell to go anywhere else. She was able to meet them at pre-planned times and places to provide food stamps and encouragement, but it was a very dangerous undertaking.

One day, early in 1943, they failed to come to the designated meeting place. Decades after the war my mother learned they had been forcibly removed from the boarding house and taken to Westerbork concentration camp, and killed on July 23, 1943 at Sobibor, Poland.

So what about the piano? It had been a gift from my mother's parents when she was about 12 years old. At that time it was not a new piano. She must have become quite an accomplished pianist as some of her music remained with her, and now with me, and it is clearly of a high standard. At the time each of us went to our place of hiding, my mother's belongings remained in my grandparents' home.

Mother survived the war despite intense hardship and danger, and in 1945 came to claim me at my refuge. That, in itself, is another story. Some time after the war, when she was somewhat re-settled, she returned to Amsterdam. She wanted to find out what had happened to her parents, and wanted to recover some of her and their belongings.

Strangers opened the door of the home where they had lived. They had no knowledge of her, her parents, or of any belongings. As she turned and began walking away, the woman of the house called her back and said, "When we bought the house it was empty, except that there was a piano. It is in the basement."

Mother went to the basement and there was her piano. Nothing else remained.

She would often say, "I believe that the piano waited for me."

The piano became the piano I learned to play on. Even in those early years of my life I had no knowledge of its history, although I knew there was something very special about it. My mother remarried after the war and the piano became the focal point of her home.

In 1956 the Russians invaded Hungary and Jews throughout Europe feared another occupation. Overnight, my stepfather took my mother and myself out of Holland, first to Ireland and eventually to New Zealand. Of course, the piano came too, and once again became the focal point of our living room there.

When, in later years, my mother joined our family in Calgary, of course the piano came with her. In the week prior to her death, she heard her grandson, my son, play some music that I had learned and that she had learned as a child, on the same piano. It was a special moment. Later my daughter also learned to play and even teach other students on the same piano.

The piano is now at least one hundred years old. It is in some wonderful way the custodian of memories of love, of courage, and of survival that is so much part of my life.

## Calgary Jews at Work – 1938

In 1938 Calgary's Jews participated in an "economic census" that spelled out the occupational make-up of the community's breadwinners. The census was part of a study undertaken for the Canadian Jewish Congress by its western director, Louis Rosenberg, then of Regina.

Morris Smith, chairman of the Jewish Congress' Calgary branch, sent the results to Rosenberg along with a letter critical of his community's preponderance of small retailers.

"No doubt, you will notice that the great majority of our people are operating small stores. The condition, evidently, is an unhealthy one. We have seven (Jewish) lawyers in the City of Calgary, but we have not one carpenter, bricklayer, or paperhanger ... there are thirty cattle buyers in Calgary alone, there are only seven Jewish farmers in the whole of Alberta that raise the cattle."

The list is incomplete. It does not list any religious functionaries—rabbis, etc. And there are no furniture store owners, hotel operators or CPA's—cleaning, pressing and alterations. Nonetheless it does confirm Morris Smith's small-store generalization.

Smith gives Calgary's 1938 Jewish population as 1328. He lists 385 working Jews in Calgary, about half of whom were proprietors. Of the 200 or so business owners 56 ran grocery stores or confectioneries. There were 26 second-hand dealers and five junk dealers. There were five Jewish shoemakers.

Most shops were run by one person or as "mom and pop" stores, but there were some larger businesses. Morris Smith (Shumiatcher) owned the Smithbilt Hat Company. Abe and Ben Pearlman ran Polar Aerated Beverage Works, the 7-Up bottler; brother Lou Pearlman was the plant "chemist" in the job list. Leo Smith (Sholomenko) operated Superior Laundry, a major steam laundry, ... Calgary had no Jewish-owned clothing factories, common features of the business environment in Winnipeg and eastern Canada.

Only a few Jews held government jobs; there was a Jewish mail carrier, a customs clerk, and only two schoolteachers. Old-timers talk about pervasive anti-Semitism among government agencies and "establishment" stores, but we must also consider the general economic situation—Canada was just emerging from the Great Depression, and there was little new hiring—as well as the problematic English-

language situation of the many relative newcomers.

Some of the 62 "salesmen" on the list may have worked for large retailers. More likely most worked for Jewish businesses or as sales agents and "travellers."

There were relatively few Jewish professionals in Calgary. In this instance, anti-Semitic quotas in Canadian universities did exist, and limited Jewish participation in such areas as law and medicine. We found the names of six lawyers; they were brothers A.L. Barron and J.B. Barron, Samuel J. Helman, Benjamin Ginsberg, Lou Fradkin, and Abraham Shumiatcher. The doctors were Louis Rudin and H.A. Bercov. J. Zimmerman was Calgary's only Jewish dentist.

Smith reported 28 unemployed Jews in the city. "These are mostly heads of families, but there are a great number of young people over the age of eighteen that are not working and most of them have not the slightest plans for the future. On the whole, it is a sad affair."

Small storekeeping was an interim phase for Calgary's Jews. Their old-country parents, restricted by tsarist laws, had been peddlers, draymen, and artisans. Poor but optimistic, they chose small businesses, frequently living behind or above their stores and shops. Their children—today's working Jews—would flourish and expand the occupational spectrum to almost unlimited horizons.

Here is the list of the 1938 Calgary Jewish occupations, as reported by Smith. It includes both business owners and employed persons. Most are men, but a few Jewish women then held jobs or ran stores.

### Jewish school teachers, 7.

**Proprietors:** Grocery Stores, 38, Second Hand Stores, 26, Confectioners, 20, Cattle Buyers, 30, Clothing Stores, 13, Misc. Stores, 44, Junk Dealers, 5, Laundry Business, 2, Club Owners, 7, Wholesale News, 1, Rooming House, 1, Landlord, 1, Shoemakers, 5, Barbers, 2, Peddlers, 10, Jewellers, 2, Farmers, 1, Furriers, 2, Filling Station, 1, Printer, 1, Butchers, 4, Dairy Business, 3, Bakers (inc. employees), 8.

**Others:** Salesmen, 62, Laborers, 3, Waiters, 1, Truck Drivers, 10, Stenographers, 17, Film Managers, 5, Bookkeepers, 5, Insurance Agents, 3, Musicians, 5, Dieticians, 2, Beauty Culture, 1, Janitors, 1, Chemist, 1, Butchers (employees), 9, Monument engraving, 1, Hat Makers, 2, Tinsmiths, 1, Machinists, 4, Mechanics, 2, Gunsmiths, 1.

**Civil Service, Municipal, etc.:** Mail Carrier, 1, Customs Clerk, 1, Public School Teachers, 2.

**Professional:** Lawyers, 7, Druggist, 1, Doctors, 2, Chiropractist, 1, Engineers, 1.

**Manufacturing - owners:** Soft Drink Mfg, 2, Hat Mfg., 1, Cabinet Makers, 1.

## New Names for Drumheller Jewish Roster

Lil Weiner recently celebrated her one hundredth birthday, and made some additions to our recent articles about the town of Drumheller's Jewish history. Joe and Sarah Ruskin ran a general store in Rosedale; Ethel and Rubin Harris operated a grocery across from the Drumheller train station. Thanks to Lil's daughter Sharna Laven, who brought these names to our attention.

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# Martin Nordegg: Reluctant Jew and Alberta Town-Builder

*Book Reviews by Agi Romer-Segal*

**Martin Nordegg, *The Uncommon Immigrant*** by W. John Koch, Brightest Pebble Publishing Company, Edmonton, 1997.

***To the Town That Bears Your Name*** by Martin Nordegg, translated by Maria Koch, Brightest Pebble Publishing Company, Edmonton, 1995.

W. John Koch subtitles his biography of Martin Nordegg "The Uncommon Immigrant" and his detailed account of the fascinating life of the founder of the Alberta town of Nordegg (west of Rocky Mountain House) certainly tells a story very different from the usual tale of struggling early 20th century immigrants to Canada.

This biography is based partly on Nordegg's own memoirs covering his Canadian experience from 1906 to 1924, but the author has gone well beyond this period, relying on archives and interviews to flesh out his subject's life from his 1868 birth as Martin Cohn, son of a rabbi in Silesia, to his death in New York in 1948. Koch presents Martin as the product of the German Reform movement which advocated the social and political assimilation of the Jews into the surrounding society.

By the time Martin Cohn had completed his excellent education and his compulsory military service and had entered the employ of the famed Buxenstein printing plant in Berlin, it seems he had abandoned his Jewish identity. Much of Martin's story is a combination of good fortune and of his personal traits which led influential people to trust and support him in his varied endeavors.

A fortunate meeting occurred with one such person, Colonel Talbot, who in 1905 convinced him that Canada needed such enterprising men. With his employer's support and financial backing, Martin arrived in Canada in 1906 and within 48 hours had met with Wilfred Laurier and other government officials. Koch recounts how his diligent research and keen observation skills led him to investigate investment possibilities in Western Canada where the railway was being expanded.

By 1909 he had changed his name to Nordegg (that is, North and "ecke" "corner", Koch postulates) and had staked claims to possible coal mining areas in the

South Brazeau River region. By 1912 he had developed and even drawn his own plans for the townsite of Nordegg, based on the "garden village" model. The descriptions of Nordegg's ideas for the model town and its actual early development are both informative and entertaining.

Nordegg developed a great love for the mountain landscape of the West and in 1912 documented his trip west with his 14 year old only daughter Marcelle in *To the Town that Bears Your Name*, translated here by Maria Koch. This touching account reveals his adventurous spirit, his keen observation skills and his respect for the local guides. Nordegg often passed

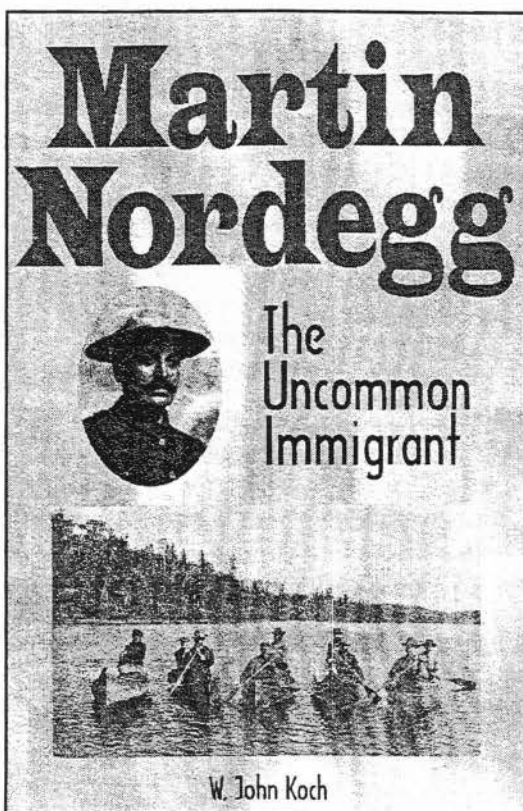
were taken over by the Canadian government. He maintained his friendships and for a brief period in the 1920s to 1930s moved back to Ottawa where he made extensive social and political contacts. He even wrote a book on the "Fuel Problems of Canada".

His first wife died in 1924 after years of suffering with depression and other medical problems and later his daughter was also diagnosed as depressive. He had a happy second marriage to Sonia Meisel who had acted on the American Yiddish stage. Together they travelled widely and made frequent trips to Europe where they witnessed the rise of Fascism and the deteriorating situation of the Jews. They often

helped family and friends at risk to themselves. In 1938 Nordegg reported to Canada on the situation in Europe. His wife became increasingly involved in charitable causes to help the new refugees. His memorial is decorated by a large map of Canada. Ironically, though he had hoped for immortality, he left no descendants. Marcelle died in an institution in Germany in 1945 and was buried in a mass grave and all traces of her son and ex-husband disappeared during the war. The town of Nordegg was officially closed in 1955.

Martin Nordegg gave up his Jewish identity yet among his important achievements was the aid he provided for those fleeing persecution in Europe and through his wife, much of his wealth went to charitable causes for refugees.

These two works together are a fascinating read. They paint a vivid portrait of an unusual man and tell a gripping tale of one man's role in the development of the West. While Martin Nordegg operated on a grander scale than most successful immigrants, he shared many of their traits. He was ambitious, an astute observer and a risk taker, willing to undergo hardships, who made wise use of his language skills and connections. He was loyal and fair and largely played the role of a middle man. He was passionate about his new home but remained steeped in the culture of his homeland. This biography is a welcome addition to the growing number of works which document the contribution of immigrants to Canada's history.



through Morley and made his headquarters in the Banff Springs Hotel in grand style.

The railway line to Nordegg officially opened in 1914, but with the unanticipated outbreak of WWI, his fortunes declined. Even his highly placed friends could not prevent the general alienation towards Germans and he finally had to move to New York, where his movements were also restricted. Finally, in 1918, the stocks of the German Development Company which he had established

## Treasures From the Archives

by Harry M. Sanders

Two recent acquisitions have made the Calgary Hebrew School papers the largest body of archival records held by the Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta. Two longtime active board members of the Calgary Hebrew School (a predecessor of today's Calgary Jewish Academy), Yale Joffe and Al Rubin, have donated valuable papers that will be available to researchers through the JHSSA's archives.

Yale Joffe's father, Joe Joffe, served as treasurer of the Calgary Hebrew School Board from about 1926-1951. The only way for him to relinquish the position, Yale recalls, was to find a replacement, hence Yale's term as treasurer (circa 1951-1956). Yale went on to serve as the board's vice-president and finally as president (circa 1967-1969). Among the 1.6 metres of records Yale donated are financial ledgers dating back to 1938.

Al Rubin's connection to the Calgary Hebrew School dates back to his father-in-law, Charles Waterman. So dedicated was Mr. Waterman to the school, and so successful was he at fundraising, that in 1959 the Calgary Hebrew School was styled as the Charles Waterman Talmud Torah. Al Rubin became active on the board in the early 1950s, and eventually served as president. "Ever since I got married in 1944, I was doing something for the Talmud Torah," he recalls.

Together, these two accessions add tremendously to the Hebrew School records previously held by the JHSSA. The financial records, annual and miscellaneous reports, correspondence files and publications in this collection will assist future researchers in understanding the administrative and social history of the school and the Jewish community it served.

Another important accession, donated by Jack Feingold, includes correspondence files, miscellaneous records and a variety of artifacts from Calgary B'nai Brith Lodge No. 816. Jack Feingold has been a longtime active member of the lodge, and served as its president from 1984 to 1995.

## JHSSA News

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Books have been added to the Harry B. Cohen library in honour of the following: Mel Nagler's 70th birthday by Tiby & Azriel Presma; Mel Levitt on his retirement by Bill & Bernice Cohen of Cupertino, CA; Ida Horwitz on her 90th birthday by Doris Miller, Lila & Jacques Mydlarski & Reva Love.

A Heritage Certificate was sent to Ida Horwitz by Frances Horwitz & David Berger to honour her 90th birthday.

Call Tiby Presma, at 281-3910, or call the JHSSA office to arrange for one of these donation opportunities.

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