



DISCOVERY

The Journal of the

תגלית

# JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY of Southern Alberta

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Elhanan Hanson and Sonia Belkin on their wedding day in Calgary, December 1909.

## Three Score and ...

by Elhanan Hanson

Introduction by Harry Sanders

*Elhanan Hanson, a Jewish activist in prerevolutionary Russia, came to Alberta in 1906. After life in Calgary and on the farm, he and his family finally settled in Edmonton. Hanson became an acclaimed Yiddish author and one of Edmonton's more prominent Jewish citizens.*

*At age 60, Hanson wrote his life's story, published in Winnipeg's Jewish Post on November 18, 1948. Following are three excerpts from Three Score and.... The Historical Society has a copy of the complete article which anyone can read by contacting the Society.*

Now that I am sixty, perhaps I may be indulged in a little reminiscing. After all, it is not how long an individual lives that is all important but his achievement, his contributions to society, his endeavours towards himself and mankind in general, that is the quintessence of his life and is of real concern to himself and society.

Far be it for me to philosophize or propagate any ideas or ideals. I will

merely attempt to analyze myself and take stock, so to speak, of my sixty years thus far.

Born and raised in the pale of Jewish settlements in the hinterlands of Tzarist Russia, among the poor and illiterate peasants, I was enabled from my earliest childhood to fathom the inbred hatred of the down-trodden Mozhik, as well as the Tzarist bureaucracy towards the Jew. Time and again my parents warned me to keep away from the *shkotsim*, the peasant children, for very obvious reasons. By not heeding their warning I met with this first experience, which left an indelible impression on my mind, one which caused me to modulate my character and psychology in the years to come.

When a youngster of about seven, unknown to our parents, I persuaded a chum of mine to take a hike out of town. It was a beautiful summer day. The fields and the woods were attired in their summer best. The birds

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## Journal Notes

by Jay Joffe

If you enjoyed reading the Community Minutes from 1912, 1913 and 1914 in the last issue you will want to read the feature story in this issue. Here is a beautifully written family history from that era. It originates in Russia, then moves to a first-hand account of pioneering starting in the Calgary area.

That we keep finding such rich material on the pioneering years is very rewarding, and we thank the Community Council and the Jewish Centre for helping us share these stories with you.

As always, the Historical Society volunteers are busy. Henry Gutman, Dinah Spindel and Sid Macklin have been organizing our first casino, scheduled for June 10-11 at the Cash Casino on the Blackfoot Trail. Over forty volunteers have registered to help.

Donna Grunberg's committee is meeting regularly to put together the Society's first-ever photographic exhibit of the history of Alberta Jews, scheduled to open October 15.

And finally, a very special thanks to the Harry B. Cohen Foundation for its generous donation of \$5,000 over a two-year period to establish the Harry B. Cohen Jewish Genealogical Library and Family Archives, under the supervision of the Society.

I hope you enjoy this issue, and your continued support for the association is most appreciated.

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### Three Score and...

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chirped all around and I felt as free and happy as they. On the outskirts of the town we ran into two peasant youngsters, one about my age who carried a big stick and the other a tot of about three or four. Our inbred fear of the *shkotsim* forced us to take to the hills. It was not long before I was overtaken by the older boy, who, without hesitation started to belabor me with his stick, aided and abetted by the tot who had picked up a switch along the way. My crying and pleading was to no avail and when they had tired of beating me and finally left me alone, nothing remained of the stick but splinters. Only then, did my childish mind revolt and jeer at me. Why had I run away? Why did I not fight back! Why! Why! Why!!! I was consumed with shame for my cowardice.

That incident converted me into a reckless youngster, with an ever increasing urge to fight back at even greater odds. I did not dare tell my parents about this incident for fear of further chastisement in not heeding their warning.

*Tzarist autocracy and anti-Semitism completed Hanson's education in Russia. To him — as to many others — emigration was preferable to the injustices inflicted on peasants and Jews.*

Summer of 1906. A letter from a young man who had escaped the Tzarist bloodhounds and landed in far off Western Canada, reached us. That letter opened new, bright and unlimited horizons, promising alluring vistas. In it he claimed "Land you can get for the asking, a hundred and sixty acres of it. The limitless prairies offer you the choice of your heart's desire. Forsake the land of oppression. Come and settle in the new land!"

No second invitation was necessary, for that was to be the realization of a long-coveted dream. About the middle of September, 1906 I set foot on the C.P.R. Station platform in Calgary.

My father's house was strictly Orthodox, also strict in many other ways. Therefore, it is understandable that the atmosphere, not only of the house, but the street, the chaidar, the school, was strictly observant. Under the circumstances, it was natural that as soon as I boarded the ocean liner I unloaded myself of all the spiritual baggage, that to my way of thinking was absolutely an unnecessary burden. I threw it overboard without any hesitation. Unfortunately, in my eagerness to become a citizen of the world, a cosmopolitan, unfettered and unbound by any spiritual, traditional, or national bonds, I did not realize then, that I had deprived my inner self of all that was dear and sacred to every conscious and conscientious Jew.



Mitchell, the first-born and his sister Marie, 1913.

I did not realize that I had broken a bond that had for many generations and centuries welded together Jewry the world over. I did not then appreciate that by divesting myself of everything that our people, from time immemorial had contributed, even to their very lives, to sanctify His name, I was also divesting myself of the light of ethics and high ideals, that my people had unstintingly contributed to a pagan world throughout the ages, in the form of our scriptures and prophets, as well as the monumental Talmudic edifice. My faith in the Marxian socialism and in mankind as a whole, made me see visions of a better world, full of brotherly love, without man-made boundaries, without hatred and persecution....

Four decades and more have since passed by. The rosy visions of my youth have turned into painful disillusion. My faith in mankind and particularly in Marxian socialism was shaken to the core, and for very obvious reasons. Yes, I had labored long, nothing seemed too difficult for me, be it at the C.P.R. shops, working for seventeen cents per hour, or blasting rocks and boring through the heart of the Canadian Rockies by the Great Divide, where a man's life is worth less than the stick of dynamite that was used in the blasting. Subsequently, I had proved my homestead in the foothills, right in the heart of the cattle country. The pioneer ranchers of the good old frontier days naturally strongly resented the invasion of the homesteader, in what they

## DISCOVERY

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The Editors welcome submissions for publication relating to areas of Calgary and Southern Alberta Jewish History. All articles should be typed, documented and sent for consideration.

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Individual	\$10
Family	\$15
Institutions/Corporations	\$25

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considered their domain, so aside from hard work, there was also hard fighting to do to assert my homestead rights.

I was married in the winter of 1909. My bride was in Calgary, where the wedding was to take place in the circle of our own immediate family. It was twenty odd miles from the farm to Calgary, I could not waste such a journey by just driving into town. Besides, I had to raise some ready cash for wedding incidentals, so I brought along a load of hay to sell. Without a highway in the foothills, with a heavy load, in severe winter weather, driving was no picnic. Therefore, the ceremony was held up until late evening until the tardy groom had arrived.

Everything was in readiness. The *chupa* was set up, the Reverend and all the guests were waiting. Then, I declared my second strike. I refused to go under the "chupa", and I also refused the services of the Reverend, for how does it behoove a progressive and radical person to go through with such nonsense. A ring and the "hary-att" was enough for me, I insisted. But there I lost my strike, for I was one against all and I soon found myself being led under the wedding canopy. That incident cost my young and blushing bride a good many tears, for she had eagerly anticipated a real Jewish wedding. She had even provided the wedding ring, for I did not have the ready cash to buy one. And so, we became man and wife with *mazol*.

Our honeymoon was a back trek to the farm in the hay rack, loaded with our wedding presents, on top of which sat the shivering bride. Oh! what a honeymoon it was. It was forty degrees below zero with a stiff breeze



Elhanan and Sonia Hanson with their children Max (on Elhanan's lap), Rebecca and Marie, 1916.

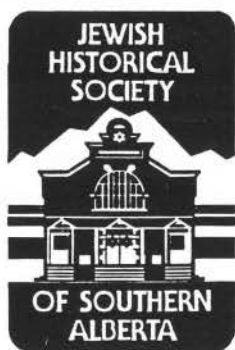
in the bargain. I brought my wife home to the farm barely alive, as she was almost frozen stiff from the cold. Since then she has stood by my side through all our ups and downs, mostly downs. It is thanks to her devotion, steadfastness and staunch help at all times, that I am what I am and where I am. God bless her!

After three years of back breaking labor on the homestead we were forced to a heart breaking decision. It was impossible to exist on a hundred and sixty acres with very little tillable soil in the heart of the cattle country. I

was finally forced to leave, and moved to Calgary with my wife and first born. Our economic worries did not hinder me in participating in certain communal activities, such as organizing an "Arbeiter Ring" branch and forming a Yiddish library.

The urge back to the soil did not leave me, so in the spring of 1914, I gave up the grocery business and moved with my family to a dairy farm near Edmonton. That summer the flames of World War I engulfed the

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## *Help us by becoming a member*

**Your Jewish Historical Society** is a nonprofit community organization dedicated to the preservation of the history of the Jews in Calgary and Southern Alberta.

**Your membership and donations** help us in collecting and researching the history of the Jewish people, individuals and organizations, with particular emphasis on the collection of oral history from our elders.

**Your membership and donations** allow us as well to undertake and encourage public information programs, including publications such as *Discovery*, displays, lectures, and special events.

(See reverse for membership form.)



### Three Score and...

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whole of Europe in spite of the Marxian socialism or internationalism.

In the fall of that same year, providence struck us a terrific blow. Our first born, who had wandered away from home, was lost in the bush. On the eve of Rosh-Hashona, just prior to his fourth birthday, and after twelve days of intensive search, he was found. The funeral had to be arranged in a great hurry, on account of the high holidays. No other previous experience, including the many hardships, privations or multiple accidents, which nearly cost me my life, time and again, and which I took in my stride without any complaints, could compare to this blow, which staggered me. In my blackest despair, I raised my voice in complaint and protest "if there is a Super Being who rules the universe and us poor mortals as well, and if the Being takes stock of all our deeds in this vale of tears, and if this Being is considered as just and righteous, then why, oh why, should he spend his wrath upon an innocent child, for the sins of his father (if he did sin)?" The void swallowed my complaints and protests but an answering reply I did not receive.

We could remain on the farm no longer, and leaving everything, we walked off with our two remaining babies, as we stood, absolutely penniless.

In Edmonton I had to start all over again. Was it hard? It certainly was, but we did not give in. My dear wife stood side by side with me and slowly, very slowly, time healed our wound, leaving deep scars.

*The Hansons ultimately succeeded*

in Edmonton, where Elhanan played a part in the ideological and political discourse of the community's early years.

*His concluding words, written as the State of Israel was fighting for independence, are just as poignant today.*

[W]hat has caused me many a sleepless night was and is, even to this day, the lack of interest and gross negligence of a good many parents towards their children's Jewish education. Some of them seem to be doing the Community a favor by sending their children to the Talmud Torah, and others are just not interested, and what is worse, a certain element is even opposing the institution in a rude and unethical manner. That hurts deeply, for now, more than ever before, we are in need of a conscious and conscientious Jewry, strongly welded as a unified entity. That can only be achieved by giving our youth a thorough training in our traditional, national, Hebrew and, if at all possible, a Yiddish education. Then, and only then, will we be able to consider our children as ours and really *ours*. Only in this way, can we hope to create that sorely needed bridge between the Jews of the diaspora and Israel.

Those of us who hoped and prayed for the day when Israel would redeem itself and establish itself in its own old and new land (and since we have lived to see this happen, with very little effort on our part), must consider it a sacred duty to endeavor to inculcate in our younger generation the spiritual, traditional, and cultural values inherent in a responsible and upright Judaism.

I hope and pray that that may materialize in my lifetime.

## Finding Your Family

If you are doing family research you might be interested in joining the Jewish Genealogical Society of Canada. Address your application to: Peter Cullman, Member Secretary, The Jewish Genealogical Society of Canada, P.O. Box 446, Station A, Willowdale, Ontario, Canada, M2N 5T1.

Membership dues are \$30 per year and there is an additional \$10 charge for a starter kit, which includes:

- A two page Beginners' Guide to help you get started on your family history project.
- A list of Canadian/US Libraries, Archives and International Research Addresses
- A list of suggested books
- A list of languages read/spoken by members (to help you translate old documents...)
- Two family Data Questionnaires (to send to newly-found relatives...)
- A Membership Survey form
- The International Family Finder entry form
- An updated membership directory—for easier cross referencing within our society

As a new member you are entitled to free entries on the computer database of the International Jewish Genealogical Family Finder, (currently comprising over 20,000 entries). Your own research and that of others will be greatly enhanced by sharing names and localities of your ancestors with fellow Jewish genealogists all over the world.

### Shorashim — שורשים Roots

A summary of the findings  
of the Jewish Genealogical Society of  
Southern Alberta



☐ Yes, I would like to become a member

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☐ Institution/Corporations \$25

☐ Yes, I would like to make a donation

(Tax deductible receipt will be issued)

☐ I have enclosed \$30 for a copy of *Roots*—a comprehensive summary of the historical resources on record pertaining to the Jews of Southern Alberta.

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