



# JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY of Southern Alberta

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## Journal Notes

by Jack Switzer

The three major articles appearing in this issue of *Discovery* are all extracted from tape recordings in the Society's archives. The recordings were made in 1989 by Trudy Cowan as part of the Society's on-going Oral History (Shorashim) project, which was funded by the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation.

The three personal histories have something else in common—all three contain vivid pictures of life in the "Old Country," and should give young Jewish Canadian some insights into the milieu from which their parents and grandparents emerged.

Another theme found in all three recollections concerns relations with non-Jews in Canada. Contact in Europe was aloof, diffident, often hostile. In contrast, Jewish immigrants to Alberta found varying degrees of tolerance, assistance, even friendship.



Rose Belzberg and the six children she brought from Poland to Calgary. Top row, right to left: Toby, Fay, Rose Belzberg, Sarah; lower right: Louis, lower left: Ann, Centre: (baby) Frances. Photo taken about 1929.

## Rambling Rose

by Therese Nagler

As part of the Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta's ongoing Oral History (Shorashim) project, the following is a story of the early years of Rose Belzberg, as told to Trudy Cowan in July of 1989.

Rose was born in 1897 in Novamiasta, Poland, a small city some 60 kilometers from Warsaw. Her father, Leib Korytko, was a respected Orthodox man and twenty years the senior of his wife. It was the second marriage for both. Rose had "half-siblings" who were living in the care of their father, after the death of his first wife. Her mother, before becoming Mrs. Korytko, had been widowed at the age of 23. Rose was the eldest of the couple's four chil-

dren. (two sisters, one brother).

The family was comfortably established, owning some property and a thriving dairy business which was located about a mile from town. They did not own a herd, but purchased milk, cream and eggs from individuals and produced butter and cheese, which was then retailed.

Rose's schooling began at age five, when she was taught Yiddish, Polish and Russian by a Jewish Scholar.

Some years passed and her father, who was growing old, wished to see his children married. An 'arrangement' was made when Rose was sixteen years of age, with their neighbors, the Belzberg family. Their handsome son, Elya (Alec) was three years older and the young couple was married the following year in 1914. As the town of approximately 25,000 had no social hall, the wedding took place at the Korytko home from

which all the furniture was removed for the occasion.

In that year war broke out and there was a battle over the city. The Jews, accused of spying, were sent out. The Russians arrived and began conscripting young men and boys, many of whom swam a river and escaped to Radom and then to Warsaw. Among them was Alec Belzberg. The family followed. They had some money and were able to live in a decent apartment in Warsaw.

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### Featured in this issue

- Oral Histories of Rose Belzberg, Max Bercovich, and Charlie Switzer

### *Rambling Rose* continued from page 1

In 1918 they were told they could return. The city was a mess; their homes had been destroyed. By then, Rose's father had died, but her mother and younger siblings were with her and they tried making a new life.

Poland was a poor country and the government needed to build up a Post-war army. In 1918-19 young boys were being conscripted, and Jewish men ran the risk of being tortured or murdered while serving in the army with the often anti-Semitic Poles. As Alec was married, he wasn't called, but his brother and two cousins stole into Germany to avoid the draft. Life in Germany was far from easy, as even the Jewish community did not treat them well. Rose's sister-in-law, Mrs. Louis Belzberg, had an aunt in Calgary (Mrs. Singer). She wrote to her to see if she could bring them to Canada and, through her efforts some 200 Polish families eventually came. Of these, Alec's brother Louis Belzberg was the first c. 1922.

Times in Poland continued to worsen and anti-Semitism was rampant. To make a living Alec and a partner were transporting food between towns when they were held up. During this incident the robber, a Polish University student, was shot. There was trouble, of course, and a terrible scare. Rose wrote to her brother-in-law, Louis, to send papers for Alec to come to Canada right away, and it was arranged. By this time the couple had five children and Rose was pregnant with the sixth. Alec wanted to stay until the baby was born, but Rose insisted he go before the Canadian immigration laws changed, as they did periodically. They hoped Canada could provide a better future for their children, and so in 1925, he sailed with a promise to send for the family as soon as possible. As they had some properties in Poland, Rose was able to manage.

Alec came directly to Calgary. Times were difficult, as in the 20s there was a great influx of young immigrants to Canada. The U.S. strict quotas prevented settlement there and Canada's established population worried that the new-comers would take away their livelihood. McKenzie King's reaction to those concerns led to eventual difficulties in immigration

to this country as well.

Meanwhile, Alec strived to become established. As was the case with most young arrivals, he came without the language, a trade or money. What to do was the question. After laboring in a foundry for a time, he and a couple of "landsmen" decided to peddle. They bought a little fruit and, later, a small truck and went into the countryside to sell. They were able to arrange for credit at a local Gas station, setting the bill at the end of each week. They actually traded for chickens, eggs or whatever they could, as the farmers had no money to spend. In winter they traded for hides and brought them back to the city to sell, and thus started to make a living. In two years Alec managed to save \$1,000.00. He wrote to Rose to ask if he should return home or "make papers" to bring the family here. It was decided the Canadian future looked brighter and the process was begun. Rose had to go to Warsaw for examinations, etc. When she was told her eyes were too bad, she found another Doctor. There were many delays and by the time everything was completed, nearly two years had passed. She sold her property and raised enough for their passage, bidding good-bye to her mother, brothers and sisters in Novamiasta. The brood travelled to Gdynia by train, where they boarded the Ship 'Estonia.'

It was a rough crossing and the children were so seasick their young mother feared they would die. No one could eat, though the food was good. One at a time the youngsters had to

be taken up to the deck. A woman from Warsaw, who had promised to help with the children, was so ill Rose had to look after her as well.

They arrived in Halifax September 13, 1929 and were escorted to the train depot, where they boarded for the five day trip to Calgary. It seemed a vast, lonely country where, for hundreds of miles at a stretch, no man or beast could be seen. When they arrived in Calgary, Rose and family were taken to the little house of her brother-in-law where she exclaimed, "Is this Canada? It's a village!"

Alec couldn't rent a place as no one would consider a family with six children, so he bought a home. It was in Riverside (646 - 1 Avenue N.E.) and close to schools. The house had six small rooms downstairs and five tiny bedrooms up. The purchase price was \$2,700.00 and, in addition to the \$1,000 which he had saved, Alec needed a mortgage. The payments were to be \$50.00 per month, but they could not afford that amount. The German family next door owned the mortgage, and being kind people told them not to worry, but to pay whatever they could—so, \$100.00 per year was paid on the house.

That year winter came early and hard. In fact, it was said to be the coldest ever and the snow was so high they couldn't open a door to go out. It was very bad; no one was making a living, but they managed to come through. Alec's brother Louis was involved in a second hand furniture

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## DISCOVERY

Editors **Jack Switzer, Jay Joffe**

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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Discovery  
c/o The Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta  
1607 - 90th Avenue S.W.  
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T2V 4V7

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# I Stayed Here— 85 Years in Southern Alberta

*Max Bercovich has lived for most of his 87 years in rural Alberta. First on a homestead and later in various small towns. Here is part of his family's story.*

I was born in Romania in 1905.

My father, Saul Bercovich, was a soldier in the Romanian army—not willingly, but because of the draft. He was in the army six years, when, on maneuvers, an officer fell with his horse, and the horse broke a leg and the officer broke his leg too.

The officers were not known for their kindness to the common soldiers, and when he fell with his horse all the other soldiers left him. My father did not leave him. He could not let a man die on the field. He picked him up and carried him across the Dnieper River, and took him back to the headquarters.

In appreciation for having saved his life, the officer—who was a wealthy landowner—mustered my father out of the army, and gave him the job of managing the business part of his farm.

Dad then married my mother, Miriam. Mother was an orphan, who lived with an aunt. They lived in this small town—actually the big farm—and mother opened up a little store. They lived there for seventeen years.

They had seven children. There was Jack, Abraham, Moses, Benny and Max. The two girls were Sarah and Bertha Rose. Sarah was the third. Benny and Rose were twins, I was the youngest; I was an afterthought.

I was a year and a half old when the decision was made to leave Romania. It was when the oldest of the boys would have been inducted into the army. Jewish boys were generally inducted into the army before they were even men, at age 12, 13, 14. This happened in Russia, and it happened in Poland, and in Romania as well.

So my parents decided that they must leave Romania.

My dad heard they were giving away land in Canada. Because of his experience in Romania, he thought farming would be a wonderful way to make a living. And he was very sincere in his beliefs. My dad saw such brutality on the landowner's place.

He wanted to deal with God. He didn't want a business where you had to give orders, or where the customer was cheated.

He believed in God, and he believed that God did everything. I remember one particular time when we had a very fine crop standing (in Canada). It was thick, and would have been harvested within ten days. A hailstorm came along and just cleaned it all up. I remember dad looking out the window. He shrugged his shoulders and said 'it's God's will.'

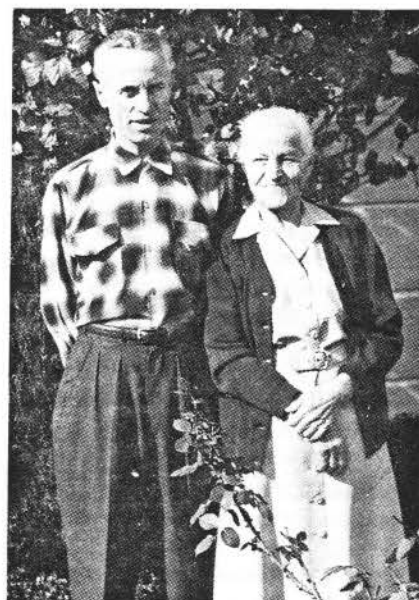
I think if he didn't have that sort of faith, he would have gone crazy.

For a while after we came to Canada (in 1907) he worked as a presser in a Montreal clothing factory. I don't think he stayed longer than six months. We stayed longer.

Anyway, we landed in Calgary, and dad and an older brother worked at various jobs. There was a lot of building going on, and even though neither knew which end of a hammer to use, they went into any kind of work that was available.

Then, of course, my dad went out and 'filed' on a quarter of land.

Our homestead was at Sibbald, Alberta (east of Calgary, near the Saskatchewan border.) We went there because it was the only land that was still available. It turned out to be the driest part in Canada. We raised more



Max Bercovich and his mother, Miriam Bercovich, in Trochu, Alberta, early 1940s.

rocks per acre than any other farm in Canada.

Until I was nine, we had no school. The area was very new. They opened a school in another district, and we went there. Then we went to our own school, the Vernon School District, and that's where I finished my grade eight.

The school was three and a half miles north of our farm, and the centre of the Montefiore Jewish colony, where the Hebrew school was located, was three and a half miles south. We would come home from the English school, have a sandwich, and go to the Hebrew school. We'd get home at 8:00 or 8:30, and then have to do our lessons.

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## PLEASE JOIN US

**Your Jewish Historical Society** is a nonprofit community organization dedicated to the preservation of the history of the Jews in Alberta with emphasis on 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.)

### *I Stayed Here* continued from page 3

I remember, though, that I didn't have to do any chores, because I was a student.

The colony was a group of Jewish homesteaders. They came there for the same reason that my father came; they were giving away free land. People came from various parts of the world. My brother-in-law came from North Dakota, where they had some land, but it too, was very bad land. That was the Ullman family.

We also had another family, Oretzky, that came from Winnipeg, and others came from Saskatchewan. One particular fellow, a chap by the name of Himmelfarb, came from the slums of New York.

I'm told there were 60 adults, so there could have been 25 or 30 Jewish families in the colony.

We lived within easy access to each other. Those people still had a Jewish background, and they wanted to have a shul and they wanted to bring up their children in Judaism to the best of their ability.

I wouldn't say these people were staunchly religious, but they definitely wanted to continue the background in which they were brought up. There were a few people who were very religious, and my dad was one of them, and there were some older people. My dad and a Mr. Chetner were of the older people, and the Ullmans. The other farmers were younger people.

They used to bring in kosher meat from Calgary, and occasionally in the wintertime they would ring out a schochet from Calgary. He would slaughter some animals, and some chickens, and we would freeze them. We had a well eighty feet deep that did not produce any water, and we used it as our refrigerator, and it was wonderful.

They put up a building for a shul, and it was large enough to accommodate us on High Holidays, and for weddings. There were enough young people there to put on some concerts and plays. We had about 1,500 books in our library. They have some English books. I remember reading the Zane Grey novels.

We also had a house for our teacher and schochet—Ravitch. He was an outstanding person, and I owe to him

thanks for having received some background in my Yiddishkeit.

I cannot say that I was ever deeply religious, but I was always a Jew. From 1927 until we moved into Calgary in 1961 I was in small towns, where I lived as a Jew. I cannot complain of the treatment that I received among the gentiles. No matter where I went, I was well treated and well received, and never forgotten.

When we were first married, we went to Trochu, and Blanch and I were very well treated there. Those years were not unpleasant, and we were making our way.

Of my brothers and sister, only Bertha Rose went to English school. Most of the others were grown up, and they had the necessity to earn a living. Except when we first came to Calgary, they all went to the farm.

Dad farmed with oxen. The first year he came out, he lived in a hole in the ground, just a dugout in the side of the hill. The following year he built himself a palace, a sod hut, an eight by ten shanty. I think there was wood on the roof, with sod on top of that.

By the time we came to the farm, he had built a large dwelling—it was fourteen by twenty-four. Each of the boys also had land, and we had two sections of land right near each other. They filed for themselves, and each one had to have a dwelling on his land. Each of the boys had his own place to sleep, and the rest of them family lived in the big mansion.

I remember one night the Ullman family came to visit us, and sure enough, we had a blizzard. But we had room for everyone. We spread our horse blankets on the floor, and that's where the men slept. The

women slept in the beds.

We had a big barn, for the cattle and the horses. They were more important than the people, you know. We must have had a granary or two, as well. The barn was a large hip-roof barn, such as you see today.

When I was through school, in 1920, my dad said to me, 'son, we haven't got the money to send you to high school.' And when my brother Moses, Morris heard that he said 'I'll pay a third,' and my brother Abe said 'I'll pay a third,' and I didn't want to force dad to give me the rest, so that's why I went out to work.

I worked with a grain separator crew, pitching bundles. It required eight men, but we had only seven. I was the seventh and the smallest of the bunch. My work mates complained that I wasn't doing my share, so on the third day I decided to go home.

I headed for home, but after three miles I decided that wasn't the right thing to do, so I turned around and went back. I stayed there for 31 days. We were making eight and a quarter a day, man and team. That was a lot of money in those days.

I went to Crescent Heights High here in Calgary. My niece also went there. I lived with Ida Sterling and her family.

By 1926 the colony had all moved out. Quite a few people went to Los Angeles. They formed a club after they had settled in there. They had dinners once a month. There is still a Montefiore club there but they meet only once a year. My sister Sarah Ullman was the only part of my family that went to Los Angeles.

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The Charlie Switzer family, about 1934, left to right: Ida, Charlie, Frances, Jack, Morris. Photos courtesy of Bertha Gold.

## At Six I Went to Hebrew School; at Ten I Learned a Trade

*Charlie Switzer has lived in Calgary for 81 years. At 95 years of age, he may be the oldest Jewish person in Calgary. He came to this city in 1912. In many ways his story parallels the community's history. Following are excerpts from a tape recorded interview.*

I was born in 1898, on the tenth of October, in Radom, in Poland. It was a big city, about one hundred thousand. There must have been about 20 or 25 thousand Jewish people.

Poland was never a good place for anyone to live. Very few lived very good.

I went to Cheder until I was 10 years old. Then I learned a trade—tailoring.

We walked everywhere. There were no cars then. But I remember when the first car came to Poland, it was about 1910. A rich man bought a car, and they brought it down to the city to show it.

My parents arranged for me to learn the tailoring trade. Down there, tailors used to have the shop where they lived. I lived at home, and I worked there for three years, for nothing, to learn the trade.

You worked hard. You had to do housework at the beginning of the day. You helped out, and they taught you how to be a tailor. We used to work Thursday all night and half a day Friday in order to get Saturday off.

Most of the trades, like tailoring and shoemaking, were taken up by Jews. The non-Jews were mostly

farmers, or did other work.

You got to the shop about seven in the morning, and you came home about seven o'clock at night, or until you got finished. You had to clean up after everyone finished.

Down there they were religious. No Jewish people would work Saturdays. Here it is different. Sunday mornings we went back to work.

Mrs. Singer, my aunt, used to live in Toronto, and then she came home once (to Poland) and I told her to send me a ticket. She went back, this time to Calgary.

She sent me a ticket in 1912. A ticket was only \$62 at that time. Of course, you didn't go first class.

My grandfather took me to the border, and then I crossed the border. We had no passes. They wouldn't let you go. You had to smuggle across the border. There were guys there near the borders—soldiers—not Jewish people... you paid them so much, and they took you across the border. You had to jump across a river.

And then we got into Germany. And from Germany I got into Antwerp. I don't remember the name of the boat I was on, but I remember I was on it for two weeks. It was a regular big ship, an old one. I stayed down low, on the bottom.

There were immigrants from Russia, from Romania, from Hungary, Jewish, maybe gentiles too, but I didn't know them so much. I travelled all by myself. Maybe I was scared, I don't remember now. I stuck with the Jewish people, and I got

here, to Canada.

We went through immigration in Halifax. You had to have \$25 to come into Canada, and you had to be examined for your health.

It took four days on the train to come across Canada. We slept on those bunks. Jewish people used to come out at all the stations and give us sandwiches. I was in Montreal after Halifax, and then to Winnipeg, and then to Calgary.

What did I think of this country I had come to?

When I got here I liked it all right. Sure. There was nothing that I shouldn't like. Why not? I had a job here. I worked, I made money, and I sent for the rest of the family. We got out of there.

I came into Calgary on a Sunday morning, about seven o'clock, and there was nobody waiting for me. My aunt was supposed to meet me, but no one was there. I suppose she forgot the date I was coming.

I saw nobody waiting for me, so I walked out of the Ninth Avenue station, and I saw a man with a little horse and wagon for delivering groceries, and I hollered over to him. I couldn't talk to him, but I showed him the address where my aunt lived. He took the address and he took me on that little horse and wagon, and where did she live? - two blocks from the station, on Ninth Avenue and Second Street east, right across from the Imperial Hotel.

He showed me where the address is, but I didn't let him go. I told him to wait for me. I walked across and I knocked at the door. The door opened and it was her, my aunt Singer. So I took my parcel off the wagon, and he left.

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***I Stayed Here***  
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My family came to Calgary. My brothers moved to Winnipeg, and I stayed here.

I had no way of making a living except the old style of becoming a store clerk, which I did for about four or five years, and I finally went out to the country. I was in Three Hills until 1926, and in Beiseker until 1929.

In 1929 I went out to Morin and opened a store for another man, and I was there until 1934. Then I went to Trochu and managed Blanch's father's store, a general store. We stayed there until 1961.

*Max Bercovich and Blanch Lipkind were married in 1936. They still live in Calgary.*

***Rambling Rose***  
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store (Capitol). From there, Alec brought home three beds and a wooden kitchen table with eight chairs, and housekeeping was begun. The children all started school and did well. Roots were put down and Rose and Alex worked together to raise a beautiful Calgary family. The off-spring are:

Toby (Conn), Sarah (Brager), Fay (Brosgart), Louie, Ann (Levine), Francis (Cohen), and two sons born in Calgary, Alberta (Bell) and Sam (Bell).

Alec passed away in April 1945, while Rose was a warmly regarded member of the community, until her death in February 1992.

## Cemetery Catalogue

### Project Completed

by Jay Joffe

Just recently we completed a very important study—the complete cataloguing of all the information on over 1,500 headstones in the two Calgary Jewish cemeteries, as well as the Jewish headstones in Queen's Park cemetery.

Each headstone has been photographed, the Hebrew, Russian, or Yiddish words translated to English, and the data recorded and filed for easy reference. This effort will greatly simplify access to this important genealogical information.

Thanks are extended to the Chevra Kaddish and the Harry B. Cohen Foundation for funding, and to Adam Aptowitz and Galit Shimoni for all their work in documenting the material, as well as to Mr. Deryk Bodington who so diligently photographed the 1500 cemetery stones.

***Urgent note to members***  
**Please renew your membership**  
**Your dues are needed**

***At Six I Went to Hebrew School***  
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It wasn't a very good feeling when nobody waits for you after you come such a long ways. She must have forgotten the day I was coming, or whatever. But I managed all right.

I went to work right away. A man had a store on Eighth Avenue and Second Street west where he sold clothes, and the factory was in that building. The man who owned the factory was named George, but I don't remember his second name. He had a store that took orders to make suits. A lot of Jewish people worked there, Mr. Shulman, a lot of Jewish tailors who came over from Europe.

There were about 25 people working in the factory. They paid us six dollars a week. We started at eight and we quit at six. I worked there for a number of years, but then I moved on. You learn the language a little bit, and that's what everybody did—you work into better, better and better.

There were a lot of people here. There were the Shapiros and the Libins. They came about the same time. We used to go on Sundays to St. George's Island.

We all used to go to one restaurant to eat, to the White Spot, on Eighth Avenue. During the first war, the army boys got drunk one night and smashed it up, because it was run by German people.

On Fourth Street west and Seventeenth avenue there used to be a club, and they used to have dances there every Friday night. The girl that I married used to come there too. Her name was Ida Millstein. You know, Jewish kids, they get together. They didn't mix so much with the gentiles at that age.

That's where I met her. We used to go around for a while, and then I married her. We got married in 1920.

I worked at Macleod Brothers at that time, on Ninth Avenue and First Street East. I did the alterations; I worked on piecework. And then I opened up my own place, Charlie's Clothing Store, on Second Street East.

My wife, Ida, was a good mixer. She had a good voice. After I met her we used to go to the movies a lot. There were a lot of Jewish people who had theatres then. There used to be an Empress Theatre, and every Friday night they would have kids come up to sing—amateurs. She

would always win ten dollars singing. She was a good singer; her father was a Chazan.

Charlie Switzer soon brought over to Calgary his older brother Meyer, sister Lily (Horodezky), younger brothers Dave and Ralph, as well as his parents, Mendel and Bella.

Charlie and Ida Switzer had three children. They lived for many years on Gladstone Road, in the Hillhurst district of north-west Calgary. Their children are Jack Switzer, of Montreal, Francis Panar, of Vancouver, and Morris Switzer, of Calgary.

Charlie and Ida Switzer were founders and active members of many Calgary Jewish organizations. Charlie retired from the retail clothing business many years ago, and now spends the winter months in the Palm Springs area.

Ida Switzer passed away several year ago, and Charlie is now married to Chanah Davids.

*Morris Switzer passed away shortly after this article was type-set. Our sincere condolences go out to his family.*