

EDMONTON A JEWISH COMMUNITY IN PERSPECTIVE

by Sid Bursten

A HISTORY of the Edmonton Jewish Community, for the first thirty years at least, might well answer as a biography of the founder of the Edmonton Hebrew Association, William Diamond.

Nearly 75 years ago, William Diamond first set foot in Alberta, and set up one of the leading clothing firms in the West. But that was at Calgary, where his brother Jacob, the first Jewish settler in Alberta, was located. About the turn of the century, the William Diamond Clothing Company set up an Edmonton store, which its founder took over in 1906.

When he arrived, he found there was no organization providing for his needs as a Jew, even though the city by then had several Jewish families. There was no place to worship, no facilities for giving the few children a Jewish education, no shochet, no Jewish cemetery — in fact everything that is indispensable to a Jewish community was missing.

Things soon began to change, and the changes were rapid. Mr. Diamond took command of the situation quickly, and soon convinced a "minyan" of Edmontonians of the need for action.

Thus, we find it recorded, in a great handwritten volume in an Edmonton safe, that on Sunday evening, the 12th day of August, 1906, ten Jewish citizens of Edmonton assembled together for the purpose of organizing the Edmonton Hebrew Association. The charter members were A. Cristall, Mr. Diamond, J. S. Berkman, L. Frankenberg, C. M. Shugarman, H. Goldstick, N. Siles, A. Spiers, D. Boyaner and Haris Iny.

Mr. Cristall, the oldest Jewish resident, was elected president, with Mr. Diamond as vice-president and Mr. Berkman as secretary. Twenty years after that meeting, an historian from eastern Canada noted the coincidence "that of the

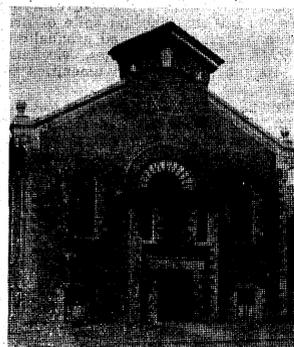
ten gentlemen there assembled, the only ones who now reside in Edmonton are the three officers first elected."

One of the interesting minutes of that meeting is a motion authorizing the secretary "to purchase a butcher knife, saw and meat chopper and all necessary articles to keep the meat perfectly kosher."

From this beginning has grown every organization the community has ever had.

The Hebrew Association, which still exists as the Beth Israel Congregation, has sprouted shoots in all directions, either founding or providing the wherewithal for the cemetery and the Chevra Kadisha, both synagogues currently active, the Talmud Torah, the Zionist Organization, the Council of Women, the Mutual Loan Association, and many others.

The first to get attention was the Hebrew school. Mr. Goldstick was hired at a salary of \$600 a year as shochet, mohel and B'aal-Tfillah, and left almost immediately for New York to improve his skills. When he returned, he was given the responsibility of providing a Jewish education for five children in an unofficial Hebrew school started on the first day of September, 1907.



House of Israel, Edmonton

During Mr. Goldstick's absence, a three-acre cemetery on the eastern edge of the city was purchased, and still serves the needs of the community.

The following year, Mr. Cristall found the leadership of the association too demanding, and Mr. Diamond took over the presidency. Every year thereafter he was unanimously re-elected until 1938, when, at 71, he asked to be relieved of his post due to advancing age.

Arthur Daniel Hart, who wrote the 575-page History of the Jew in Canada, said of Mr. Diamond: "The many personal sacrifices he has made to the congregation have served a double purpose. They have endeared the congregation to him, so that its needs and its welfare are always paramount; and the community, with full appreciation of his unselfish devotion to its welfare, has supported him generously in every laudable undertaking."

With the association now well on the road, efforts started toward the erection of a synagogue. A. H. Goldberg, then a man in his early 20s, was the association secretary and the prime advocate of the project. He encountered a great deal of opposition.

It was thought the community was still too small and much too poor for such an ambitious undertaking. At first even Mr. Diamond hesitated



WILLIAM DIAMOND

to support a project which then seemed like a hare-brained scheme, but he was soon converted by his young secretary.

With two such strong advocates, it was merely a matter of time to work up the interest of the entire community.

Mr. Diamond donated two downtown building lots, and Mr. Cristall added \$500 toward the total cost of \$12,000. At first the pessimists had their prophecies of difficulties confirmed, and time and again Mr. Goldberg was urged to abandon the project. But in 1911, with the building fund still just a disappointing portion of the required amount, the contract was let.

On August 17 of that year, the cornerstone was laid by Mr. Diamond in the presence of the lieutenant-governor and the entire Jewish community. After the ceremony money flowed in more freely, and the building was soon completed. With the population steadily increasing, it was found less of a burden than even the most optimistic had expected, and by 1924 the mortgage was burned.

The first service in the new Beth Israel was held September 12, 1912, and there was no longer any doubt of the community's future. Within two weeks of the first service, the congregation decided a mikvah was needed and land was obtained next to the synagogue.

In March of the following year, Edmonton Lodge 732 of the B'nai B'rith was founded.

Until this period the Jewish communities of Western Canada remained more or less to themselves, but this situation came to an end in 1916 when the Western Jewish Conference was held in Winnipeg.

Harry A. Friedman, the first Jewish lawyer in Alberta, and J. Sternberg were elected to represent the Hebrew Association at this pioneer meeting.

On their return, an Edmonton board of the newly formed Western Jewish Congress was established with Mr. Diamond and A. Greisdorf as its first members.

The Hebrew school, until this time, had been without its own facilities, but by the early 1920s it became obvious this condition could no longer continue.

The Talmud Torah had grown rapidly from Mr. Goldstick's first five students, and by 1911, H. Malkin was brought from New York to take over Mr. Goldstick's duties. The community now felt itself large enough to be able to afford a full-time, fully-qualified teacher. In a burst of enthusiasm in 1912, a full-time assistant was

(Continued on page 31)

CALGARY JEWRY 1893-1965

by Tanya (Gelfand) Sklar

CALGARY 1965

is a bustling, busy metropolis, the executive oil capital of Canada, a far cry from 1891 when the population was 1,876. Calgary now boasts a thriving Jewish Community with over 900 families, three synagogues, two schools, the Jewish Community Council, and many organizations working for various causes . . . all geared to fostering and preserving Judaism, Jewish culture and Jewish education, locally, nationally and internationally.

How did this all begin? How did it come about? A community just doesn't happen, it just doesn't grow like Topsy. It is a result of "blood, sweat and tears." First there must be a seed



TANYA (GELFAND) SKLAR

road tracks. They operated there from August until the end of the year. It was apparently a profitable venture, and they returned to Winnipeg. This procedure was followed by a number of Jews who worked in prairie cities, realized a profit, and then returned to Manitoba.

The first Jewish settler in Calgary, the man who might be called the seed from which the tree eventually grew, was Jacob Leon Diamond, from Kiev, Russia. Mr. Diamond arrived in Canada in 1880 and in Calgary in 1888. The Diamonds (Jacob and Rachel) had five children, four of whom were born in Calgary — Joe, Myer, Rose and Dorothy. The fifth, Hattie Diamond Joffe, was born in Edmonton, and is the only one now living in Calgary.

The Diamond's first home was on 10th Avenue East between 3rd and 4th streets. Jacob started as a peddler, buying hides from ranchers all over southern Alberta. He later opened a grocery store. He was a distinguished looking man with a well-tended beard.

Jacob Diamond was an observant Orthodox Jew, and his home was used as a synagogue, and often for funerals. (The first Jewish death took place in Calgary in 1906 and it was in this year that the community purchased land on which the present Jewish cemetery is located.) He was the leader of the small Jewish group — two Jewish male adults in 1904, and only four families in 1906.

The pogroms and persecutions of eastern Europe greatly affected the growth of the Jewish community in Calgary. Between 1905 and 1910, such families as the Austins, the Kesnicks, the Malkins and the Horodezkys established themselves here, responding to the promise of good jobs, particularly with the CPR, and the possibility of cheap land for farming in Rumsey and Pincher Creek. However, times were hard: the going wages were 15¢ an hour, and these were scarce. In many cases only the father and oldest son came over from the old country, so that they could save and send for their wives and children. Some men who arrived in 1905 or 1906, were not re-united with the rest of their families until 1910 and even later.

By 1910 there were 50 Jewish families in Calgary. Although times were hard, there was a spirit of optimism. Many stories can be told of the help given newcomers by the established families. As a child I used to listen eagerly to such stories told by my mother who arrived here in 1911 and by my father who came a year later.

The social life was of necessity simple, but it was enjoyable and the community was a close knit one. Card parties, dances and socials in various homes were popular and Calgary could boast of its share of shadchans and would-be shadchans who frequented these affairs to, as one might say, "appraise the merchandise."

Religion also played a vital role in the life of the young community, and High Holy Day services were held in the various homes, because no synagogue had been erected. Later space was rented in the old Cohen building on 8th Avenue East for use as a synagogue. The rules of Kashruth were observed where possible, but it was some time later before a permanent Shochet was hired (Mr. Kaplan).



House of Jacob . . . opened in 1912

Concomitantly community life was being developed in Rumsey. Here land was available at \$10 for a 320-acre farm. This area really became part of the Calgary Jewish community and bears telling in that context. A story is told about Judah Shumiatcher, who suddenly became J. Smith, because a government official could neither pronounce nor spell his name. Mr. Shumiatcher, who came in 1910, was the first Hebrew teacher in Calgary. He came from Russia with his son, Morris, but it was some time later before he was able to send for his wife and remaining ten children. Five of the Shumiatcher children are still living in Calgary: A. I. Shumiatcher, Q.C., Annie Paperny, Eva Busheikin, Bessie Shapiro and Billy Smith. The family of the late Morris Shumiatcher are still living here.

Other well-known old-timers who came around that time too were the Naglers and Singers. Mrs. Singer has been responsible for bringing over 200 people to North America from Poland, the first of whom was Charlie Switzer, and the last, Mr. Cyngiser who was taken from a concentration camp in Germany.

Charles Malkin, who was an uncle of my mother, and Mrs. Malkin, my mother's cousin, had a delicatessen on 8th Avenue and 2nd Street S.E., where a large Sateway store now stands. Their store was a favorite meeting place for members of the community.

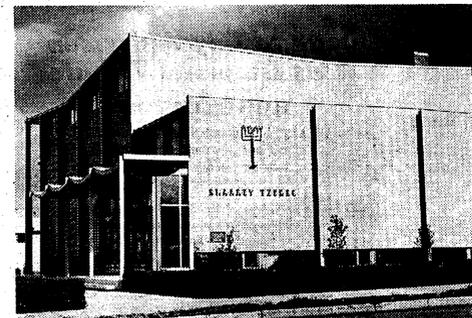
Other old-timers still living in Calgary include such as A. H. Goldberg, Charles Waterman, S. Jaffe, D. A. Dvorkin.

In 1912 the first synagogue, on 5th Avenue between 3rd and 4th Streets East, was opened. Named after its founder, Jacob Diamond, the House of Jacob still stands. It is the seat of orthodoxy in Calgary and a monument to Calgary's first settler.

Schools Established

In 1912 also the new congregation elected a

(Continued on page 26)

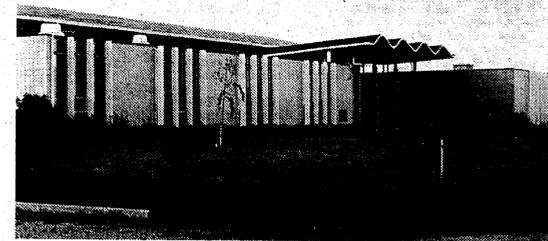


Shaarey Tzedec Congregation . . . near Jewish Community Centre

planted, roots must take, and then the tree begins to grow by careful tending and nurturing. A community is also like a building, it must have the site, the foundation, and then with planning and effort the building takes form. There must be continuous building, building, and building. It is a never-ending process.

Unfortunately there is too little documented history of the Jews in Calgary. The Calgary Section of the National Council of Jewish Women conducted a survey marking the recent bicentenary of Canadian Jewry, and Sid Burstein (formerly of The Jewish Post) wrote a story for the Calgary Herald on the Jews in Calgary. They did considerable research, and this feature is indebted to them for much of the information.

There is some evidence that a number of the refugees who came in 1882 to Winnipeg were the first Jews to arrive in Calgary. Most took jobs on the construction gangs building the Canadian Pacific Railway. In 1883 the first CPR train arrived in Calgary from Winnipeg, and immediately thereafter the first Jewish owned business was established in Calgary. Opened by the Epstein brothers from Winnipeg, it was called "The Cheap Cash Store," and its first location was in a tent on the east side of the Elbow River near the rail-



Beth Israel Synagogue . . . dedicated in 1960



HARRY A. FRIEDMAN