

THE BIRTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF A  
WESTERN JEWISH ARCHIVES PROGRAM

by

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The Jewish Archives of Western Canada was conceived in the Spring of 1967 with the formal establishment of a Western Region Archives and Research Committee by the Winnipeg office of Canadian Jewish Congress. Its first objective was to plan a pictorial exhibition as a project in honour of the centennial of Confederation.

The project was in danger of being still-born in its very early stages as the conception took place at a time when war clouds were gathering in the Middle East and the heart and mind of virtually every Canadian Jew came near to being overwhelmed with the thought that Israel's continued existence as an independent state was in mortal danger. Jews throughout Canada rallied to Israel's cause as never before, and it seemed that many better established projects might suffer in consequence, not to speak of the completely new idea of an archives program.

What actually happened might be regarded as an answer to the sometimes still whispered charge of "dual loyalty"; i.e., every man, and every Jew, is capable of sustaining many loyalties: to his country, to his people, to his religion, to his family. While one of these may at times take priority over the others, sooner or later they come back into balance. In this case, the balance was restored fairly quickly; when the guns were stilled in the Middle East, the Jewish community of Winnipeg remembered that it still had a part to play in Canada's Centennial.

The idea of developing a Jewish archives for Western Canada did not come about merely because of the Centennial year, although that observance served as the catalyst. Through several millennia of their existence, Jews have always been conscious of the need to maintain archival records and to assure the continuity of their written history. It is necessary to cite but one example.

In October, 1939, as the Nazis were beginning the occupation of Warsaw and planning to confine the Jews behind the walls of the ghetto which went up in November, 1940, a Jewish community welfare worker, Emmanuel Ringelblum, undertook as a personal obligation the task of recording everything that happened to the Jews under the Nazi tyranny. He established a secret group known as the "Oneg Shabbat Archives Committee" which in the face of inevitable death began to create an archives of documents on the record of the treatment of the Jews by the Nazis.<sup>1</sup> Much of this record was found after the war in many secret hiding places and

attested to the indomitable drive of the Jewish people to preserve their place in the annals of world history even while being cast into the depths of a holocaust.

The task of the Western Region Jewish Archives Committee was not nearly so dramatic. They were confronted with the more mundane problem of apathy and disinterest due to lack of understanding. A few dedicated people, however, soon began to demonstrate the potential for the success of this project, and the exhibition was opened at the Y.M.H.A. Centre at the end of September, 1967, on the theme "Ninety Years of Jewish Life in Western Canada".<sup>2</sup> More than one thousand photographs and documents were collected over the summer months so that before the display was opened a careful job of selection had to be done.

More than two thousand people viewed the exhibit during a three-week display period, and undoubtedly there were some who considered that this was the end of it. As soon as the exhibit opened however, many more people began to come forward voluntarily with contributions of additional photographs, documents and publications to swell the archival collection.

The Archives Committee undoubtedly owed its quick success to the fact that it had immediately set itself a target of a public event to popularize its objectives. Another important step was the making of a working arrangement with the Provincial Archives of Manitoba. Initially, this consisted merely of a deposit agreement by which the Provincial Archives agreed to take custody of acquisitions for the Jewish Archives. This relationship, however, has now progressed far beyond that first stage.

When the 1967 exhibit closed, it was agreed by Canadian Jewish Congress that the Archives should become a permanent project and that the Archives Committee should also undertake to organize a Jewish Historical Society for Western Canada as a means of seeking wider community participation. The acquisition of new materials continued and contributions began to come in from other western communities. In the meantime, careful plans were made to inaugurate the Jewish Historical Society, and this took place in May, 1968, with the reading of a paper<sup>3</sup> by one of the founding members of the Archives Committee, and the election of the first officers.

The summer of 1968 was devoted to planning and research. During this period, it was discovered that the Public Archives in Ottawa had a considerable store of primary source documentary material relating to the early history of the Jews in Western Canada.<sup>4</sup>

Between October of 1968 and May of 1969, the Jewish Historical Society of Western Canada conducted its first full season of activities under the guidance of the Archives Committee. Papers were read at every meeting, and each meeting stimulated the acquisition of additional materials. One program took the form of a joint meeting with the Manitoba Historical Society, and this has now become an annual event.

In May, 1969, the Canadian Jewish Congress celebrated its 50th anniversary and a banquet marking the occasion was arranged in Winnipeg. The historical part of the program, planned by the Archives Committee, was a project conceived to honour Jewish pioneers of Western Canada who were 75 years of age or over and had resided for fifty years or more in the West. Each pioneer was asked to provide autobiographical reminiscences. Some 240 pioneers were entered in the honour roll and more than half of them

contributed material which helped to expand the human element of the archives holdings. This material has also been used as a basis for the launching of an oral history program.

During 1969, this writer toured other western centres to stimulate local interest. Contact was also established with the other Provincial Archives, including those in Regina and Saskatoon, Calgary, Edmonton and Victoria. (In the latter case, it represented the renewal of a friendly relationship first developed with the British Columbia Provincial Archives dating back to the late 1950's.) Additional documentary source material was uncovered in each of the Provincial Archives.

In at least one instance to date, an arrangement has been made for the Jewish community of Saskatoon to transfer its documentary records to the Provincial Archives for indexing and cataloguing. In 1969, a Jewish archives group was started in Calgary, and in 1970, the Jewish Historical Society of British Columbia was established in Vancouver.

In 1970, the centennial of Manitoba as a Province was observed. The Jewish Historical Society of Western Canada concluded its program series that year with a special event in June commemorating the centennial and the first annual publication was issued.<sup>5</sup>

It was also decided to undertake, as a centennial project, the preparation of a source book of Western Canada Jewish history. A student was engaged for the summer to research recorded sources in books, publications and documentary records available in the Legislative, university and public libraries of Winnipeg. A considerable bibliographic file was thus added to the photographic and documentary material which already formed part of the Western Jewish archives collection.

During 1970 and early 1971, a beginning was made in recording a number of oral history interviews. An invitation was also received from the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature (which had opened in the summer of 1970) to begin planning a special exhibit for the Museum's Alloway Hall, reserved for visiting exhibitions. From their inception, the Archives and Research Committee and the Jewish Historical Society of Western Canada have followed the policy of working in close cooperation not only with the Provincial Archives but with all major organizations and institutions in the field, including the University of Manitoba History Department.

The value of such a relationship has also proven itself with the Museum. Before that institution was opened, its representatives had met with the Jewish group to explain the concept of the Manitoba Museum and to discuss ways in which cooperation might be developed. On learning of the geographic area approach being taken by the Museum for its permanent exhibit, it was also discovered that at that stage the Museum officials were unaware that there had been any Jewish association with the early development of the grasslands; i.e., the homestead settlement era of 1880 to 1910. This oversight was quickly rectified with documentary and photographic evidence. This experience underscored the important role to be played by the Jewish Archives and Research Committee in bringing to light primary source materials that would help to correct certain stereotyped impressions about Jewish immigrants which, for many years, have influenced otherwise competent historians, archivists and museologists.

Since the fall of 1971, the Jewish Archives and Research Committee has

become very closely involved with the Manitoba Museum in two major projects. One is the expansion of the oral history program<sup>6</sup> and the other is the development of the Jewish Peoples Museum of Western Canada.

Earlier in 1971, steps had been taken to strengthen the working relationship with the Provincial Archives. Archivist John Bovey had agreed to open a separate accessions book for the immediate recording of all items coming in for the Jewish collection. He also agreed to begin the integration of the Jewish archival holdings into the regular catalogue system of the Archives as soon as staff and space became available. Unfortunately, the Manitoba Archives has continued to operate with limited space facilities and limited staff. Even with the plans for new space and additional staff, the proper indexing of the Jewish collection would have been delayed to 1974.

During the summer of 1971, a history graduate student with a good knowledge of Yiddish and Hebrew was engaged to do an inventory of the existing Jewish holdings.<sup>7</sup>

While all these steps were helpful, they did not constitute proper cataloguing according to recognized archival practices. It was also felt that even with the addition of a number of volunteer oral history interviewers, sufficient progress was not being made in the pioneer interview program.

In January, 1972, an application was, therefore, submitted under the Provincial Employment Program for winter works, and a grant of \$6,600. was received to engage three people for oral history and one person to index the archival holdings.

In the fall of 1971, an active museum project committee was established as a sub-committee of the Archives and Research Committee to plan the new exhibit.

The Manitoba Museum has provided office space for the oral history program as well as a lab for the collection of artifacts for the museum project. The staff and volunteers of the oral history program and the museum project are benefiting greatly from the guidance of the Museum and Archives staffs.

The latest development, as this report is being written, is that a grant of \$16,000. has been received for the Jewish Museum of Western Canada under the new multi-cultural program of the Department of the Secretary of State of the Federal Government. An additional grant of \$10,000. has been received through the Manitoba Arts Council of the Provincial Government to permit the continuation of the oral history and archives cataloguing programs.

The Western Region Jewish Archives and Research Committee also maintains close liaison with the National Archives Committee of Canadian Jewish Congress in Montreal.

The key ingredient of the Western Region Archives and Research Committee of Canadian Jewish Congress and of the Jewish Historical Society to which it gave birth is people. The first Archives chairman was Nathan Arkin, who already had a reputation for his active interest in Canadiana. Mr. Arkin has now been named Associate Chairman of the National Archives

Committee of Canadian Jewish Congress. He has been succeeded as regional chairman by Joe Lavitt who has brought new energy and new people to the Committee. The first collection or acquisitions chairman was Harry Gale, representative of the older Yiddish-speaking element of the community. Mr. Gale, who continues to be active on the Committee, was succeeded first by Joseph Wilder and more recently by Myra Wolch, a housewife with a flair for interior design. Mrs. Wolch is specializing in gathering artifacts for the museum display. The first president of the Jewish Historical Society is A. Montague Israels, Q.C. who continues in office. The publications chairman is Harvey Herstein, a history teacher and co-author of a Canadian history text. The oral history chairman is Barry Hyman, Assistant Provincial Archivist, who is also supervising the cataloguing program. The historical society program chairman is Dr. I. Wolch, a dentist. The chairman of the all-important museum project is Harry Gutkin, a graphic arts specialist. Assisting these people are housewives and businessmen, professionals and students, and many community pioneers.

Additional results of the Archives and Historical Society program to date are as follows:

Second Annual Publication: Papers presented in 1969-70, published in April, 1972.

Two pictorial booklets co-published with the Manitoba Historical Society:

- (1) Role of Jews in Opening and Development of West, A. J. Arnold, Transactions, 1968-69;
- (2) Wapella Farm Settlement, C. E. Leonoff, Transactions, 1970-71.

Cataloguing results to April 15, 1972: (1) 2,200 index cards covering 1,300 photos and prints, including copy negatives for all prints; (2) eight manuscript groups as follows: Immigration and Settlement; Associations and Societies; Religious Institutions; Sports and Recreation; Industry and Commerce; Wars; Individuals; and the Canadian Jewish Congress. An inventory for these eight manuscript groups has been prepared, which lists approximately 170 unit titles. The lineal extent of the collection is twelve feet. Main entry cards have been prepared for each accession with reference to title, dates, type of material, extent, description, restrictions and provenance. Some of the correspondence and minute books have been cross-indexed in approximately 550 cross-reference cards.

Oral History: Close to fifty interviews have been taped. An outline has been prepared for each tape, and the tapes are being indexed. The index and the tapes are housed at the Manitoba Museum.

The third annual publication of papers for 1970-71 is being prepared for September of 1972, and the preparation of copy for the Western Canada Jewish History source book is now well underway.

The first museum exhibit opens at Alloway Hall at the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature on Sunday, October 8th. The multi-cultural grant will be used to assist in producing a mobile exhibit to tour other communities.

Footnotes

1. Ringelblum, E., Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto, McGraw-Hill, 1958, Introduction xvii, xix, xx; "Oneg Shabbat" means Sabbath study group signifying the sacredness of the task undertaken.
2. Catalogue: Centennial History Exhibit, 90 Years of Jewish Life in Western Canada; compiled by History and Archives Committee, Canadian Jewish Congress, presented in Winnipeg in cooperation with YMHA Program Committee, September, 1967.
3. H. H. Herstein, Growth of Winnipeg Jewish Community and Evolution of its Educational Institutions; Transactions, Manitoba Historical Society, 1965-66.
4. e.g.: Dominion Lands Bureau papers, Department of Interior and Department of Agriculture papers, Public Archives of Canada.
5. Jewish Historical Society of Western Canada: First Annual Publication, Selection of Papers presented in 1968-69, Winnipeg, June, 1970.
6. Oral History seminar with ten volunteers, November, December, 1971, conducted by John Frishholz and Jim Stanton of Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature.
7. During 1970 the same student prepared an annotated index of selected themes in the first ten years of the Yiddish press of Winnipeg (1910-1920).

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