

RESEARCHING THE JEWISH HISTORY OF PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

BY DR. JOSEPH B. GLASS, POWNAL PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

Shortly after moving to Prince Edward Island, I looked for an Island Jewish history. A simple Google search directed me to the Atlantic Jewish Council website and a two-paragraph description of the Jewish presence on the Island (theajc.ca/history/the-jewish-community-of-prince-edward-island). The brief description cited Sheva Medjek's short history of Jewish PEI in her study the *Jews of Atlantic Canada* and background material provided by Joe Naylor z"l, who was elected the first president of the PEI Jewish community in 1993.

Sensing that the Jewish presence on PEI was more significant and more complex, I started to investigate. I was curious as to what life was like for Jews who resided on the Island, particularly before improved access with the opening of the Confederation Bridge in 1997. I wanted to know how Jews dealt with life cycle events, festivals, holidays and fast days, and with religious practices in and outside the home. I was also interested in knowing why no synagogue had been established and why no Jewish cemetery had been consecrated.

As an academic researcher in historical-geography, I applied research tools and methodologies utilized in previous research projects to investigate the history of the Jewish population of PEI.

The starting point was Louis Rosenberg's classic 1939 demographic study, *Canada's Jews*. His statistics quantified the Jewish population by religion, by origin or race, as well as certain characteristics of gender, age, marital status, occupation, mother tongue, etc. Library and Archives Canada's collection of enumeration pages for Canadian up to and including 1921 revealed the names of most Jewish persons listed in the census summaries. With their names in hand and some basic details, further searches in public archives, libraries, local histories, genealogical resources, and newspapers revealed additional details, incidents, and stories of the Jewish presence.

This material was supplemented by oral histories and interviews conducted with descendants of Jewish Island residents and locals who interacted with Island Jews. Some visual material has also been located which provides portraits of the Jewish inhabitants and their different physical, social, cultural, and economic environments.

I would like to thank a long list of members of the Jewish community, archivists, librarians, descendants of Jewish Island residents, local historians and researchers, local informants, and others who helped in the identification and collection of research material. I will thank them by name in the book on the history of the Jews of PEI.

There are two difficulties in researching the Jewish history of PEI.

In many other Jewish communities, institutional and organizational historical records often provide information on their history and development. In PEI no such records exist for the study period. Secondly, with limited Jewish continuity on the Island and years of Jewish out-migration, potential informants are dispersed through the Maritimes and far beyond. There are, for example, a few unsolved mysteries such as Angela Finlay whose origin or race was listed as Jewish and her religion as Roman Catholic in the 1901 census. She was born in Port of Spain, Trinidad in 1874 and her occupation was nurse. She was married and living with her in-laws in Vernon Bridge. No other references to her have been located.

Preliminary findings have revealed that the Jewish presence in Prince Edward Island was greater in number and more active economically, socially, and culturally than previously presented. The Jewish population was spread across the Island from O'Leary to Souris with the largest concentration in Charlottetown. The wealth of information about the Jewish population and life in PEI justify the creation of a monograph, like those published on the Blacks, Lebanese, and Chinese, on PEI. In the meantime, a short history of the Jews of PEI is presented in two parts; the first until World War One and the second continues after the war through World War Two, until the early 1950s. Essential details of Jewish presence and life are provided. Some individuals and families are highlighted but not all Jewish residents are discussed.

SHORT BIO:

Dr. Joseph B. Glass received his doctorate from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He has authored books and numerous academic articles on topics relating to the historical-geography of late Ottoman and British Mandate Palestine and to Canadian and American Jewish migration to Eretz Israel until 1948. His book *From New Zion to Old Zion: American Jewish Immigration and Settlement in Palestine, 1917-1939*, was reprinted in 2018. *Sephardi Entrepreneurs in Jerusalem: The Valero Family 1800-1948*, written together with Prof. Ruth Kark, was awarded best monograph on Turkish economic and social history by the Ottoman Bank Archives and Research Centre. Dr. Glass is currently researching the history of the Jewish presence on Prince Edward Island.

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE JEWISH PRESENCE ON PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND UNTIL 1945—PART 1: UNTIL WORLD WAR I

THE FORERUNNERS

The earliest Jewish presence identified was Joseph Levi. Mentioned

heAJC.ca

.ca

SPR

SPRING 20

2019

21

PHOTOS: (1) Tombstone of Dr. Frank Rossin, New Glasgow—Courtesy of Alexander Egorov, 2018 (2) List of Peddlers' licences including four Jewish men (Abraham Golden, Mier Golden, Jacob Chen, and Simon Brag [Baig])—Source: Royal Gazette, 9 May 1896, Prince Edward Island Provincial Archives and Records Office (PARO) (3) Section of a 1901 census enumeration page for Charlottetown showing the Block and Golden families—Source: Library and Archives of Canada, Census of Canada, 1911 <http://data2.collectionscanada.ca/1901/z/z003/pdf/z000123432.pdf> (4) Advertisement for Silverston and Epstein, *Charlottetown Guardian*, December 15, 1910, p. 5.—Source: IslandArchives.ca at University of Prince Edward Island, <http://islandnewspapers.ca/islandora/object/guardian%3A19101215-005> (5) Editorial staff of the [Prince of Wales College] College Times in 1937, Sylvia Block, top right—Source: College Times, May 1937, p. 18, <http://vre2.upei.ca/pwc/fedora/repository/pwc%3A2002-018>

office was located in the Allan L MacDonald Building on Main Street. According to local lore, the business was accessed through a side entrance and the side street became known as Hebrew Street.

The sojourn of one Jewish peddler ended in tragedy. Joseph Simon, born in Russia in 1861, traversed the Island on foot from 1897 and then with horse and wagon from 1900. In January 1901, he was thrown from his sleigh into a ditch along the main road near Summerville. Heavily loaded with junk, the sleigh ran over him killing him instantly. He had been in Canada four years and was well-known to Saint John's Jewish community. He was survived by his wife and six daughters in Russia. Joseph's remains were buried in the closest Jewish cemetery—Shaarei Zedek Cemetery, Saint John.

Three early Jewish peddlers were joined by their wives and children—Albert Golden in Pinette, Meir Golden and Louis Block in Charlottetown—and they had more children in PEI. In 1901, Charlottetown, the provincial capital, economic centre, and largest city had a population of 10,718.

(See image 3)

Albert and Meir Golden's families left in the first years of the twentieth century. Louis Block, a well-known junk dealer and his wife raised their family on the Island. He was joined by his brothers Israel and Abie who made Charlottetown home for their families. Israel and Abie were also junk dealers. Israel left for Boston in 1920, Louis passed away in Charlottetown in 1934 and Abie died in Charlottetown and was buried in New York where his daughters and wife's family resided. All the second generation of the Block family left the Island except Maurice Block (See part 2).

Moses Jacobson, his wife Ida and their two sons arrived in the early 1900s. He transitioned from peddler to junk dealer, in essence, from nomadic to sedentary. The family lived in Charlottetown where daughter Lillian was born. In the 1920s Ida ran a grocery store and newsstand. The Jacobsons remained on the Island until the mid-1930s.

The Chary family lived in Summerside at the turn of the century. Harry (Aaron) and his wife Rose were born in Russia and migrated to the U.S. Their second son Herman was born in Summerside in 1900. Harry was listed as a trader in 1901 but no mention was made of what he traded. By 1905 the family was in Campbellton, New Brunswick, and in Winnipeg in 1915.

Jewish settlement continued until 1914 with more Jewish families arriving and more Jewish business ventures opening. Along Queen Street, the main commercial street of Charlottetown, Max Israel, his brothers, and Samuel Matz opened a dry goods store; the Hoffmans operated National Clothing, a men's and boy's clothing store; and Drs. Kemp Epstein and Max Silverston ran an optician's office.

Dr. Leo Frank stood out among the Jewish residents. Born in Lithuania in 1881, his family moved to Scotland and subsequently to the United States in 1895. He had various occupations including law clerk, real estate speculator, promoter, jeweller, and medical supply salesman. In 1915 Frank purchased a 27-acre property in Southport, across the Hillsborough River from Charlottetown. He established Rosebank Fur Farm and specialized in the breeding and raising of silver black fox.

(See image 4)

Local newspapers reported on Jewish religious observance. The

Patriot in 1908 stated that, "The Jews of Charlottetown are now concluding the celebration of the Feast of the Passover, which [...] lasts for eight days. Unleavened bread, as prescribed on [sic] the Mosaic law is eaten during the continuance of the feast, and many reminders of Israel's exodus from Egypt were introduced." In 1912 the *Charlottetown Guardian* reported: "Members of the Jewish Nationality in Charlottetown celebrated the beginning of the Jewish New Year on Sept. 12, the new year entering after sunset Sept. 11th."

The Jewish population the Island was at its largest, at over forty persons. However, the Jewish population did not organize and establish the basic institutions of a Jewish community—a synagogue and cemetery. Over the years some Jewish residents travelled to Saint John and Moncton to celebrate Passover and the High Holidays.

A Jewish wedding was held in 1913. An engagement announcement for Ida E. Hoffman of Charlottetown and Meyer A. Ducoffe of Bridgewater, Nova Scotia, appeared in the *Canadian Jewish Times*. The nuptials were held at the home of the bride's parents, Charles and Nellie Hoffman, on Pownal Street. The *Charlottetown Guardian* underscored that this was the first Jewish wedding in PEI and treated it as frontpage news. Rabbi Herman Benmosche of the Hazen Street Synagogue in Saint John came specially to perform the ceremony. The couple settled in Charlottetown, and Ida gave birth to two sons—Roland Norman and Eric. The latter died in his sixth month. In 1916, the Ducoffes left PEI.

(See table)

During World War One some Jewish residents closed their businesses and moved with their families to other parts of Canada. The economic downturn due to the war, a drop in demand for luxury furs, and other factors led to financial difficulties for many Island residents.

PART 2—AFTER WORLD WAR I TO THE 1950S

BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS

The interwar years saw little change in the size of the Jewish population. Most of the second generation, born either in PEI or having arrived at a young age, left the Island in their late teens and early twenties. When they were growing up in Charlottetown, they studied in the Protestant educational system at the West Kent School and most continued their studies at the Charlottetown Business College or Prince of Wales College. Many of the Block children were recognized for their academic achievements. For example, a 1936 advertisement for the Business College referred to "Miss Beatrice Block, the clever daughter of Mr. and Mrs. A. Block of this city, who now holds a very responsible position in New York City—having won EIGHT [medals] IN ONE TERM." With relatives in New York and Boston, most of these young Jewish women and men moved to these cities where they found employment and opportunities to meet eligible Jewish marriage partners. Some young Jewish men attempted to develop their own businesses. In the early 1920s, Moses Jacobson's son Joe ran a livery stable. Later he and his brother, Herman (Hyman) obtained peddlers' licences, but they left for New York in the mid-1920s.

(See image 5)

Maurice Block, who was born in Charlottetown in 1909, worked for his father Abie, then partnered with him, and eventually took

over the family junk business and expanded into other ventures. For example, in 1946, he was also a Goodyear Tire dealer. He constructed a two-storey brick building at 156 Kent Street and on the upper face was inscribed "1950 Block Building." In 1938 Maurice married Sarah Jake from Moncton. The couple had two children, a daughter Beverly in 1939 and a son Marven in 1941. Maurice and Sarah passed away in Charlottetown in 1994 and 2005 and both were laid to rest in the Jewish cemetery in Moncton where Sarah's parents had been buried.

After the war, Leo Frank sold valuable silver fox pelts in London, England and New York and breeding pairs in Japan. In 1919 one of Frank's high-quality pelts fetched \$850. He successfully promoted his ranch and the PEI silver black fox industry with his ranch appearing in film and photographs. He ceased operations in 1944 and remained in Charlottetown until 1958. During his time in PEI, Dr. Frank fostered significant business and social connections with prominent fox breeders, businessmen, and politicians. His name frequently appeared in the press as a contributor to various charities. Leo Frank married Columbia University educated Ruhamah Scheinfeld in Montreal in 1935. She contributed to the Island's cultural life and wrote a regular column in the Guardian.

(See image 6)

There were new arrivals. Born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1893, Max M. Cohen graduated from the Royal Academy of Music in London. An accomplished pianist and violinist, he immigrated to Canada in 1913 and moved to Charlottetown in June 1921. His performances were well-reviewed in the local press. He died in December 1921 and was buried in the People's Cemetery in Charlottetown.

Most new arrivals were seasonal residents with many coming from Saint John. This reflected improved transportation between the mainland and the Island, as well as on the Island. They acquired peddlers' licences and travelled across the Island in their trucks. Some men specialized in the exchange of linoleum squares for hooked rugs produced in rural areas. Foreign-born Jewish fathers were joined by their Canadian-born sons. Morris Kashetsky of Saint John and his two sons Max and Hyman conducted business in PEI during the 1930s and 1940s. They spent many summers based in Kensington purchasing and bartering for hooked rugs and other products. They were known as "mat men." Hyman Kashetsky, an antique shopkeeper in Saint John, opened a small antique store in Kensington which operated in the summers through to the early 1950s.

(See image 7)

Joe Jochelman was also based in Kensington from at least 1931 until 1947, for at least part of the year. He was a store keeper in Saint John in 1921. On the Island, he was a cattle dealer, he owned silver fox, and a race horse. He was joined by his son Hymie in the late 1930s. Sam Levine resided in O'Leary in the 1940s and 1950s. He was a cattle dealer who purchased from farmers in western PEI.

A few Jewish men put down roots on the Island. Based in Albany, Max Cope arrived in the late 1920s and engaged in peddling, buying hooked rugs, and junk dealing. He lived on the Island until his death in 1957. Benjamin Benjamin was a frequent visitor to the Island from 1916 into the early 1920s. He crisscrossed the Island hawking and bartering. In 1924 he married a local Christian woman, the widow Georgie Smith, they settled in Charlottetown and had a son

An Appeal for Information about Jews in the military stationed on PEI during World War II

If you have information detailing the stay of Jewish men and women in the military who served in Prince Edward Island, such as letters, photographs, family histories, memoirs and any other materials, and are willing to share this material for the purpose of research on the early Jewish presence on PEI, please contact me at josephbglass@yahoo.com

CENSUS YEAR	RELIGION	ORIGIN OR RACE	POPULATION OF PEI
1891	1	n.a.	109,078
1901	17	17	103,259
1911	36	38	93,728
1921	18	21	88,615
1931	19	20	88,038
1941	18	25	95,047
1951	26	21	98,429

TABLE: Jewish population of PEI by religion and origin, 1891-1951

Source: Census of Canada, 1891-1951



PHOTOS: (6) Stereoscope photograph of Leo Frank holding a domesticated Silver Black Fox, Rosebank Fur Farms, Southport, PEI—Source: Keystone-Mast Collection, UC Riverside, California Museum of Photography, <http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/kt009nb6j9/?order=2&brand=calisphere> (7) Jewish mat men on PEI in the 1940s with Max Kashetsky in the middle—Source: Courtesy of Herzl Kashetsky, Saint John (8) Sydney S. Shulemson of Montreal, in an Avro Anson aircraft, No. 1 General Reconnaissance School, RCAF in Summerside, PEI,—Source: Library and Archives Canada / C-000719

named Harry. Benjamin left PEI in 1925 and returned in 1931. He operated two second-hand stores in the centre of Charlottetown until his death in 1951.

WORLD WAR TWO

The war significantly but temporarily changed the composition of the Jewish population. Training bases for the Royal Air Force (RAF) and Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) were established in Charlottetown, Summerside, and Mount Pleasant. The number of Jewish members of armed forces on the Island varied with most staying for a few months of training as pilots, navigators, and bombardiers. Some remained for longer periods working as trainers and instructors. Twenty-four servicemen and one servicewoman have been identified to date. Their number was certainly greater if in 1945 twenty Jewish airmen participated in a Purim celebration organized by members of the Block family in Charlottetown. The few permanent Jewish residents hosted the Jewish servicemen in their homes for Shabbat and holidays.

(See image 8)

The one woman was Ruth Friedman of Montreal, a wireless operator who was stationed in PEI for part of the war. Four servicemen were joined by their wives in PEI. For example, Lewis Jacobs from England was a technical officer in the meteorological department at the Royal Air Force school from December 1940. His wife Kathleen arrived in July 1941 and she passed away in December that year at the age of twenty-seven. She was laid to rest in the Jewish cemetery in Moncton.

Two Jewish airmen died while serving in PEI. Airman 2nd class, English-born Norman Yaffe died in an accident in 1943 and he was buried in the Moncton Jewish cemetery. Sergeant Sam Levine of Montreal was a student pilot at No. 9 Service Flying Training School at Summerside in 1941. He was the lone occupant of a Harvard trainer which crashed off Point Prim on the south coast in November 1941. His body was recovered in the spring and he was buried in Montreal.

During the war four Jewish doctors set up their practices. These men were born in Central Europe and educated in Vienna and Strasbourg. Dr. Israel Rachmel and Dr. Max Shapiro left Europe before the outbreak of the war. Dr. Sydney Bandler was interned in Buchenwald following the German annexation of Austria in 1938 and his wife arranged for his release. The family fled Austria and made their way through Italy, France, Spain, and Portugal and were granted passage to Canada.

There was an urgent need for doctors in PEI since many local doctors enlisted in the armed forces. Dr. Shapiro opened a practice in Borden in 1940 and later moved to New Glasgow. He left PEI in 1951 and was given a very warm send-off by residents of the New Glasgow area. Dr. Bandler practiced medicine in Alberton from 1941 to 1954. He was very well respected and was among the founders of the West Prince Hospital. When his son, Martin, who had graduated Dalhousie University medical school, received an internship in New York, his parents joined him. Dr. Rachmel arrived in 1942 and he was appointed to the staff of the P.E.I. Hospital. He ran a private practice specializing in gynecology, obstetrics, and pediatrics. He passed away in 1980 and is buried in the Floral Hills Cemetery in

PEI. Dr. Frederick Siebner was from Czechoslovakia and graduated from the University of Vienna in 1926. He had a three-year contract with the PEI government. During his tenure he served Tyne Valley and the nearby communities. He married in 1946 and they moved to upstate New York in 1947.

A fifth doctor arrived in 1948, Dr. Edward Kassner. Born in Vienna, he completed his medical studies at the University of Vienna in 1937. Following the German occupation in 1938, he fled Austria, and reached England. He was considered an enemy alien and was interned and then transported to Canada where he was imprisoned in an internment camp for two years. He worked in Montreal and in 1948 he and his Island-born wife Irene, nee Roper, moved to Souris where he practiced until his retirement in 1977. They raised three children—David, Rachel, and Richard. He was elected president of the Medical Society of P.E.I. in 1962. Dr. Kassner's medical practice impressed Rachel's career choice and she is a physician in Charlottetown.

By 1951 the Jewish population was 21 by origin or race and 26 by religion. The number of Jews remained steady from 1921 to 1951. There were births and deaths as well as in-migration and out-migration. The Jewish population was concentrated in Charlottetown with some Jewish individuals and families spread across the Island. Without a critical mass of Jews, no synagogue or Jewish cemetery was established. During the 1960s and 1970s, there was an increased Jewish migration to the Island and the beginnings of organized Jewish activity. ⑤

fine art, unique gifts

Studio 14
gifts & Gallery

CUSTOM
FRAMING
at fantastic prices.

All work
is done
on-site

2993 Agricola Street
902.406.1414