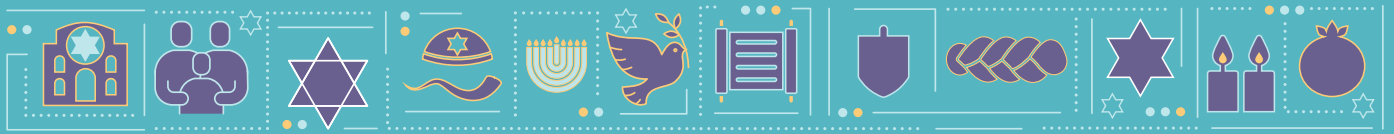


BEING ★ JEWISH IN ONTARIO

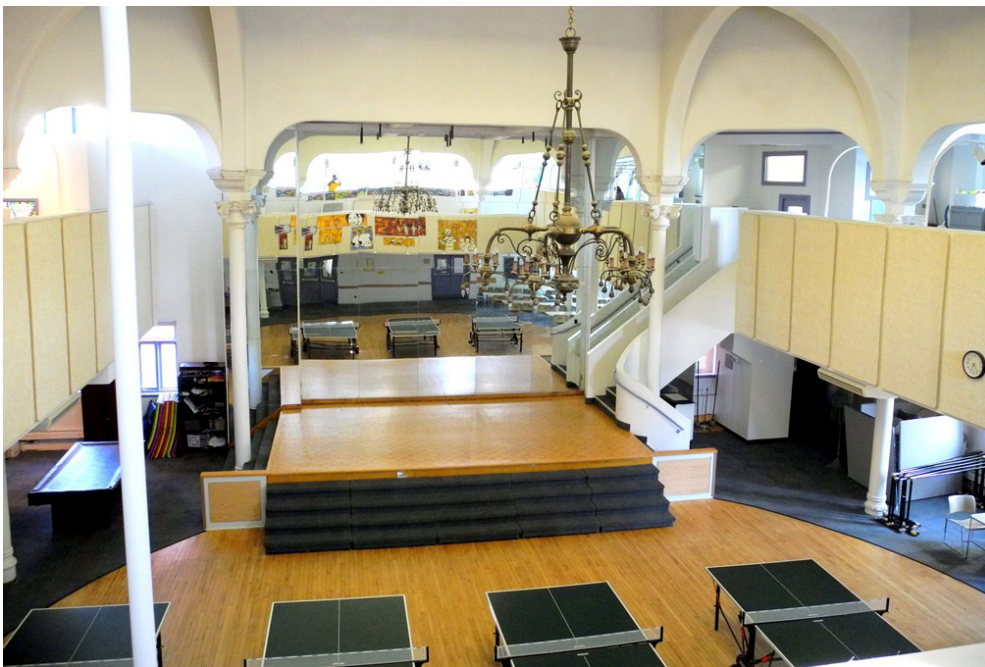


LANDSMANSCHAFT

The Ostrovtzer Society Landsmanschaft

In the middle of Toronto's Cecil Community Centre, there's a large room with a tall ceiling. During the day, you might see older adults doing slow exercises in a tai chi class, or kids playing ping pong after school. Upstairs, there's a library for quiet reading. In the cold months, the building helps people without homes stay warm.

In the middle of the big room, a large light hangs from the round ceiling. It has **Stars of David** on it, showing that this building was once an important place for Jewish people. From 1925 to 1966, it was the Ostrovtzer Congregation, a small Jewish synagogue started by people from Ostrowiec, Poland.



Auditorium at Cecil Community Centre today. Former home of the Ostrovtzer Congregation and the Ostrovtzer Independent Mutual Benefit Society, Ladies' Auxiliary, and Hilfs Farein. The brass chandelier in the centre of the ceiling features Stars of David and is one of the decorative features left in the building from the time when it served as a Jewish synagogue and meeting space. Source: <https://cecilcentre.ca/rentals/>

Hometown Associations: Friendship from Back Home

In the early 1900s, Jews from eastern Europe moved to Ontario. They made groups with people they knew from their old homes. These groups were called “*landsmanschaften*” in Yiddish, which means “hometown associations” in English. These groups were important to the Jewish community, and there were many of them across Ontario as Jewish people settled in new places.

The Ostrovtzer Society was a *landsmanschaft* started by 38 men in Toronto in 1924. It was named after the city of Ostrowiec, Poland, because that’s where the first members came from. They shared the same language, food, and other customs. They were often connected through friends. Can you guess where the people who made the Kiever Society or the Minsker Society came from, based on their names?

A *landsmanschaft* helped people feel at home in a new city like Toronto. Newcomers, who often came without family, joined these groups for help. They made new communities with old neighbors, friends, cousins, and others they knew from their old homes.

Helping Each Other Out

Landsmanschaften in Ontario helped each other like friends should. The Ostrovtzer Society was one of these groups. You paid a little money to join. That money helped others in the group who needed it most. They provided free food and shelter to those who had none.¹ They also helped people find jobs and lent them money to buy equipment to start a small business. Money was also given to help people buy a plot of land in the cemetery. This way, everyone could have a proper Jewish burial.

As people settled in Toronto, they helped new friends or others having a tough time. One member of the Ostrovtzer Society explained how they helped people with small loans, doctor visits, or just by being friends. Even a little help made a big difference. Many people who came to Toronto with nothing got help and became successful. Eventually, when they were able, they helped others who needed it, too.²



Exterior view of the Ostrovtzer Synagogue. The synagogue building served the religious and social needs of new immigrants from Ostrowiec, Poland, and their descendants from 1925 to 1966. The building was sold in 1966 when the community moved to another part of town. Ontario Jewish Archives, 1977-5-8.

¹ “Ostrovtzer Shul in Toronto: Migration Movements.” Yizkor Book, p. 126.

<https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/ostrowiec/oste111.html#:~:text=Among%20those%20present%20at%20this%20gathering%20were%20the%20following%20members%3A>

² Author unknown: <https://www.jewishfoundationtoronto.com/book-of-life-stories/-00ostrovtzer>

Some leaders of Ontario landsmanschaften, like the Ostrovtzer, also ran a synagogue. The Ladies' Auxiliary—who were usually the wives and widows of members—gave lots of money, time, and work to the Ostrovtzer synagogue. They raised money and donated important items for the worship space.



Ladies Auxiliary of the Ostrovtzer Independent Mutual Benefit Society. This group, established in 1924, was one of three landsmanschaften for the Jews of Ostrowiec, Poland. The others were a Ostrovtzer Ladies' Auxiliary, for the wives and widows of the members, and the Ostrovtzer Hilfs Farein, another group that was initially established by an earlier wave of immigrants from Ostrowiec but which later joined together with the Ostrovtzer Independent Mutual Benefit Society.
Ontario Jewish Archives

Help from a Society Doctor

Landsmanschaften, like the Ostrovtzer Society, had their own doctors. Members paid a small fee each month or year. This way, they could see the doctor whenever they needed to, without paying extra.

By the 1970s, Society doctors were no longer needed. Canada started a new system of universal healthcare where everyone could get medical care for free. This meant people in Ontario didn't have to pay to see a doctor anymore.

Sending Help Overseas

Landsmanschaften also helped families and friends in the communities where they came from before immigrating. The Ostrovtzer Society in Toronto sent money to people in their old hometown. After the Second World War, they sent money to help with urgent food and shelter needs of people who survived the Holocaust.

Landsmanschaften also helped families and friends back home. The Ostrovtzer Society in Toronto sent money to people in their old hometown. After the Second World War, they sent money to surviving refugees overseas to help with urgent food and shelter needs. Landsmanschaften also helped survivors of the Holocaust immigrate to places like Canada.

Conclusion

After the 1960s, many landsmanschaften, like the Ostrovtzer Society, had fewer members. The first members were gone, and their kids and grandkids didn't need the group as much.



1924 - 2024

The
Ostrovtzer Independent Mutual
Benefit Society

Cordially invites you to attend our
100th Anniversary Luncheon
Sunday September 22nd, 2024
at the
Beth Emeth Synagogue
100 Elder Street, Toronto Ontario

Mingle at 11:30am Members \$10pp
Luncheon at 12noon Non-Members \$25pp

Please mail your RSVP & payment by September 6th, 2024
Telephone: 289-597-4069 or Email: hhundert2@gmail.com

Please make your cheque payable to the
Ostrovtzer Independent Mutual Benefit Society
Please advise if you have any dietary restrictions

In September 2024, the Ostrovtzer Society celebrated its centennial (100th) anniversary with a luncheon that brought together the descendants of many of the original founders' families. Though many of these people have joined other communities over the years, the legacy of the Ostrovtzer landsmanschaften is still strong.

However, some landsmanschaften still meet today. In 2024, the Ostrovtzer Society celebrated 100 years. The Ostrovtzer Society helped a lot when people really needed it. Today, it continues to raise money for other important projects in Toronto, such as Baycrest Hospital on Bathurst Street and the Jewish Federation of Greater Toronto.

Connections

- What makes you feel like you belong somewhere?
- Why were landsmanschaften created? How do organizations like the Ostrovtzer Society help individuals feel like they belong?
- How did landsmanschaften help new immigrants when they were first established? How did this change over time? Why?

A Note to Teachers

Primary source quotes and texts, including quotes taken from diaries and scholarship, have been synthesized into more accessible language.