



SMALL-TOWN SYNAGOGUES

Small-Town Synagogues

Small Jewish communities grew in places like Thunder Bay, Sudbury, Peterborough, and Niagara Falls. Jewish People who lived in smaller communities had to work hard to keep their traditions alive. The contributions of the Jewish community made the small towns they lived in better. For over 100 years, these communities have been **determined** and **inventive**.

Settling into Small Communities

Why would someone want to live and start a family in a place where:

- There are very few people like them?
- Only a few families share their beliefs?
- It's hard to find things they need, like:
 - **Kosher** food (dietary rules that some Jewish people follow)
 - A **rabbi** (a Jewish spiritual leader and teacher)
 - Holiday celebrations?

A long time ago, in the early 1900s, many different people, including Jews, moved to towns with mills and mines. They were looking for jobs in:

- Lumber (cutting wood)
- Mining (digging for metals and stones)
- Building a big train track called the Trans-Canada Railway



Talmud Torah class from 1957, Thunder Bay. The first cheder program in Fort William (now Thunder Bay) was established in 1911. At the time, 41 students were enrolled. Young boys prepared for their Bar Mitzvah and young girls were taught how to keep kosher homes and prepare for significant holidays. The more formal Talmud Torah program started in the 1930s, involving between 40 and 50 students at its peak. They met five days a week after regular day school classes and on Sundays to study Hebrew, Jewish culture and history. Ontario Jewish Archives, 2007-7-7.

Jewish shopkeepers also opened stores near the new train tracks. They sold things to the workers and their families who were settling in these new towns. By doing this, they helped towns across Ontario grow and become better places to live.

The story of the Jewish people in Brantford can help us understand how small Jewish communities lived in Ontario. An associate professor named Christina Han from Wilfrid Laurier University explained how a long time ago, the Jewish community in Brantford was big and full of life. At first, they prayed at home, but soon they wanted a special place to gather. In 1907, they started meeting in a big room above the Wonderland Cinema on 21 George Street. Over time, more families joined, and by the 1960s, there were 160 Jewish families in the city! They had a synagogue (a place to pray), a school to learn Hebrew, and clubs to join. They were an important part of the city, helping it grow and even having a Jewish mayor named Max Sherman in the late 1950s. Now, most of the Jewish families have moved away, and there are not many left in the city.¹

In the 1950s and 1960s, many small Jewish communities in Ontario towns were growing big and active. Some of these communities, like the one in Brantford, are now much smaller. Others, like the ones in Barrie and Kingston, have grown bigger again in recent years.

The Little Synagogue in Town

A **synagogue** is a special place where Jewish people go to pray. In many small towns in Ontario, the synagogue was the most important place for Jewish life. Most synagogues in Ontario started the same way as in Brantford: A small group of Jewish men would meet in someone's home or store to pray together. In their religion, they need at least ten men to pray as a group, which is called a **minyan**. When they could, they would rent a bigger place to become their synagogue. Some towns even built a new synagogue building when their community grew big enough. This made them very proud!

A synagogue was a very important place for small Jewish communities in Ontario. It was where people went to pray and have special celebrations like births, **bar mitzvahs**, and weddings. They also went there to remember loved ones who had died.

Kids learned to read **Hebrew** and say prayers at the synagogue. They also learned to speak and write in **Yiddish**, which was their parents' language. People of all ages would meet and chat, sharing news about family, friends, and big events happening in the world.

Jerry Stitt, who lives in Thunder Bay, remembered the synagogue as a lively and busy place. He explained how the synagogue was a great place to meet and chat. Men talked downstairs, while women talked upstairs. The rabbi prayed, and sometimes you could hear him even with all the noise. When it got too loud, he would tap on his desk and say "be still" in Yiddish. Going to the synagogue was always fun because so many things happened there!²

¹ Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1J16qeDKnik>

² Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AINFnAW2Gn4>

A Rabbi Is More than a Prayer Leader

In the early years, when small Jewish communities had enough money, they would look for a **rabbi**. They would put an ad in the big city newspapers. Then, they would bring the rabbi to their town.



Sunday school class (Brantford, ON), 1927. Like synagogues in other small Jewish communities, the synagogue in Brantford ran a Sunday morning Hebrew school program. In this program, kids learned to read and write in Hebrew, to speak and write in Yiddish, and learned core Jewish beliefs, ethics, and history. Rabbi Gringorten, a Polish immigrant, was the spiritual leader, teacher, shoichet [kosher butcher], and mohel [circumciser] for the Brantford Jewish community after his arrival for thirteen years. Children learned from the rabbi but also from other adult members of the congregation, including members of the women's group Hadassah, and learned men from within the community. Ontario Jewish Archives, item 1158.

Jean Gringorten Gelb, a girl who grew up in Brantford, recalled how her dad was a rabbi there. Jean remembered that when her family moved to town, there were fewer than 30 Jewish families. Rev. W. Gringorten, her father, was more than just their religious leader. He served as a kosher butcher, performed special ceremonies, and taught the children. He cared deeply about every Jewish family in the community. The synagogue was an old house situated on the corner of Albion and Palace Streets, and it also served as the Hebrew school. Rev. Gringorten was a dedicated teacher who made sure the kids learned well and never forgot their lessons. Many mothers who couldn't read or write English were grateful because their children could now write letters in Yiddish.

Rev. Gringorten also took care of Jewish students at the School for the Blind. He invited them to the family home for every **Shabbat** and holiday. One young man from Winnipeg became like family to them. He kept in touch even after graduating and becoming a piano tuner. He taught the family's son, Jack, to read and write in Braille, and they wrote letters to each other for a long time.³

This story tells us that the local synagogue was like a “one-stop shop”. It was a place to pray, learn, meet friends, and even get help when money was tight.

Shrinking Populations

In the 1940s, many small Ontario cities grew wealthier, and Jewish communities built new synagogues. These communities grew as families expanded and new people arrived.

By the 1970s, many synagogues faced problems as mining and mill towns shrank. People moved away for jobs or retirement, and younger people stayed in big cities like Toronto. Many smaller Jewish communities are less visible today, and some sold their synagogues.

³ Source: <https://memoriesofbrantford.ca/communities/jewish/memories-brantford>

However, a few small-town synagogues remain. Owen Sound has “Canada’s Last Small Town Synagogue”⁴ welcoming new Jewish people. In North Bay, the Sons of Jacob synagogue, established in 1925, still hosts prayers and talks.⁵ Around Ontario, you might find other small Jewish communities eager to share their traditions.

Conclusion

Many of the small-town synagogues have changed a lot over the years, but one thing remains the same – everyone continues to step up to help make their community better for everyone.



Sons of Jacob Synagogue, North Bay, Ontario, 1979. The Sons of Jacob Synagogue is the oldest synagogue north of Toronto still in use as a place of worship. It was built in 1913 as a grocery store, and it became a hardware store and later a furniture store before people started to use it as a synagogue in 1925. The synagogue suffered flood damage in 2007. The neighbouring churches of St. Andrew’s United and the Pro-Cathedral of the Assumption offered financial help to repair the synagogue. The North Bay Mosque invited the Jewish community to use their facilities while damage to the Synagogue was repaired. Today, there are 15 or fewer Jewish households in North Bay and area. The Synagogue is open now only for occasional religious services and has the only remaining kosher kitchen in the area. Ontario Jewish Archives, fonds 64, series 2, file 19, item 1.

Connections

- Think about a community you belong to. What do you love about this community? What contributes to your sense of belonging in this community? What holds this community together?
- How does a synagogue—a Jewish place of worship—hold a community together in a small town or city where there aren’t that many Jewish people?
- Do you gather with a community in a physical space? How does that space make you feel? What types of spaces help people feel like they belong to a group or community? Why do buildings contribute to a sense of community belonging?

⁴ Sources on Owen Sound: <https://onthebaymagazine.com/the-endurance-of-faith/> or <https://indulgedtraveler.com/museum-exhibit-celebrates-canadas-last-small-town-synagogue/>

⁵ More about Sons of Jacob: <https://sonsofjacobnorthbay.ca/>

Additional Resources

What happens in a Jewish prayer service?

<https://www.bimbam.com/jewish-service/>

What should you expect if you visit a synagogue?

https://18doors.org/what_to_expect_at_a_synagogue_-_video/

What's in a Jewish sanctuary? How are the rituals organized in the space?

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/synagogue-layout/>

Hoffman, Lawrence A. and Dr. Ron Wolfson. *What Will You Inside a Synagogue*. Turner Publishing Company, 2013.

What was it like to be a student in the Jewish schools of these small communities? Shulamith (Shami) Kligman-Zimmerman describes attending the Peretz School in her hometown of Windsor Ontario.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GRH1NrfuOes>

A Note to Teachers

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