

# BEING JEWISH IN ONTARIO



## A NEW START AND A HAPPY COMMUNITY

### Creating Context: A New Start and a Happy Community

For many, home is where we feel comfortable and safe. In our home communities, we can connect to people and places we know and love. Having to leave the place you call home can be hard.

Why do people move to new places? Some people move because they want a better life for their family (**pull factors**). Others have to leave their home communities because living conditions are poor or unsafe (**push factors**).

Learning the stories of immigrants who came to Canada, helps us think about:

- What makes Canada a nice and safe place to live? Has it always been like this for everyone?
- How can people who move to Canada keep their old customs and make new friends? How can they help Canada be an even better place to live?

### Jewish Immigration

There is no single story of Jewish immigration, life, or community. Each wave of immigration to Canada brought individuals with different experiences, religious beliefs, and cultures. Each wave faced different challenges, and each wave built upon the work of those who came before them.

### Pre-Confederation Immigration

Jewish immigrants helped settle Upper and Lower Canada, and have lived here since 1759. Between the 1750s and the 1880s, a small number of Jews came to Upper Canada. Most came from the UK and Bavaria. They became shopkeepers and merchants.

These early Jewish immigrants spoke English or learned it quickly. Most did not strictly follow the Jewish faith. They could not vote or hold political jobs at first, but they felt safe being Jewish. Many contributed to early Canadian arts, music, and businesses.

When the first Jews came to Canada, they were often not given a place in politics or the economy. Like other small groups, they had to work hard to fit in. However, because Jews have been in Canada since the 1700s, they started asking for equal rights earlier than some other groups who came later.

## Jewish Mass Migration

In 1881, things started to change. Jewish people began coming to Canada from eastern Europe. In their old homes, they were treated unfairly because of their religion. They could only live in certain places and have certain jobs. This made many of them very poor.

Canada was looking for more workers. It promised a good life with freedom and opportunities. This made many Jews want to move there.

From 1881 to 1914, most Jews who came to Canada didn't have much money. They went to cities and towns to find work. They often worked in factories or started small shops. These were usually the only jobs they could find.

Many of these newcomers had to leave behind their plans for the future. When they arrived in small towns in Ontario, they found life to be hard and lonely. There weren't many helpful things like buses, houses, or parks. There also weren't many Jewish communities.

The first Jews who came had to make a new life for themselves. They often helped other Jewish immigrants, who were from their old hometowns in Europe, settle into life in Canada.

From 1881 to 1914, about 90,000 Jews came to Canada. They had many challenges. Like most newcomers, they had skills but not much money. They needed to find cheap homes and jobs they could do without knowing English.

Most of these Jews were from eastern Europe. They were **orthodox**, spoke Yiddish, and were very poor. Many sold things using **pushcarts** or in small shops. They sold old clothes, junk, and used items.

Life was even harder because some people in Canada did not like Jewish people. This is called **antisemitism**. Some Jews were told they couldn't work in banks, big stores, schools, hospitals, or for the government. So, most Jews worked in factories or started their own businesses.



*In the 1870s and 1880s, the Allan Line of Steamers spent more money on advertising for immigrants to Canada than did the new federal government, it was said. Steamships and railways, along with the government, tried to encourage immigration to Canada to help build up the workforce and the economy. National Archives of Canada, C-63484*

## **Establishing Jewish Community in Ontario (1880s–1920s)**

Even though life was hard, most Jews from eastern Europe moved to places like Toronto and Montreal. They joined other Jews who were already living there. Some Jews moved to smaller towns in Ontario. Many of them opened stores.

In these places, they made groups with people they knew from their old homes. These groups were called Landsmanschaften.

Jews from the same towns in eastern Europe, like Ostrowiecz in Poland, also started new synagogues in Canada. They named them after their old towns, like the Ostrovtzer Synagogue. (see Ostrovtzer Society Landsmanschaft)

As more Jews settled in Ontario, they started fun activities together. They made sports clubs, like the YM-YWHA, where kids could play and learn to work as a team. This helped them feel proud to be Jewish.

In Toronto, they opened a special theater called the Standard, which showed plays in a language called Yiddish. They also made a newspaper in Yiddish that told local news and news from their old homes in Europe.

In the 1920s, Jews built many important places for their community. They made new synagogues, and a big meeting hall called the Labour Lyceum in Toronto. They also built Mount Sinai Hospital to help sick people.

Even though it cost a lot of money, Jews believed in helping others. They gave some of their money to charity. These places helped Jews feel connected and welcome. They could keep their Jewish culture and religion while living in Canada.

It was hard work to make these places, but Jews thought it was important. So, they found time to help, even when they were very busy and didn't have much money. (Breton. "Institutional Completeness", American Journal of Sociology 1964)

## **The 1930s and Beyond**

During the First World War (1914-1918), Canada made it hard for people to move there, especially for Asians, Roma, Black, and Jewish people. This was tough for families who wanted to bring relatives to Canada.

In 1927, new rules made it even harder for Jews to come to Canada. Even though the 1930s were a dangerous time for Jews in Europe, Canada let in very few Jewish people—only about 5,000.

A group called the Jewish Immigrant Aid Services of Canada (JIAS) tried to help. They talked to the government and continued to help Jewish people who came to Canada.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ontariojewisharchives.org/Explore/Themed-Topics/Immigration>

After the Second World War (1939-1945) ended, Canada welcomed more Jewish people from many places. This made the Jewish community even more **diverse**.

Each new group wanted to keep their own language and traditions. These weren't always the same as the Jews already in Canada, whose families came from eastern Europe before 1930.

So, each new group started their own community spaces, like synagogues or clubs. They also connected with the bigger Jewish community that was already in Ontario.

After the Second World War, Canada needed workers. So, they slowly let in more Jewish people from Europe who survived the Holocaust. First, they preferred Jewish people from the UK and Western Europe, then from eastern Europe.

In the 1950s, Canada welcomed Jews from North Africa, where things had become bad for them. In the 1980s, the biggest group of new Jewish immigrants to Ontario came from the Soviet Union.

Jews come from many places and have different customs. There's no one way to look or be Jewish. Jews are a community of communities.

Today, only a few countries have more Jews than Canada. These are France, the US, and Israel. About 0.9% of the overall Canadian population is Jewish.<sup>2</sup>

## Connections

- What are push and pull factors? What factors might “pull” new immigrants to Canada? What factors might “push” people from their home country?
- What makes Canada a welcoming, attractive, safe and secure place to live, and for whom? How has this changed or remained the same over time?
- How can new communities form and grow over time so groups can keep their heritage and customs, while creating new connections and making significant contributions to Canada?
- How did early Jewish immigrants become anchor points for the next arrivals to Canada?

## A Note to Teachers

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

<sup>2</sup> For reference, the Indigenous population is about 5%; the Black population is about 3.5%; the population defined as visible minority is about 16%, according to StatsCan.