

# BEING JEWISH IN ONTARIO



## BUILDING A NEW LIFE AND A VIBRANT COMMUNITY

### Creating Context: Building a New Life and a Vibrant Community

A home community is a comfortable and familiar place for many of us. In our home community, we have favourite places to go, we know some neighbours, and we learn its language(s) and customs. Moving is not something most people do quickly or easily, especially if the move is to a new land or a new country.

If moving is stressful, why do people migrate? Social scientists divide the main reasons into push and pull factors. Some immigrants are “pulled” by the chance of a better life or to reunite with family members. Other immigrants are “pushed out” of their home country by conflict, persecution, or poverty.

Learning about histories of immigration to Canada helps us to consider:

- 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 maintain their heritage and customs while creating new connections and making significant contributions to Canada?

### Jewish Immigration

Unlike many immigrant groups to Canada, Jews did not come from a place where they were the majority cultural group. Jews have lived, often for centuries, as minorities in the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe. There is no single story of Jewish immigration, life, or community. Each wave of immigration 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

Jews participated in the settlement of Upper and Lower Canada. There have been Jews living in the lands that we call Canada since 1759. Between the 1750s and the 1870s, Jews came to Upper Canada

in very small numbers, most often from England and Bavaria (German lands), and settled there as shopkeepers and merchants. Most early Jewish immigrants were already assimilated, spoke English or learned it quickly, and were not rigorously observant of the Jewish faith. This small group of European Jews freely entered pre-Confederation (before 1867) Canada, but they were unable to vote or hold political office, a role reserved for Christians until 1832. Although very few Jews arrived in Canada before the 1880s<sup>1</sup>, early Jewish immigrants mostly felt safe and able to express their Jewish identities. Many thrived, making significant contributions to early Canadian arts, music, and entrepreneurship. Still, like other minorities, many of Canada's first waves of Jewish immigrants did not have guaranteed political and economic rights in this country when they arrived. But because there have been Jews here since the eighteenth century, the fight for civil rights for Jews happened earlier than for some other immigrant groups. (Godfrey and Godfrey. *Search out the Land*, Table 5).

## Jews in the Era of Mass Migration

Things started to change in 1881. Jewish immigrants began to arrive from eastern Europe, where whole communities had been targets of religious discrimination that caused mass poverty (they could only live in certain areas and only hold certain jobs), and where they faced a new period of religious violence. Canada, like the United States, was building up its workforce at that time and was advertising itself as a land of prosperity, opportunity, and freedom from religious persecution. Naturally this attracted a lot of Jews from Europe who longed for a better life. Most of the Jews who immigrated between 1881 and 1914 came with very little money and went to Canadian cities and towns where they worked in factories or opened small businesses, often the only work available to them.

Many of these immigrants had to give up the futures they had planned in Europe to find a new path forward. When they landed in Ontario towns, the earliest eastern European Jewish immigrants found a hard, lonely life: there was very little city infrastructure (systems that support daily life, like transportation, housing, and parks) and even less in the way of an organized Jewish community. The first generations of Jewish immigrants had to carve out a new life for themselves and often became anchor points for the next arrivals from their hometowns.



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

<sup>1</sup> The 1871 census, the first after Confederation, counted 1115 Jews in Canada - 409 in Montreal, 157 in Toronto, 131 in Hamilton and smaller numbers in Quebec City, Saint John, London, Kingston and Brantford (Canadian Encyclopedia).

Louis Rotenberg was one of the influential early immigrants from eastern Europe who made it possible for other Jews to come to Ontario. He was the first Jew in Toronto to come from the small Polish town of Ivansk, but by 1936 there would be more Ivansk Jews in Toronto than there were in Ivansk. Rotenberg made this Ivansk migration possible by writing to his friends and acquaintances in Poland and encouraging them to come to Toronto. He sent them steamship tickets and welcomed them into his home, with all their troubles and joys, when they arrived in Canada.

Many immigrants remembered the hard passage by steamship and the confusing period of arrival, showing why brave people like Rotenberg were so important in helping the new arrivals settle in. Beatrice Fischer recounts the story of her mother, a Russian Jewish immigrant who came to Woodstock, Ontario, after a short period in New York. Hers is a story of having to give up her early dreams to form new ones in Ontario:

“*Mama was clever; she taught Russian to Russian children. She carried her shoes and her books to school and had dreams of an intellectual life. But instead she had to prepare herself to emigrate [sic] to the United States, because her father, a poor rabbi, could not make a living in Zakalnov [her hometown in Russia]. Mama was seventeen... She was to get a job, find a place to live, and then my grandfather would join her. My bubby [grandmother] packed sandwiches, a salami, and Mama's favourite book, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, and Mama set off. The year was 1909, I think. I know the weather turned rotten. Mama was by then on the boat, hundreds of immigrants heaving on the lowest decks<sup>2</sup>.*”

The approximately 90,000 Jews who arrived in Canada between 1881 and 1914 faced many challenges. Like most immigrants, they came with skills and experiences but had little money. They had to find cheap places to live and jobs they could do without speaking English. Most of these early eastern European Jews were Orthodox, Yiddish-speaking, and very poor. Most of them were peddlers, operating pushcarts or small shops, selling rags, junk, and second-hand goods. To make things even harder, as early Canada grew, so did antisemitism. In Toronto and the rest of Canada, Jews learned that they wouldn't be hired by banks, department stores, boards of education, hospitals, or governments. This left most Jews working in factories downtown or becoming independent business people.

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

For all the poverty and discrimination of these decades, though, the majority of eastern European Jews settled in existing Jewish communities like Toronto and Montreal and helped to grow them. Others in Ontario settled in smaller towns throughout the province, often becoming storekeepers. In these places, they formed social groups organized around the people they knew from back home (see *landsmanschaft*).

Likewise, most late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century synagogues were formed by people from the same region—towns from eastern Europe, like Ostrowiecz, Poland, gave their name to new communities in Canada, like the Ostrovtzer Synagogue.

<sup>2</sup> Fischer, Beatrice. “Growing Up in Woodstock.” *Growing Up Jewish in Canada: Canadians Tell Their Own Stories*. Eds. Rosalie Sharp, Irving Abella, and Edwin Goodman. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1997. pp. 76-77.

As local Jewish communities grew and settled across Ontario, they also developed more organized recreational activities. Sports clubs like the Young Men's and Women's Hebrew Athletics Association (the YM-YWHA) helped Jewish youth develop cross-cultural relationships through teamwork and instilled a deep sense of Jewish identity and pride in their members. The Toronto community established a Yiddish theatre, the Standard, showing live plays and a Yiddish newspaper that contained local news and, most importantly for immigrants, news from "back home" in Europe.

The 1920s was a period of tremendously important growth of Jewish communal organizations. New synagogues were built. In Toronto, a large union assembly hall—the Labour Lyceum—was constructed and the community added Mount Sinai Hospital to take care of its most vulnerable. Building these institutions was expensive but the Jews believed charity was of huge importance and families regularly set aside 10 percent of their small incomes to help others.

All of these organizations provided connection and belonging for the Jewish community. They allowed Jewish immigrants to adapt to life in Canada while remaining connected to their Jewish culture and religion. Creating these organizations took a great deal of energy, time, and money from a community that was struggling to put down roots. But community building and membership was important to many Jews. Therefore, they made time to get involved despite long work hours and struggles to earn enough money to survive. (Breton. "Institutional Completeness", American Journal of Sociology 1964)

## **The 1930s and Beyond**

During the First World War (1914–18), Canada slowed all immigration and applied especially discriminatory policies against Asian, Roma, Black, and Jewish immigrants. This caused horrible tension for families who tried to bring in relatives. Jewish immigration to Canada almost came to a complete stop with new restrictive immigration laws in 1927. Even though the 1930s were a terrible period for Jews in Europe, Canada accepted fewer than 150,000 immigrants, of which only 5,000 were Jewish. During this time the Jewish Immigrant Aid Services of Canada (JIAS), which was established in the early 1920s, continued its efforts to lobby the government while directly assisting Jewish immigrants.<sup>3</sup>

Since the end of the Second World War (1939–1945), Canada has accepted new waves of Jewish immigrants from many different countries, and that has made the Jewish community even more diverse. Each new wave of Jews wants to preserve its language, customs, and traditions from home, and the languages and customs aren't always the same as those of the Canadian Jews who can trace their roots to the eastern European Jewish communities that came before 1930. So, each new wave needs to establish some of its own community organizations—like synagogues or social clubs—while still connecting with the broader Jewish community that came to Ontario before it.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://ontariojewisharchives.org/Explore/Themed-Topics/Immigration>

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Canada needed a new workforce and gradually relaxed its immigration policies, initially preferring immigrants from the UK and western Europe. Due to the persistent efforts of Jewish organizations such as the Canadian Jewish Congress, and the targeted push to bring in tailors and other skilled workers, Canada started to welcome more European Jews who had survived the Holocaust. In the 1950s, Canada opened its doors to North African Jews coming from Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, where the political climate had become worse for Jews in those years. The single largest group of immigrants to Ontario during the 1980s was from the Soviet Union. During the 1970s, Soviet Jews were persecuted and denied permission to emigrate. In the 1980s, after many years of political pressure from governments and Jewish organizations around the world, the Soviet Union eased its restrictive rules on Jewish emigration. The diversity of Jewish lives, ethnicities, and cultural and religious practices reminds us that there is no one “Jewish look” or one way of being Jewish. Jews are a community of communities.

In 2024, the only countries with more Jews in the world than Canada are France (with very similar numbers), the US (with 7.6 million) and Israel (with 7.2 million). The Jewish population of Canada today is about 0.9% of the overall Canadian population.<sup>4</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?

<sup>4</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.