

BEING JEWISH IN ONTARIO



MOUNT SINAI



Early picture of Dorothy Dworkin (nee Dora Goldstick), ca. 1909. Dworkin was born in Windau, Latvia, in 1890. She moved to Canada at age 14 and went to the US at 17 to train in nursing and midwifery. She came back to Toronto in 1909 to operate the first free Jewish medical clinic, along with Ida Siegel and her brother Abraham Lewis, Dr. Samuel Lavine (the first Jewish doctor to practice in Toronto), and Drs. A.I. Willinsky, Solomon Singer, L.J. Solway, and Bessie Pullen, Toronto's first Jewish female doctor. Ontario Jewish Archives, 2006-1-2.

Dorothy Dworkin & Mount Sinai

Dorothy Dworkin was one of the founders of Mount Sinai Hospital and was its unofficial leader for the first decades of the hospital's existence. "She was a fireball," remembers historian Irving Abella.¹ Her early experiences and what she did changed the face of Toronto.

Dworkin moved to Toronto from Latvia in 1904, when she was 14 years old. She wanted to help people and hoped to be a doctor. Because she was a woman, a Jew, and born outside of Canada, her career choices were very limited. At age 17, she realized she couldn't become a doctor in Toronto, so she moved to Ohio (in the United States), to train as a nurse and midwife. When she came back to Toronto, she began working in a private medical clinic run by a Jewish doctor, where she served 60 to 80 patients each day and delivered 150 babies in the span of two years. Later in her life, she remembered these early days to the *Toronto Star*:

“ Often I would go in and the woman would be in the most pitiable condition, on soiled and ragged sheets. A wonderful [Jewish] organization provided two big trunks I could go to for what I needed, and it was a real joy to see the woman when I had her fresh and clean and comfortable. ”

¹ Abella, Irving. "Mount Sinai: 'The Standard Has Always Been Excellence.'" *The Toronto Star*, 3 December 1992.

Early 20th Century Hospitals

In the early 1900s, most people in Ontario received medical care at home. If you were sick, or having a baby, or needed a broken bone set right, you'd call a doctor or a midwife to come to you, and your family would be responsible for taking care of you and nursing you back to health. If you needed long-term care when recovering from an illness or accident, there were specialized nursing homes that could help you. Back then, you had to pay directly for all your medical care. If you were a sick person who couldn't afford the cost of hospitalization, you might be lucky enough to have your city government send you to a public hospital in Norfolk, Brockville, Kingston, or Toronto and then pay your bills.

Public general hospitals were often very frightening places, where poor, sick people, who had no one to take care of them at home, spent their last days. People were scared of hospitals because there was a high chance of getting an infection or another disease. Whenever they could, poor immigrants like Toronto's newcomer Jews would choose to go to out-patient medical clinics like the one at which Dorothy Dworkin worked.

Why a Jewish Hospital in Toronto

"The story of Mount Sinai Hospital is basically the story of Toronto Jewry and their way of making dreams come true," wrote Irving Abella.²

How did a small community of immigrant Jews scrape together enough money to build a new hospital for the community? And why did they need it?

Toronto's Jewish population grew very quickly in the early 1900s, and many of the newcomer Canadian Jews were very poor immigrants from eastern Europe. They came to private Jewish clinics because they could not speak English and they could not make themselves understood in the city's other medical clinics. Neither could they afford the \$1 fee that private doctors charged when their family income barely covered rent, food, and other essentials. Dworkin's clinic was half the price; another Jewish clinic was even free.

However, the small clinics couldn't serve all the needs of the community. People who needed overnight stays still wanted to be understood by their doctors. They also wanted to be able to access kosher food, prepared according to Jewish law, which none of the city's hospitals had available.

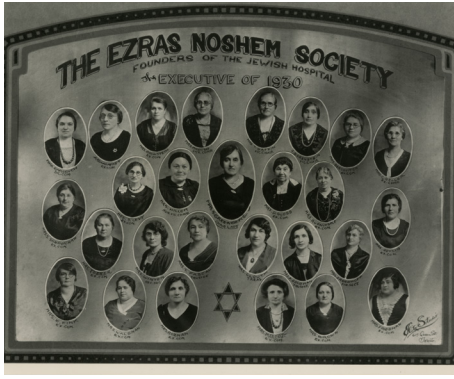
Jewish doctors also faced discrimination and prejudice and were denied employment in the city's public hospitals because they were Jewish. Dorothy Dworkin tells us that "they began to dream of a hospital which they could staff and to which they could send their patients.... The medical staff needed the hospital and nurtured it."³

² Abella, *ibid.*

³ Dworkin, Dorothy. Unpublished memoir manuscript, p. 4, p. 14. Ontario Jewish Archives, Fonds 10.



A photograph of Dorothy Dworkin (seated in the centre) with members of the Mount Sinai Hospital Ladies Auxiliary, Toronto. Celia Goldstein stands in the back row on the right and Mrs. Salkovitch stands in the back row, second from the right. [ca. 1923] Ontario Jewish Archives, fonds 10, item 1.



The Ezras Noshem Society Executive composite, Toronto, 1930. Ontario Jewish Archives, item 3704.



Former Mount Sinai Hospital, Yorkville Ave., Toronto, [197-]. The original building had been used as a private hospital before the Ezras Noshem (Ladies Aid) Society bought it and renovated it to become a public Jewish hospital in 1922. This building had 20 beds and focused on caring for people during childbirth and recovery from illness or accident. Ontario Jewish Archives, item 1464.

The Ladies Take the Lead

A small group of incredible Jewish women were working on solutions to these challenges. With the encouragement of Dorothy Dworkin and other community leaders, these ladies, called the Ezras Noshem (Ladies Aid) Society, soon raised enough money to turn two renovated houses into Toronto's first Jewish Home for the Aged. In 1922, they went knocking on doors across the Jewish community.

Through bake sales, raffles, street fairs, and doorway donations, they managed to raise enough money to buy an old private hospital and turn it into the Hebrew Maternity and Convalescent Hospital. One year later, in 1923, that hospital became Mount Sinai Hospital and was the first hospital in Canada to serve kosher meals and one of the first to employ Jewish doctors.

Not only did these women raise the money to build and maintain the hospital, but they also cooked, cleaned, mended the linen, and looked after the patients. Dworkin herself would go to the market with one of the doctors to pick up potatoes or a basket of apples. When patients were afraid to try out the hospital, the women invited them in for tours so they would feel that the hospital was a safe, secure place to have a baby or recover from an illness. As Dworkin said, "Mount Sinai would have fallen by the wayside time and again had it not been for the unflagging enthusiasm and devotion of its women supporters."⁴

The hospital's reputation grew and people came to trust it. Soon, the number of people asking for a bed was much greater than the number of beds they had. Even though the hospital was created to cater to the specific language, dietary, and cultural needs of Toronto's Jewish community, it has always been open to everyone: "[T]he idea was a new one – a public hospital catering for all races and creeds but especially catering to the needs of the Jewish community."⁵

⁴ Dworkin, *ibid.*

⁵ Best Wishes magazine for new mothers, vol. 1, no. 1, 1949 (Mount Sinai Hospital gift to new mothers), Ontario Jewish Archives, fonds 10, file 3

Conclusion

In 1923, Dorothy Dworkin had to convince pregnant people to have their babies in the hospital. One hundred years later, Mount Sinai Hospital supports more than 7,000 births every year.⁶

In 1923, they struggled to fill 20 beds. Today, the hospital has over 1,100 beds and a waiting list.

With a dream and with tireless dedication to the needs of people in their most vulnerable moments, a small group of Jewish women and doctors created the foundations of a world-renowned teaching hospital. As Irving Abella says, “the Jews built their own hospital, their own way. And then they opened its doors to those who had shut them out.”

Connections

- Think of a community you belong to (e.g. your school, a faith group, a neighbourhood).
How has your community responded to the needs of the people within it?
What are the ways that members of a community help each other?
- Can you think of a time your community came together to support a common goal?
What were the steps your community took to achieve this goal? What was the outcome?
- Why do you think it was important to have a hospital for Jewish people to be able to go to?
- How did Dorothy Dworkin become a role model for her community?
What is something that you could do to be a role model in your school?

Additional Resources

Marrus Barsky, Lesley. *From Generation to Generation: A History of Toronto's Mount Sinai Hospital*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1998.

⁶ “The First Mount Sinai Baby of 2023.” <https://www.sinaihealth.ca/news/the-first-mount-sinai-baby-of-2023#:~:text=Mount%20Sinai%20has%20proudly%20delivered,families%20through%20this%20personal%20milestone>