

BEING JEWISH IN ONTARIO



LANDSMANSCHAFT

Historical Context: Landsmanschaft (Ostrovitzer Society)

In the middle of Toronto's Cecil Community Centre, there's a big room with a high ceiling. During the day, you might find seniors slowly stretching in a tai chi class or kids coming by after school to play ping pong. Upstairs, there's a library for quiet study, and in the cold months the building is a warming centre for people without housing.

In the centre of the big room, hanging from the domed ceiling, is a big, brass chandelier with Stars of David on it: a reminder that this building was once a centre of Jewish life as well. First built in 1890 as a church, from 1925 to 1966, it was the Ostrovitzer Congregation, a small synagogue founded by people from the City of Ostrowiec, Poland.



Auditorium at Cecil Community Centre today. Former home of the Ostrovitzer Congregation and the Ostrovitzer 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 countries in eastern Europe who came to Ontario created social groups that were comprised of people they knew from back home. This kind of social group was called a *landsmanschaft* in Yiddish, or “hometown association” in English. The *landsmanschaften* became leading Jewish social organizations in these years, and there were dozens of these groups across Ontario as Jewish immigrants settled into new communities here.

The Ostrovtzer Independent Mutual Benefit Society was a *landsmanschaft* established by 38 men in Toronto in 1924. The Ostrovtzer was named after the city of Ostrowiec, Poland, because that’s where its earliest members came from. They shared a language, food traditions, and other customs and they often already knew each other—or knew about each other through friends of friends. Can you tell from their names where the people who created the Kiever Society or the Minsker Society came from?

A *landsmanschaft* gave people a rare and special feeling of closeness with their *landsmen*—the people from their same land—as they settled into a foreign city like Toronto, so far from their hometowns. New immigrants, many who came without family, sought out these groups for support. They then built communities with familiar people from back home, like old neighbours, friends of friends, cousins, and other members of their social networks from back home.

Mutual Benefit Society: Helping Each Other Out

The Ontario *landsmanschaften* functioned as “mutual benefit societies” because one of their most important roles in the community was to help their members financially. The Ostrovtzer Society served these important functions. When a person joined one of these societies, they would pay a membership fee. These fees would then support those members who needed the most help, and the society meeting spaces would often be “a shelter for the homeless and the hungry, providing free meals to anyone who came there.”¹ In addition to food and shelter, they helped people find jobs, and they often gave people interest-free loans to buy a wagon or piece of equipment needed to start a business. They also extended their financial support to help people buy cemetery plots to make sure that everybody got a proper Jewish burial, and to help widows and orphans.



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>

As people became more established in Toronto, they would in turn help the next waves of newcomers or other people who fell on hard times. One member of the Ostrovtzer Independent Mutual Benefit Society says:

“ A little can go a long way. Whether it was a small loan, some medical attention or even just some friendship, the society was there. Many of our members who came to Toronto with nothing soon became successful contributing members of our community. In turn, they stepped up and were there for others in need..² ”

The leadership of some Ontario *landsmanschaften*, like the Ostrovtzer, also operated a synagogue. The Ladies' Auxiliary, who were most often the wives and widows of the members, contributed a lot of money, time, and work to the synagogue, fundraising for special campaigns and donating a number of pieces of ritual furniture and decorations to make the worship space functional and beautiful.



Ladies Auxiliary of the Ostrovtzer Independent Mutual Benefit Society. This group, established in 1924, was one of three landmanschaften 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

Society Doctors: Medical Supports

Before government supports like OHIP (Ontario Health Insurance Plan) existed to allow people to visit doctors at no cost, mutual benefit societies like the Ostrovtzer also hired society doctors. Instead of paying for each doctor's visit, society members would pay a low monthly or annual fee that gave them the right to call a doctor whenever they needed one.

By the early 1970s, however, there was no longer a need for society doctors, as Canada moved toward socialized medicine. All provinces and territories in Canada followed Saskatchewan's lead and adopted a universal healthcare policy. This meant that people in Ontario had healthcare coverage provided by the province and didn't have to pay out-of-pocket for medical care.

International Help

Another major purpose of these groups was to help members' families and friends back home. As the members here found more stable and successful work, the Ostrovtzer Hilfs Farein focused on raising money from members in Toronto to send back home to the communities they left behind in Ostrowiec. Grateful for their new lives in Ontario, society members would try to help people from their hometown—relatives and strangers alike—to immigrate to Toronto, where they would have more job opportunities and greater safety as Jews. The small Ostrovtzer group that started with 38 members in 1924 grew to 100 members ten years later because of this pattern of immigration recruitment and

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

support. This pattern continued even after the Second World War (1939-1945), when the Jewish community in Ostrowiec had been murdered or displaced during the Holocaust. The Toronto group sent money to the surviving refugees to help with urgent food and shelter needs and to help them establish a new life in new countries like Canada.

Conclusion

After the 1960s, a number of landsmanschaften across Ontario had a hard time keeping their membership. Many of the first generation had died and there were no new waves of immigrants from the old hometowns. As they were better integrated into Canadian life and more financially secure, the members' children and grandchildren often didn't need the same things from a community group.

There are still many landsmanschaften that meet, and many vibrant synagogues that have their roots in these early immigrant groups. In recent years, the Ostrovitzer landsmanschaften have raised money to support other projects across Toronto, from Baycrest Hospital to the Jewish Federation of Greater Toronto. In September 2024, their descendants marked the 100th anniversary of their community. As one long-time member said, "The Ostrovitzer Society made a difference years ago when there was tremendous need—and we've done it the whole way through. Why should we stop now? We can still be part of the future."³

Connections

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



In September 2024, the Ostrovitzer 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 Ostrovitzer landsmanschaften is still strong.

³ Author unknown: <https://www.jewishfoundationtoronto.com/book-of-life-stories/-00ostrovitzer>