



## SMALL-TOWN SYNAGOGUES

### Historical Context: Small-Town Synagogues

Thunder Bay, North Bay, Timmins, Sudbury, Owen Sound, Peterborough, Belleville, Brantford, Cornwall, Kingston, Kitchener-Waterloo, St. Catharines, and Niagara Falls: Ontario has been peppered with small Jewish communities built up by people with a do-it-yourself attitude to keeping their traditions alive. These communities were small but they persevered and thrived for many decades, making significant contributions to their local landscape in the process.

For over 100 years, Ontario Jews in small communities have had to be determined and inventive.

### Settling into Small Communities

Why would someone choose to live and start a family in a place where they'd be so much in the minority? Where there might only be a few other families with their shared beliefs and practices? Where it would be hard to access the things they need to live a Jewish life, like kosher food, a rabbi, and holiday celebrations?

In the early 1900s, a wide variety of people, including Jews, landed in mill and mining towns. They were seeking work opportunities in lumber, mining, and the construction of the Trans-Canada Railway. Jewish merchants and storekeepers also set up shop along the new railway lines to provide for the working communities that were settling into these new towns. In the process, their initiatives contributed to the economic growth of these cities across Ontario.



*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.*

The story of Brantford's Jewish community gives us a glimpse into the pattern of small-town Jewish community life in Ontario. Christina Han, associate professor in Wilfrid Laurier University's Faculty of Liberal Arts, tells us a bit about Brantford's Jewish history:

“ *The Jewish community used to be one of the most dynamic immigrant communities in the city, and now they're virtually gone... The earliest Jewish members had to rely on personal prayer and family service, but they always wanted to set up their own faith centre as soon as possible. By 1907, people's homes could no longer accommodate the number of believers, so they used an upper hall of 21 George Street, which was Wonderland Cinema. By the 1960s, the community peaked at 160 families and they had an active synagogue, a Hebrew school, and Jewish associations and they became an integral part of the city's life and supported the city's economic, political, and cultural life. We even had a Jewish mayor in the late 1950s, Max Sherman.*<sup>1</sup> ”

A lot of small-town Ontario Jewish communities, like Brantford's, hit their peak in the 1950s or 1960s. Some, like Brantford's, are almost invisible today, while others, like Barrie and Kingston, have grown strong again in recent years.

## The Little Synagogue in Town

A synagogue is a Jewish house of worship. For most of Ontario's small Jewish communities, the synagogue was the anchor point of Jewish life.

Almost all the synagogues in Ontario have a history that sounds a lot like Brantford's: they start with a small group of Jewish men who gather together in someone's home or store for a few years to pray together. In Orthodox Judaism, a group of ten men is needed for communal worship; while people can pray on their own, this group—called a minyan in Hebrew—is a religious structure that encourages community gathering and solidarity. When they can afford it, they rent a bigger space that becomes the community's synagogue. Some communities even manage to build a new synagogue building when the community is big enough to support it—and what a point of pride that is!

Synagogues became a major hub for the small Jewish communities across Ontario. It was where people prayed, celebrated births, bar mitzvahs, and weddings, and mourned together when their loved ones died. It's where kids learned to read Hebrew, say prayers, and speak and write in Yiddish so they could keep their parents' language alive. It's where everybody, of all ages, socialized and caught up on the weekly news about family, friends, and big events in the world. It was a loud, buzzing place, as Thunder Bay resident Jerry Stitt remembers fondly:

“ *And the noise level in the shul [synagogue]... It was a great place to meet. You'd talk about things. So the men were talking downstairs. The women were talking upstairs. Rabbi Polanski was davening [praying]. And in between the noise, you could sort of hear the davening. And every now and then, he'd pound on the lectern and he said it in Jewish [Yiddish], "be still".... It was so much fun going to shul because everything went on there!*<sup>2</sup> ”

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

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



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.

## A Rabbi Is More than a Prayer Leader

In the early years, when they could get enough money together to hire a spiritual leader, small Jewish congregations would advertise for a rabbi in the big city newspapers and bring someone to town.

Jean Gringorten Gelb, one of the children of an early Brantford rabbi, remembers her childhood in Brantford. When the community was able to afford a rabbi, they brought her father to town. But, like many small-town rabbis, he was much more than just the leader of prayer services—he was a teacher and a connector, too, and he took care of the Jewish people who lived in town all year-round as well as the students who spent part of their year at the local School for the Blind.

“ There were fewer than thirty Jewish families when we came. My father, Rev. W. Gringorten was not only the religious leader of that small community. He was shochet [kosher butcher], mohel [performed ritual circumcision], [and] teacher... for his entire flock. He didn't take his position lightly. He was totally involved with every Jewish family there.

The shul was an old house on the corner of Albion and Palace Streets. Naturally, the cheder [Hebrew school] was there too. Papa was a teacher of the old school, disciplinary ruler in hand. But what he taught, the kids really learned. Learned and never forgot. Many a mother who couldn't read or write English, blessed my father forevermore, for having taught the children to read and write Yiddish, so that when they left the parental home, they could keep in touch with their folks by corresponding in Yiddish.

I don't know whether the practice was continued after we left Brantford, but my father made it his business to be in touch with the School for the Blind in Brantford, and to take under his wing any Jewish student there, from whatever part of Canada he may have come. We would bring them to our home for every Shabbat and every Jewish holiday. I remember one young man from Winnipeg who became a family favourite. He kept in touch with us for many years after he was graduated from the school as a piano tuner. He taught my brother Jack to read and write Braille and they corresponded for some time.<sup>3</sup> ”

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

This story shows us how the local synagogue was a “one-stop shop”: it functioned as a prayer space, a study hall, a social centre, and even supported people during tough financial times.

## Shrinking Populations

The 1940s brought new wealth to a lot of the smaller cities across Ontario, and the Jewish communities in places like North Bay, Peterborough, and elsewhere were able to build new synagogue buildings. Some of these communities grew bigger for a little while, as families grew and new Jewish people moved to these towns.

Even though they built new buildings in the 1950s and 1960s, many of the synagogues would start to struggle within a decade. By the 1970s, mining towns and mill towns were getting smaller altogether—their main businesses were downsizing (getting smaller) and people were moving away for other jobs or retiring to the south; very few new people were coming to town. The younger generations would go away to university and then stay in bigger cities like Toronto to start their careers. This was as true of Jewish communities as it was of the general population.

Many of Ontario’s smaller Jewish communities are no longer a vibrant, visible presence in town. Some of them chose to sell their synagogue buildings as people left town. Michael Grand, a member of a Cambridge synagogue that closed in 1985, described the day they closed the building: “It was one of the saddest days for so many of the families because they’d been married in the synagogue, their children were named there, and had had their bar and bat mitzvahs there. It was the centre of the community. That day, the synagogue felt more like a house of mourning than it did anything else.”<sup>4</sup>

But a few small town synagogues remain, sprinkled across Ontario, paying tribute to the traditions of their ancestors. In Owen Sound, there’s “Canada’s Last Small Town Synagogue,”<sup>5</sup> where Congregation Beth Ezekiel’s small but strong Jewish community still provides a welcoming place for Jewish newcomers and retirees who are choosing to live outside of the city.



*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 damaged 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.*

<sup>4</sup> Source: <https://www.cantawhos.ca/post/the-history-of-forgotten-cambridge-synagogue>

<sup>5</sup> Sources on Owen Sound: <https://onthebaymagazine.com/the-endurance-of-faith/>  
or <https://indulgedtraveler.com/museum-exhibit-celebrates-canadas-last-small-town-synagogue/>

In North Bay, you can still find people gathering together for Jewish prayer and conversation at the Sons of Jacob Synagogue, which was established in 1925<sup>6</sup>. Across the province, you might stumble upon a Jewish community that would be happy to show you around and explain their traditions.

## Conclusion

Many of the historic synagogues that remain in these small communities have changed a lot over the century. They started out Orthodox, with men and women sitting separately, and with stricter observance of Jewish rituals and laws. Today, though, they are often more liberal, egalitarian spaces, where men and women take turns leading the congregation. But just like in the early years, everyone steps up to help make things happen.

## 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?

## 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/](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>

<sup>6</sup> More about Sons of Jacob: <https://sonsofjacobnorthbay.ca/>