

**Henry Abramson**

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**“JUST DIFFERENT:” THE LAST JEWISH FAMILY OF ANSONVILLE, ONTARIO**

By the late 1960s there was a general consensus among residents that Ansonville was simply too small to have its own name. In contrast to neighboring Iroquois Falls, the well-planned company town developed early in the century to house the largely anglophone employees of the new paper mill, Ansonville grew in a haphazard, *heimish* manner to accommodate the growing population of “less-desirable” individuals drawn to the prosperity of the town in the second decade of the century: Québécois and Eastern European immigrant labourers for the mill, Asian immigrants to meet the ubiquitous Northern demand for Chinese food, and Jews to build an economic infrastructure for the town, primarily in textiles and groceries. Whereas Iroquois Falls boasted comfortable single-family dwellings on sizeable lots situated on streets so well-organized that they were laid out in alphabetical order, housing in Ansonville (and Montrock, the largely Francophone satellite community to the northwest) was characterized by crowded multiple-family duplexes and triplexes, with sagging roofs and encased in tarpaper. The population of the tri-town peaked at some 7,000 in the post-war era, but the circular walk from the extreme south-west point in Ansonville (the Ontario Provincial Police station) to the most northern point of Iroquois Falls (out by the paper mill) and around to the easternmost point in Montrock (near Jacob’s Hill, by the site of the grocery store of

my father's cousin Joe Abramson) would still take no more than an hour or so. By snowmobile, one of the preferred modes of travel in the winter, the route would take about ten or fifteen minutes. Given the difficulties of managing three separate town councils and so on, in 1969 the towns merged to form the "Corporation of Iroquois Falls," and only Canada Post retained the memory of Ansonville and Montrock: mail may be addressed to residents of Iroquois Falls "A" and "M" respectively, even though it goes to the single postal station anyway.

I was six years old when Ansonville lost its name. Like my father before me, I was born in this remote milling town, located some 450 miles north of Toronto on Highway 67, a spur off Highway 11 just before it begins to curve west. Unlike my father, I grew up as an only child, in two senses: I was the only child of my parents, and I was the only Jewish kid in town, while my father was the second youngest of seven, and grew up in the small but active Jewish community of the 1920s through early 1950s. By the time I was born, a new Jewish child was sufficiently unusual that it was the occasion of general celebration. A *mohel* was brought up from Timmins, and a month later Harry Gramm, the snowplow driver from South Porcupine and the Cohen of the North, came to perform my *pidyon ha-ben*. This article, is a brief description of what it was like to grow up in this remote town, isolated from the main centers of Jewish population in Canada.

The Abramsons were among the first Jews to settle Northern Ontario. Three brothers — Louis, Nathan and the youngest, my grandfather Alex Abramson — fled Lithuania to avoid conscription for the Russo-Japanese War in 1904, attracted by land grants in the area of Krugersdorf and Englehart (a married sister moved out west to Lethbridge). Although they made an honest effort at clearing and farming the untamed coniferous forest — known as "the bush" in Northern lexicon — within a decade all of those early Jewish settlers had turned to commercial ventures in the nascent population centers along Highway 11. Farming in general is not the major industry of the

North, given its short growing season and the brutally cold winter. In fact, Iroquois Falls has the unusual distinction of being the location of the coldest temperature ever recorded in Ontario: on January 23, 1935, the mercury dipped to 73 degrees below zero (ask a native whether that was fahrenheit or Celsius, and he will likely respond with a smile, “*tabernak*, who cares, eh?”).

The exploitation of natural resources — timber in the case of Iroquois Falls, cobalt, silver and even gold elsewhere — became the most important economic engine of the North in the early decades, and the Jewish population soon turned to professions more characteristic of Eastern Europe, serving the rapidly growing population with a variety of goods and services. The only remnant of the early Jewish farming communities was the cemetery in Krugersdorf, established in 1906 when some Jews died in a canoeing accident. Morris Perkus and his son Ben were returning from Englehart station with three new immigrants from Europe when their boat was caught in a surprise current and took them over the falls.<sup>1</sup>

As a child, I remember regular pilgrimages to the small Jewish cemetery at Krugersdorf, which covered an area roughly equivalent to that of a hockey rink. I remember in particular the unveiling of the headstone for my grandmother Polly (Pafke) in 1971, when two dozen or so Jews gathered from Cochrane in the north to Timmins in the south to pay respects at the slightly neglected ancestral burial ground. I vaguely remember that the old iron gate was locked, but I found a small footpath so we left the cars on the gravel road and carefully made our way through the brambles in our best clothes. There was a medium sized shed on the graveyard grounds, and after the unveiling the last Jews of the north stood around and shared a small meal that consisted primarily of hard-boiled eggs.

After a few years trying his hand at farming, then raising chickens, my grandfather wandered to South Porcupine, which was the center of a gold rush in 1910. In 1916 he moved again to Ansonville because of the establishment of the paper mill and the railway’s extension to nearby Porquis Junction, and set up a

multiple-purpose store (his business card from that era advertises “men’s wear, stationery, barber shop, confectionary, and rooms to let”). Bella Briansky Kalter remembers the business which my grandfather began and my father continued:

When crossing the field on the way from Iroquois Falls to Ansonville, as one approaches the tracks that run alongside Railway Street, the eye meets the sign that expresses an indomitable trust in the town — Alex Abramson and Son — above the door of the two-story building at the corner of Railway and Synagogue Streets. Upstairs several sisters operate the town’s telephone switchboard and have their living quarters. Tiptoeing to get a peek into the store, a little girl sees a narrow passageway with counters and shelves of men’s clothing to the right and the left, and in the back a little wood stove around which the father, Alex, or his son Albert stands talking to a customer. The eldest son, Milton, has married dairyman Korman’s eldest daughter in Timmins and gone to live there. Alex’s short, plump, always good-humored wife, Polly, is probably home baking bagels. Their daughter Esther, who is a few years older than I and is my sister Rebecca’s friend, is called Big Esther or Esther Polly’s to distinguish her from her cousin Esther Mooshe’s, who, though she is a year or two older, is known as Little Esther because she is smaller. There are also the younger children, Dorothy and Yankie. And a year or two after our arrival, a new baby, Enid, is born about the same time as brother Milton’s baby.<sup>2</sup>

My father — Yankie to the Jewish community and the non-Jews of his generation, Jack to everyone else — became the “son” in Alex Abramson and Son. All of his six siblings left the North in the post-war era to seek their fortunes elsewhere, primarily in Montreal and Toronto. Due to his deeply ingrained filial piety, as well as his sense of the potential of the North, my father stayed behind to develop the business and care for his

aging parents. He met my mother Ethel at his sister Dorothy's wedding in Montreal, and brought her back to Ansonville in 1961. By the time I was born two years later, we were the only Jews in town, with my father's elderly cousin Joe Abramson a mile away in Montrock. Although I was the only Jewish child in town, our home was appropriately located on "Synagogue Street," so named because the *minyan* used to meet in a small building three houses down from the apartment over the store in which we lived. The building, which still stands, is now a private residence, and I have never seen its interior.

Alex Abramson and Son is still operated by my father and mother, and it has the distinction — so awarded by the local Chamber of Commerce several years ago — of being the oldest business in town (excepting the mill, of course). Long ago the range of goods was slimmed down to providing only men's wear, with the majority of the trade being work clothes, construction boots, parkas and the like. The business provided only a small income to the family, (particularly after the opening of the first shopping mall of the North in Timmins, some forty miles away), but my father diversified by buying several local properties and renting them out as furnished apartments to migrant labourers who came for the various mining and milling projects in the region.

While real estate holdings provided a certain degree of stability, the business continued while others folded because of the old-world style of business practice that my father and grandfather before him extended to customers. As a boy, my father taught me how to write an alphanumeric code on each price tag, indicating the actual cost of the item, so that when a customer wanted to negotiate the price (only newcomers to town and those buying on the mill account would refrain from haggling) we would know how far to reduce it. I must have stood beside my father at the counter for hundreds of transactions, usually conducted in the French-English *patois* of the North.

Furthermore, my father extended credit long before Visa and Mastercard made it to the north, based primarily on family

reputation. We had an ancient safe in the store, but it held no cash — just a standing file of 8” by 11” yellow index cards, listing every customer’s name, their address, and each transaction in my mother’s careful hand. Like his father before him, my father would extend interest-free credit to total strangers, as long as they could establish their family connections in the North. A person could walk out of Jack Abramson’s store outfitted with everything he needed for his new job at the mill if he was, for example, a son of one of the Trembley girls who married that Desjardins boy from Rouyn and moved to Kap.

The most prominent demographic feature of the tri-town was the division between the Francophone and Anglophone population — and the deep animosity between the communities. As a young child, I had little consciousness of this social rift, particularly because we lived, literally, “on the wrong side of the tracks,” which was predominately French. Like all my playmates, I was fluent in the twangy Québécois French, and often switched unconsciously between languages — my father laughs as he describes how he once asked, “who wants ice cream?” and I responded immediately, “*mwah!*” The public school system (as opposed to the Catholic school in town) was anglotropic, however, and the use of French was discouraged until it was reduced to the language of the playground, and then even to the language of the street. Somehow — perhaps it was the two television channels in English, when there was only one in French — everyone silently learned that the English were somehow better than the French, and circles of friendship tended to coalesce along linguistic lines even in an otherwise anglophone public school. I remember once asking my father if we were English or French. He responded that we were Jewish, I so I asked him if that was “better or worse,” to which my father said, “different. Just different.” Nevertheless, I drifted away from my Francophone playmates, and my newer pals had names like McGuire, Liznick, and most of all, Peter Chin, my next-door neighbour, best friend, and principal rival. The son of the proprietor of one of the local Chinese restaurants, Peter was the

only Chinese kid in school, and our status as outsiders was exacerbated by our incessant competition for academic achievement at Calvert Centennial Public School.

This is not to say that I suffered from any form of anti-semitism or discrimination in my early years, although that did come later. All in all, the first ten years of my life in Ansonville were idyllic beyond description, particularly to people who have lived in major urban centers all their life. I remember very little of school, but I have beautiful memories of the snow crunching under the runners of my sled as my father pulled me to my kindergarten class; of wading through stagnant ponds collecting jars full of pollywogs; of wandering along the railway tracks by Hi-Way beach eating so many blueberries that I made myself sick; of jumping off our second-story balcony into the snow and building igloos; of setting my line into Meadow Creek and kicking back for a nap, only to be awakened by the biggest catch of my life: a ferocious-looking Northern Pike that was so huge that when I held it by the tail and slung it over my shoulder to carry it home, the head dragged along the ground. I imagine that, despite being the only Jewish kid in town, my childhood was probably much closer to that of my grandparents in their Lithuanian *shtetlakh* than that of my cousins in Toronto.

There was some Jewish content in my life in Ansonville. My mother always kept a kosher kitchen, going to the great expense and difficulty of having all her meat shipped up from Toronto. She also lit candles on Friday nights, and the store was always closed for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur; Passover was the occasion of the annual trip to Toronto, where we spent the *sedarim* at my Aunt Enid's home. The occasional *meshulah* occasionally stayed at our home overnight. I remember in particular an aged collector for a Bais Yaakov girl's school in Montreal, who would quite literally spend the summer hitchhiking through the North, stopping at each community with a Jewish family or two. He would show up without announcement at the store, and I would be displaced to the living room sofa to give him the privacy of my room, and then the next day

he would be gone. Right after my seventh or eighth birthday, my parents sent me to the B'nai Brith summer camp, which was then in Parry Sound (I believe I was the only boy who came from *north* of the camp for the summer), which was my first experience with large numbers of Jews who were not my first cousins. I was deeply moved, even transformed, by the experience, particularly by the strong Zionist component of the camp curriculum. I vaguely remember learning a sense of Jewish heroism, and I put together some sort of a scrapbook chronicling the history of the State of Israel.

During these preadolescent years I began to develop a mild sense of alienation as I grew more aware of the rich Jewish lives my summer camp friends had in Toronto. Christmas was always a particularly difficult time. From my earliest years I knew there was no Santa Claus—a clerk in the store, Pierre Chassé, used to dress up in a costume my father bought for the season, and so I was never fooled—but all my friends were fervent believers (David Bigelow once even took a Polaroid photograph of Santa in his house on Christmas morning to prove his existence). I recall distinctly walking home from school one afternoon—it was already dark out, and the cold air had that familiar bite in the lungs that made me take shallow breaths—when I looked up and saw that a four or five foot section of a pine tree was lying by the side of the road, obviously knocked off one of the big timber trucks that regularly drove down the street. I brought it home, and my parents took pity on me, allowing me to set it up by the dishwasher. The next morning it had dried out and lost its needles, messing up the floor. Dry-eyed, I threw it away, as if resolved to accept the identity that was thrust upon me.

I was also a member of the local Wolf Cub Pack, and I remember taking it very seriously. I once wore my Wolf Cub uniform to school for picture day, and I eagerly devoured the Wolf Cub manual, memorizing its Code of Conduct and its tips for wilderness survival. One of the primary goals of a Wolf Cub is to acquire certain skills (carpentry, orienteering, etc.), and



after this mastery is demonstrated before the Pack Leaders, the Cub receives a coveted patch that is worn with pride on the left sleeve of the uniform. Several patches are given for knowledge of a religious tradition—to my dismay, the Pack Leader simply awarded me the badge for Jewish knowledge (a yellow Menorah against a white background) without requiring any formal presentation or examination. Apparently, some of the Catholic boys had earned their patches for having passed catechism or something, and I suppose the Pack Leader simply ordered a patch for me at the same time. While I appreciated having another patch for my sleeve, I felt somehow dishonest about receiving a patch without having to work for it. I also felt uneasy at receiving preferential treatment, separating me from the otherwise ideal and undifferentiated community of Wolf Cubs.

Besides the summer camp, my parents also began ferrying me to Timmins every Sunday morning for Hebrew lessons with a traveling *melamed* who catered to the Jewish communities of the North. The classes were held in a well-lit, sparsely furnished small room on the second floor of the Timmins synagogue, which was later torn down to make room for the bus station. I recall little of the lessons themselves, except that the teacher tried to get us to learn vocabularily by recognition rather than teaching us the alphabet first. I remember staring at the vowelized shape of the word *dag*, trying to fix the unusual Semitic cast of the lines in my head while associating it with the drawing of the plump trout beside the word. I do remember, on the other hand, endlessly complaining to my parents about this weekly ordeal, and the various bribes they employed to get my cooperation: an afternoon at the movie theater in Timmins (Ansonville had none), a new plastic sled, and so on.

My parents understood that this level of Jewish education was insufficient. Although my father had little formal Jewish education, having grown up in Ansonville, my mother came from a family with strong intellectual roots, including her uncle Mordechai Itshak (Itsel) Mendelsohn, who was a prominent educator and community activist in Montreal.<sup>3</sup> Shortly

after my tenth birthday, my parents undertook tremendous sacrifices to ensure that I would know what it meant to be a Jew. My father took a partner into his business, and they rented an apartment off Bathurst Street in the north end of Toronto. My mother lived with me full time, and my father would commute between his family and the business every two weeks, all for the purpose of enrolling me in Eitz Chaim School for a few hours several days a week after public school. The level of sophistication of this school put the time I spent with the *melamed* to shame. I learned how to sound out Hebrew words, and mastered the *parashah* for my Bar Mitzvah in 1976. During those years in Toronto, I returned to Ansonville each summer, and after my Bar Mitzvah, I moved back to finish High School in my home town.

Looking back over two decades later, I see that that first year back in Ansonville was a major turning point in my life as a Jew. It was my first real encounter with antisemitism, and caused certain attitudes towards my Jewish identity to harden while others simply faded away. To be fair, it is difficult to separate this characterization of small town life from the history of my personal adolescence, and now that I have the perspective of adulthood I realize that my parent's understanding of the situation was far more accurate than the muddled passions of a fifteen-year-old boy. Still, my first experience of antisemitism was an extremely unpleasant illustration of Gerald Tulchinsky's characterization of Jewish life in small towns:

They lived among non-Jews, and their children were often the only non-Christians in the public schools they attended. It might be said therefore, that they lived on a kind of cultural frontier between the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds; they were more directly exposed, on the one hand, to those influences which drew them away from their identity as Jews, and on the other, to the need to understand, assert, explain, and defend that identity on almost a daily basis.<sup>4</sup>

The antisemitism I experienced was primarily high school hooliganism. I got involved in quite a few fist fights, and spent a significant portion of my high school years waiting to see the principal, holding my broken glasses in hand and remembering with relish the few good blows I managed to deliver before I was overwhelmed by superior numbers. A fight would typically start as I walked down the hallway and heard someone call out, “Hey, dirty Jew!” or “*Mau-dzee juif!*” My father couldn’t understand my reaction — he always said I should consider this “water off a duck’s back” — but my summer camp experience and the years in Toronto had changed me. Turning to face several boys, usually older than me (and always bigger, as I was a small child), in my mind I was no longer the scrawny Abramson kid — I was a Maccabee, a defender of Masada, a rebel in the Warsaw Ghetto, a Sabra on the Golan Heights. What I lacked in fighting skill I made up for in determination. Eventually, after joining the wrestling team, I caught up in skill as well, and after a particularly nasty fight in late spring I finally earned some grudging respect from my enemies.

Three aspects of my personal experience with anti-semitism are relevant, and I suspect might be generalized to other remote communities. Firstly, I never experienced any antisemitism on an institutional level, that is, I never felt discriminated against by my teachers or school administrators, nor did I ever feel bias in any organized event that I participated in, from the Winter Fair to Little League (the Wolf Cub incident mentioned above, while discriminatory, was well-intentioned). I believe a good part of this was due to the fact that I was a “northerner,” born and raised in Ansonville with connections there. Peter Chin suffered his share of racial slurs, but I believe his experience as a Chinese kid was similar to mine because he, too, was a northerner. On the other hand, kids coming from big cities (like North Bay or Sudbury) might be looked at sideways for years after their arrival. Furthermore, my father was a prominent northerner and a major community

activist. He was widely respected as a fair businessman, extending credit (without interest!) to people when the mill was laying off; he was also ready to hire social outcasts such as young men released from the Monteith jail, unmarried mothers, and so on. He was also a prolific commentator on local affairs in the weekly *Iroquois Falls Enterprise*, often a gadfly of elected officials. Customers would often come into the store to laugh with my father about his latest article. I believe he could have run for mayor (a Jew, Barney Nosov, had held the office decades earlier) after he successfully coerced the Town Council into paying for construction of a fence around the rail yard and the hiring of a school crossing guard. The public elementary and high schools and one of the Catholic schools were located in Iroquois Falls, and that meant that Ansonville kids (myself included) were tempted to take the dangerous shortcut through the rail yard, crossing some twenty tracks by crawling under standing boxcars which could move without warning if an engine was hooked up at the other end. So I may have been the Jew kid, but well before that, I was “Jack Abramson’s boy,” and that sheltered me from much anti-Jewish prejudice.

Secondly, while a certain amount of childhood brutality was directed at me, it paled in comparison to the animosity between the Anglophones and Francophones, a conflict that I was not really involved in. The Anglophones generally did not view me or Peter Chin as a threat, and the Francophones did not consider us bona fide Anglophones. Ironically, my tormentors were almost all of mixed parentage, typically Anglophones with Francophone fathers. Unable to side easily with either the French nor the English, I suspect they turned their frustrations on the only kids who had less community than they, that is, the Jew, the Chinese boy, and the Black girl who came in from Matheson for High School.

Thirdly, it is crucial to note that the bad boys who bullied me were *really* bad boys. They were not academic achievers, but that was nothing special—the ambition of most of the boys in my class was to quit school as soon as possible

and get a job paying \$16 an hour at the mill (incidentally, it was an unstated assumption in my family that Jewish kids didn't opt for this career path). As these boys grew older, they proved unfit for mill work and several of them ended up in prison; one for, I believe, drug peddling (he was caught in a motel near Toronto after a province-wide manhunt), another for arson, and a third for involvement in the premeditated murder of an Ontario Provincial Police officer. Their treatment of me was not typical of most northerners.

This is not to say that antisemitism does not exist in the North: I believe it does, and at a systemic level. One incident stands out in my mind — a trapper came in to buy some things from my father, and they were doing the usual haggling at the counter. A crude and dirty man, he held in his hands a hand-made leather wallet that had an exceptionally vulgar picture tooled into its surface as he argued for a lower price, saying, "*mau-dzee Kris*, Jack, I'll Jew you down on this." My father never flinched at the slur, and in fact when I asked him about it later he couldn't even recall the insult. This was what he meant by "water off a duck's back:" a certain level of anti-semitism was a normal part of the culture. The trapper meant no harm by his offensive choice of words — he was genuinely jovial with my father, no doubt happy to be in town and out of the bush for his visit. I was the one who was oversensitized to such things, after my experience at summer camps and in Toronto. My father had grown up with this level of prejudice in society, and saw no reason to react to it negatively. Indeed, I believe now that if I had followed my father's advice and ignored the town delinquents, I would not have been involved in as many fistfights.

Nevertheless, my parents came to the conclusion that I could no longer live in Ansonville, and in the summer of 1979 they purchased a two-bedroom condominium apartment near Yonge and Steeles Avenue in northern Toronto. I lived there on my own for the remainder of my High School years, with my parents coming (individually and together) for long stays.

I pursued my higher secular education at the University of Toronto, eventually receiving a Ph.D. in Jewish history; I also spent several years in branches of Yeshivas Ohr Somayach in Toronto, Jerusalem, and Monsey, New York.

I have returned to Ansonville only a handful of times in the last twenty years. My parents live in the same apartment over the store. Business has declined dramatically as the mill has modernized, laying off hundreds of employees; most of the local stores have closed because of competition from Timmins and Internet shopping. My father has difficulty finding tenants for his apartments. There is still some Jewish life in Timmins — although the shul is no longer in existence, a Jewish doctor in town holds services in his home on the major holidays, and the scattered families of the North come down for the occasion. Most of the Jews up north are of my parents' generation: my age cohort has either left for the south, intermarried, or both. Several years ago one of my cousins in Timmins organized a Bar Mitzvah for her son, an event so unusual that it made the Timmins Daily Press.

It is hard to imagine a revival of the Jewish community of the North. My children — one of whom is named for pioneering patriarch of the family, Alex Abramson — have advantages here that I never enjoyed, such as a strong Jewish primary school education, a sense of community, and a rich Jewish lifestyle in general. Still, living in an urban environment, there are wonderful aspects of my childhood that they will likely never experience. They will never know what it is like to wander barefoot through the pines and go swimming in the cold waters of a secluded lake, with the only sound the call of the birds and an occasional truck passing on a distant two-lane highway. They will never know what it is like to strap on a pair of cross-country skis at the front door of the house and head straight into the bush, skiing for hours without seeing any other sign of human passing. They will never know these things — unless I take them up to see Bubbie and Zaydie for a visit.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>This incident is described in Bella Briansky Kalter, “A Jewish Community That Was – Ansonville, Ontario, Canada,” *American Jewish Archives* 30:2 (November, 1978), 107-125. Ms. Kalter’s memoir — she spent part of her childhood in Ansonville during the 30s — is an exceptionally valuable source, although her description of some of the early exploits of the Abramson family does not seem to conform with family history. Krugersdorf was changed to Krugerdorf in 1949.

<sup>2</sup>Briansky Kalter, “A Jewish Community that Was,” 116.

<sup>3</sup>My mother’s side boasts several prominent intellectuals, including my uncle Dr. Leon Ravvin, now a brain surgeon in Kentucky, and my cousin Professor Norman Ravvin, Chair of Canadian Jewish Studies at Concordia University.

<sup>4</sup>Gerald Tulchinsky, *Taking Root: The Origins of the Canadian Jewish Community*, Toronto: Lester, 1992, p. 160.