

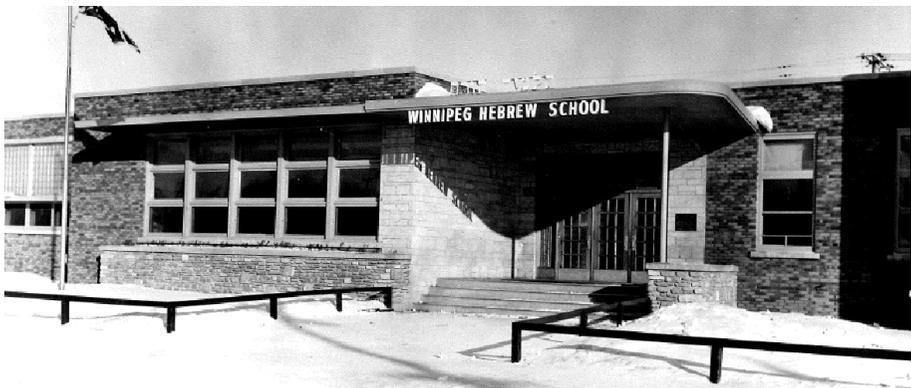
Ava Block Super

Archivist, Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada (JHCWC)

Preserving Winnipeg's Jewish History

Imagine settling in or around Winnipeg, in the late 19th century in the middle of December. If you were fortunate enough to end up in Winnipeg, home was a in a poor neighbourhood comprised of flimsily-built shanties that could not withstand the intense cold of a prairie winter. Conditions were not much better for the immigrants who chose to make rural Manitoba and Saskatchewan their home. The Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada has many documents and papers of Manitoba's early Jewish settlers. These people were resourceful, diverse, creative, and tough enough to withstand the rigours of doing with less. The archives of the JHCWC have enabled authors like Rabbi Arthur Chiel, Harry Gutkin, and Allan Levine to write comprehensive histories on the Jews of Manitoba, and the surrounding prairie.

Whether in Winnipeg or on rural homesteads, Jews sought to build community. In time, they built synagogues and schools; Jewish religious schools (the Talmud Torah) along with middle-of-the-road Yiddish Schools (the Peretz Shul), and left-leaning Yiddish Language secular schools (Liberty Temple). What made Winnipeg unique is that there was a place for every type of Jew, from the religious to the humanist. Our archives celebrate the urban Jew, the more affluent Jew, the erudite, and the simple everyday Jew.



Winnipeg Talmud Torah school, 1955. Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada.

Anthony Astrachan, a writer, editor, and foreign correspondent for the *Washington Post*, commented on the enduring power of Winnipeg's Jews after visiting the city in 1973. He wrote in the U.S. Jewish Magazine *Present Tense* that "the community's celebrated vitality was based on five key ingredients: political activism, radicalism, a vital Yiddish culture mixed with universal Jewish devotion to education, a prairie mystique and of course the geographic isolation that has made Winnipeg the centre of its own diaspora."¹

The cultural life of immigrants was always rich. Whether in theatre, literature or sport, the Jewish community mirrored the community at large, and succeeded beyond anyone's imagined expectations. Our archive boasts of having the manuscripts and Yiddish letters written by the award winning author Adele Wiseman to her family. A finding aid was recently completed, and we are expecting to have it posted to our website shortly.

The actor Frances Bay (Goffman) left the Jewish Heritage Centre her photographs, letters, scripts and many of her personal papers. Frances was born in Manville Alberta, but moved to and was raised in Dauphin Manitoba, and throughout her career returned home numerous times, as her husband Charles is also from Dauphin.

The YMHA was tremendously important to the cultural life of the Jewish community. The Archives has hundreds of photographs and articles documenting its evolution from the early 1930s to the present day on the Asper Campus.



Opening of the Winnipeg YMHA in 1950. Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada.

The Jewish Community was ahead of its time with regards to social services. After the Winnipeg General strike in 1919, Jews learned that if they failed to look after one another no one else would look after them, regardless of religious or political affiliations. The most pressing need was care for the young and the old. The Archives has plenty of photos and documents tracing the history of both The Jewish Old Folks Home and the Esther Robinson Jewish Orphan Home.



The Esther Robinson Jewish Orphan Home, ca. 1920.
Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada.

Jewish doctors also made a significant contribution. In the 1920s Mount Carmel clinic was formed by a group of Jewish medical professionals who volunteered their services for free to the large number of Jewish immigrants who immigrated to Winnipeg in the early 20th century. Perhaps the most enduring quality is that those who offered services within the Jewish community were eager and willing to share their services with the greater community. Services at the Mount Carmel clinic were offered free of charge for the Jew and non-Jew alike. The only prerequisite was to be impoverished. The Mount Carmel Clinic still exists to this day, and still serves the inner city, only now it has been incorporated by the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority and is no longer owned and run exclusively by Jews.

The Jewish community also produced socially-conscious lawyers who served not only the Jewish community but were city counsellors. They broke many barriers, paving the way for future generations of Jews to become involved in civic, provincial and federal politics. The JHCWC Archives has a collection of articles and letters by M.J. Finkelstein, a prominent lawyer who served the Jewish community very well, and was involved in some very high profile cases. In 1910 he joined with Nathaniel F. Hagel, one of the top lawyers in Canada, to defend a Russian Radical named Saava Federenko. Finkelstein was the first Jewish Lawyer in Manitoba appointed to the Kings Counsel.

The JHC also has a large digital file on Maitland Steinkopf, son of prominent Lawyer Max Steinkopf, who was the first Jewish lawyer to be called to the Manitoba bar. On the other end of the pole but equally important was the left-wing lawyer Joseph Alter Cherniak. Cherniak championed many causes, but is probably best known for challenging the quota system that barred Jews from attending the University of Manitoba's School of Medicine. He was pivotal in the anti-Fascist league. He was also a Yiddishist, with a flair for theatre. The Archives has many of Cherniak's letters and papers. Not only do we have J.A. Cherniak's papers, but we have those of his son, Saul Cherniak, who held several cabinet posts in Ed Shreyer's NDP cabinet in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s.

Winnipeg Jews played a major role in radical politics between 1905 and 1960. This is especially well-documented in the Jewish Heritage publication *Jewish Life and Times* Volume VIII, *Jewish Radicalism in Winnipeg 1905-1960*, edited by Dan Stone. All the *Life and Times* books are compilations of scholarly essays, and are a wonderful resource for anyone wishing to research a specific topic on Winnipeg Jewry, be it feminism, religion, secularism, literature or even radical politics.

Our exhibitions depend heavily upon the Archives, without which we wouldn't have the necessary materials. Our Yiddish newspapers, some of which are over 100 years old, were recently digitized. This means they are far more accessible for researchers. Our photograph collection of over 5000 photographs is an integral part of any exhibition we do. The JHCWC mounts at least two major exhibitions per year, plus 'mini' exhibitions that accompany our programs.

Our latest exhibition deals with the garment industry, curated jointly by my colleagues Stan Carbone and Susan Turner. Jews in Winnipeg ran the garment industry in its heyday through the 1940s-1960s. The garment industry is what gave Jews economic stability and prominence. It is what links this exhibition to the present that makes it relevant. This exhibition depended heavily on oral histories, photographs, and artifacts that are part of our collection

The Archives is the memory keeper of the Jewish community. Perhaps the biggest challenge we have right now is getting younger people to recognize its worth.

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Allan Levine, *Coming of Age: A History of the Jewish People of Manitoba* (Winnipeg: Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, 2009), 21.