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**From the End to the Beginning: Archiving the
History of a Small Jewish Community**

Saint John, New Brunswick is the childhood home of movie mogul, Louis B. Mayer and of corporate giant, Nathan Cummings. The city's Jewish community can also boast of having had a Canadian senator, a mayor, a provincial Boy Scout commissioner, a lieutenant-governor, a provincial court judge and the founder of the Canadian Thyroid Foundation, among others. All of their stories, and many others, can be found in the archives of the Saint John Jewish Historical Museum.

Saint John's first Jewish resident came with the Loyalists who arrived from New York in 1783, although a viable Jewish community did not develop until 1858 with the arrival of Solomon Hart and his family from England. By the 1890s there were about 25 Jewish families in the city. That number grew rapidly from 1892 to the end of the 1920s with an influx from Eastern Europe escaping the pogroms and the aftermath of the First World War. The community had more than 200 families when the two early synagogues – the Ahavith Achim (Brotherly Love) and the Hazen Avenue – merged to form the Shaarei Zedek Synagogue in 1918. Refugees from Nazi dominated Europe arrived in 1938 and 1939 and after the war. These waves of immigration led to what has been referred to as the “Golden Years” from the 1920s to the 1960s. The Saint John Jewish community had between 200 and 300 families participating in all synagogue activities and supported many Jewish causes and educational endeavours through many Zionist and social organizations. Jewish-owned stores lined the city's main streets and thrived for decades. Dramatic change came in the 1960s, as the third generation of Jewish residents were presented with educational and economic opportunities which drew them from Saint John to larger cities in other parts of Canada and the United States. They would return to Saint John as visitors having found homes and raised families elsewhere, however they still recognized Saint John as “home”.



The Boyaner family, ca. 1900. The Saint John Jewish Historical Museum.

By 1983, there were about 55 families left in the city, most of them senior citizens. Plans were developed for a community reunion to coincide with the Bicentennial Celebrations for the Province of New Brunswick in 1984. What became known as the *Koom Ahaim (Come Home)* brought 500 “ex-patriots” to the city for a three day period to reminisce, remember and renew community ties.

After the event ended, thought was given to the idea of creating a small museum to tell the story of the Saint John Jewish community. Marcia Koven, a community member and committee member for the reunion, founded the Saint John Jewish Historical Society, rented a small studio office and began, in earnest, to collect photographs, memorabilia, and artifacts to preserve and tell the story of the community.

The collection began with photographs from synagogue and organization dinners, family photographs from the early 20th century, minutes and correspondence from the congregation and ladies’ organizations and family trees. Marcia Koven also conducted oral interviews with more than sixty people who had lived in Saint John. The collection grew with documents, artifacts and memorabilia brought in from basements and attics in Jewish homes across the city and then by mail from other parts of Canada and the United States. In 1990 several dozen boxes of minutes and correspondence from the congregation and many organizations were found in the balcony of the former Shaarei Zedek Synagogue building and these too were added to the collections. The collection continues to grow as older Jewish residents in the city downsize from family homes. Donations include personal and family histories as well as their contributions to the many organizations which had existed. Almost two thousand family photographs have been added within the last two years. Each new box reveals new treasures and new information about the Jewish community. Additional boxes of documentation of community families and organizations are anticipated to join the collection in the coming months.

The Saint John Jewish Historical Museum houses the only Jewish archives east of Montreal. As such, we have become a crucial link in the preservation of Jewish history. The focus of our collection is the Jewish community that existed in Saint John from the mid 1850s to the present day, but we have also gathered family and community history from smaller New Brunswick Jewish communities. For example, the archivist of the Bathurst (New Brunswick) Heritage Trust Commission researched the history of more than fifteen Jewish families that lived in Bathurst and neighbouring communities. The document extends to more than 60 pages, includes genealogical information and business advertisements, and clarifies some of the links between the families of Bathurst to each other and to families elsewhere in the province. We were pleased to receive a copy for our archives.

Our archival holdings have been organized into sections reflecting the themes of the community's history: Synagogue, Organizations, Community, Family Trees and Personal History, Saint John Jewish Historical Society, and Photographs. Smaller sections include the Holocaust, Fine Arts and Audio/Visual. Short descriptions have been written to describe each of these sections and a full listing of contents has been created. Most of these listings are currently under review as new acquisitions are accessioned, organized and added. It is hoped that all sections will be updated over the next few months. This process will improve access to our collections. We also have a large collection of objects which have been donated and are used for display and research of the community history.

Portions of the archives have been preserved with the cooperation of the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick (PANB). All material acquired from 1983 to 2005 has been copied on microfilm, copies of which are held by the PANB. The PANB with funding from the National Archival Development Plan was able to transfer the audio from the more than 60 oral interviews recorded in the 1980s to MP3 files. The original cassettes remain at the PANB, but the MP3 files were returned to the Jewish Museum archives where they are regularly consulted.

More recently we have worked with the Canadian Jewish Heritage Network to share some of the information from our archives, particularly the Shaarei Zedek Cemetery database, including obituaries and photographs of gravestones, and the data on Jewish residents and businesses as compiled from the city directories for Saint John. A searchable database can be found at <http://www.cjhn.ca>. Descriptions of the archival holdings will be added over the next few months as these are updated.

In 1989 Marcia Koven wrote and published a history of the Saint John Jewish community – *Weaving the Past Into the Present* – which was revised and updated in 2008. This slender volume recounts the history of the Jewish community from its beginnings and through its “Golden Years” to the present day. Readers learn about the history of the synagogues, the organizations, and many of the interesting and accomplished individuals who made up the community. The book is also illustrated with several archival photographs.



Shaarei Zedek Synagogue Dinner, ca. 1930s. The Saint John Jewish Historical Museum.

Material from our archival collections has been extensively used by our curator and student researchers to gather information for exhibitions. Over the past 28 years we have presented exhibitions on various topics including immigration, weddings, businesses, organizations, men, women, medical professionals, war service, notable members of the community, athletes, artists, and family trees. We have also created two online exhibitions through the Community Memories Programme from the Canadian Heritage Information Network – The Changing Role of Jewish Women in Saint John (http://www.museevirtuel-virtualmuseum.ca/sgc-cms/histoires_de_chez_nous-community_memories/pm_v2.php?lg=English&ex=00000538&fl=o&id=exhibit_home) and 150 Years of Jewish History in Saint John (http://www.museevirtuel-virtualmuseum.ca/Search.do?R=VE_2192&lang=en&ex=on).

Over the past twenty-five years we have welcomed researchers into our archives – students, academics, genealogists, and members of our extended community – to learn more about their Saint John relatives. As many of our requests come from cities far from Saint John, we are often faced with the question of how to share the information. When researchers come to us they can make notes or photograph or photocopy documents. Over the past few years, we have spent a lot of time making digital copies of photographs and documents and sending them out by mail on a CD or sending them through electronic storage platforms (e.g. www.dropbox.com).

The Saint John Jewish Historical Museum regularly receives requests for information about families that lived in the city many years ago. Most searches for family information of this type begin in the cemetery database created in 1997. It lists all the burials in the Shaarei Zedek Cemetery. If an individual was buried in the cemetery, we can reference photographs of the gravestone and the obituary published in one of Saint John's newspapers. From there, it is on to the databases of names culled

from the Saint John City Directories to see where they lived and their occupation. Documents in the Personal History section of the archives – newspaper clippings, immigration papers, certificates, and programmes – add to the personal story. There are also some family trees which can help to place the person into the context of the extended family. Additional information may be found in the files on the history of the Synagogue and various Jewish organizations if the person played a significant role in their operations. Matching a face to a name brings the story to life. A search of the photograph files can provide both family and organization photographs.

Clearly a simple inquiry can lead down many paths, and what one might think is a matter of only a few minutes of research can quickly extend into many hours of discovery. Every search uncovers yet another family connection within the Saint John Jewish community and adds new meaning to the documents consulted. There is also the opportunity to add new information to our archives – checking sources in other archives and libraries to verify or add data to the request. Afterwards, there is always the hope that our archives will acquire the results of the researcher's efforts – perhaps a new family tree or bundle of documents or photographs.

What is most remarkable about the archival collection is its personal nature. The archives is a story of people and their connections to the community through membership and involvement in the synagogue and in organizations, as well as their careers as business owners, professionals or volunteers. Almost all of our holdings have been donated by community members and these reflect their involvement in the community. For example, treasurers and recording secretaries have donated the papers accumulated during their times in office. Some individuals who have had significant personal careers outside the boundaries of Jewish life have chosen our archives as the resting place for many of their personal papers. This is truly a mark of esteem and trust in our ability to ensure their posterity.

The nature of our archives also determines the presentation of exhibits in the Saint John Jewish Historical Museum. Visitors to the Museum, whose exposure to our history is generally confined to our exhibit rooms and conversations with student docents or community volunteers, often make note of the personal nature of the Museum. The history is accessible and most visitors can relate easily to the stories they are told. It is not unusual to have community volunteers showing photographs and sharing stories of their own families, to the delight of tourists from across North America and around the world. This is an experience that cannot be found in every museum.

As a small archives we face many challenges. These include the availability of archival space, proper storage of documents and photographs, availability of human resources, public awareness of our archives, and of course, funding to maintain the collection. Meeting these challenges requires effort that often limits the time needed to accession, organize, analyze, and share the collections. With the greater exposure

of our collections through partnerships with the Canadian Jewish Heritage Network, the Virtual Museum of Canada, and others, we hope for an increased profile for our archives and our Museum which may ensure our long term sustainability.

On a personal note, I want to add that I came to this position as an outsider and with virtually no knowledge of Jewish life in Saint John. Now, after nearly 28 years of accessioning and archiving the history of the Saint John Jewish Community, I have learned some very interesting things about this community. First, this was a very close knit community because of its small size and family connections. When current and former residents talk about life here, the reminiscences always come with names and stories that include (with fondness) family and friends. Second, it would seem that almost every family that lived here was related to one or more other families residing in the city. Almost every day I make new links between the community members, and have come to believe that were I able to write down the name of every Jewish resident who had ever lived in the city, I would be able to link almost all of them together into one very large family tree. Third, many of those whose stories are preserved within our archives express gratitude for the Archives and Museum and the hope that these stories will not be irretrievably lost. My hope is that this goal has been achieved.

As the Saint John Jewish community embarks on a period of renewal with new immigration to the city, this time from Israel, we look forward to collecting the stories and memorabilia from a new generation of Saint John Jews, so that there will always be a new beginning for our collections and not an end.