

Growing Up Jewish in Hanover, Ontario

by Malcah Sufrin

Dans les années 30 et 40, il y avait certains avantages à être juive dans une petite ville de l'Ontario. Cette petite ville



Jeannie Kamins, "Shabbos," fabric appliqué, 32" x 45", 1985. Photo: Henri Robideau

offrait, entre autres, des activités variées auxquelles l'auteure pouvait prendre part. Par contre, l'auteure n'était pas préparée pour son expérience à l'Université de Toronto où elle se sentait particulièrement exclue.

Hanover's population in the '30s was about 3,000. My parents had settled there in 1925 having been lured by the

prospect of independence from piece work in a shirt-manufacturing shop in Toronto. How did they choose Hanover? Family members were already located in neighbouring towns and Hanover had an empty store that was soon stocked with ladies' and men's wear.

The Jewish population consisted of five families of which ours was the orthodox one. Being orthodox in a small town presented problems: A *minyan*¹ could not be mustered from among the local Jews; the closest synagogue was forty miles away in Owen Sound; kosher food had to be brought from Toronto; my father would not belong to the local chapter of Kinsmen or Rotary because he felt he could not explain *kashruth*² to people who didn't really understand what a Jew is.

My father taught my brother (five years older than I), my sister (eight years younger than I) and me to read and write Hebrew. He patiently ruled lines on paper so that we could properly fit in the letters. Unfortunately much of this learning has disappeared. My brother put on *t'fillin*³

each day and *davened*⁴ with my father while my sister and I recited the morning prayers. I did not understand the prayers. My father ordered Jewish educational books for us and that was our religious education.

My parents spoke Yiddish. My mother had a beautiful voice. From her I learned and sang Yiddish songs. Today those songs form my performance repertoire. My daughter, Jodi Sufrin, Canada's first professional woman cantor, sings many of these same songs.

Hanover was an ideal place to grow up in. My secular education was rounded out by participation in numerous extra-curricular activities. One of the most progressive towns in Ontario, Hanover supported a band, a choir, an opera society, a bugle band, a dramatic society, Brownies, Girl Guides, a dance band. For the sports-minded there were hockey, baseball, skiing.

My father prepared my brother for his *bar mitzvah*. For my father this occasion was strictly religious. He took my brother to the Jewish Old Folks Home on Cecil Street in Toronto, bought cake, shnapps, herring, and celebrated this *mitzvah* with the old people. Neither my mother, my sister, nor I was there, and I have always regretted missing this *simcha*.⁵

On Rosh Hoshanna or Yom Kippur my father would travel to Toronto or Owen Sound, occasionally with the whole family. I recall sitting with my father and playing with his *tallis*,⁶ while he prayed. I don't recall ever sitting with the women.

My parents came to Toronto frequently to shop for the store as well as the kitchen. Imagine a car loaded with live chickens! My mother would not buy ready-slaughtered chickens from the kosher butcher because they were not clean enough for her. Prior to leaving Hanover, they would go to a local farmer to buy the chickens. Mama always joked that they looked for a plump farmer's wife because the chickens would be well-fed and plump. After the chickens had been ritually slaughtered in Toronto they were brought home to Hanover, cleaned, packaged, and taken to the local dairy where they were stored in our freezer locker. Often the cleaning was an all-night affair.

Our freezer was like a treasure chest. Not only did it contain chicken, but also meat and bread—enough bread, rye, pumpernickel, black, to last through any siege. The bread bags were big enough for children to hide in. One did not buy white bread at the local bakery because it might contain lard.

Anti-Semitism existed in my small town but it did not exhibit itself between my friends and me. There were racist taunts from time to time but mostly when we were very young. My sister has teeth marks in her arm from one encounter with a religious zealot. My mother forbade us

to react when we were taunted; we were told to turn the other cheek. My parents expected us to be model children, to excel at school, to behave properly, to never give cause for people to criticize us as Jews.

My "model" childhood included piano lessons, sewing lessons, elocution lessons, singing lessons. I entertained regularly for local organizations, sang at concerts, played drum in the bugle band, sang with a dance band, knitted for the Red Cross, and wrote a column for the newspaper. When I was in Grade Eight, the principal of the Hanover Public School announced that since I was in his class, the

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morning Bible readings would be taken from the Old Testament. I thought this was a man who understood. In this same Grade Eight class was a girl who whispered in my ear that I really didn't look Jewish. Compliment?

I learned many Christian hymns and Christmas carols, and attended many Christmas parties and dinners. I ate non-kosher food. My parents did not ask! However I never explained to my Christian friends anything about our Jewish celebrations or days of significance. On the High Holy Days we stayed home from school, a brief note explaining our absence.

Wednesday afternoons and Sundays when the shops were closed, our relatives from Owen Sound and Chesley would gather at someone's house. The men and women played cards and the children played and squabbled. At an early age I learned to play gin rummy and poker. Often 30 people would gather for supper and I was my mother's sous-chef, having learned to bake during evenings when she was at the movies. I didn't bake when she was home because she couldn't stand the mess.

Our summers were spent at our cottage at Sauble Beach on the shore of Lake Huron. Having a cottage precluded going to camp. Once more we were together with our relatives from the neighbouring towns who also had cottages there. A very close bond developed between my country aunts, uncles, cousins, and me.

Since I was the only Jewish child my age in Hanover, my closest friends were not Jewish. My girl friends and I shared without any prejudice the wonderful experiences of the teen years. My dating non-Jewish boys was troubling to my mother no matter how often I assured her that I would not marry a Christian. I knew that as soon as I finished high school I would leave Hanover.

When I left to enroll at the University of Toronto my father presented me with a copy of the *Pentateuch*⁷ and

Haftorah.⁸ He said "This is how I believe. You are free to believe as you like but you must not interfere with how I believe." I marvelled at his grace.

From a small town where I knew everyone and everyone knew me I came to Toronto at the age of 18 with the expectation that I would soon acquire a new circle of friends. My roommate in residence at the University of Toronto, a Jewish girl from Timmins, became my closest friend. I thought that the city girls with whom I took classes would invite me home for a *Shabbat* dinner. They didn't. Theirs was a closed society. Their own friendships were of long standing and we had no shared experiences. I had never been to camp, I had never spent time with Jews my age. For a long time I felt like a fish out of water. Time helped me overcome the shyness and awkwardness.

My birthday, graduation, and marriage were celebrated in quick succession. I married a Toronto Jew, moved to New York where our three New Yorkers were born, returned to Toronto where family and friends form the circle of my life.

Malcah Sufrin is currently a public member of the College of Massage Therapy, a member of the Pomegranate Guild, and the Museum for Textiles, and a performer of Yiddish folk music. She is a retired French and English-as-a-Second Language teacher from Forest Hill Collegiate in Toronto.

¹*Minyan* is a quorum for public prayer made up of ten adult Jews, usually men.

²The dietary laws of Judaism.

³Phylacteries—small, square leather boxes containing slips of vellum, on which are written portions of the Mosaic Law, worn one on the head, another on the left arm, by orthodox and conservative Jewish men at prayer.

⁴*Daven* is the Yiddish verb to pray.

⁵Celebration.

⁶A prayer shawl.

⁷The first five books of the Hebrew Bible.

⁸Writings of the prophets read every Saturday morning in the synagogue.

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