

Growing up Jewish on the Prairies: Rural Manitoba and Saskatchewan

By Chana Thau,
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Introduction

The Jewish population of Manitoba is located almost entirely in Winnipeg. Many Winnipeg Jews, especially younger ones, know nothing of the days when Jews lived on farms and small towns throughout the region. Yet a surprising number of Winnipeggers have roots outside of Winnipeg, in Manitoba and Saskatchewan towns. They remember their origins vividly and, for the most part, fondly.

Jews began coming to Canada, to the Prairies, in the late 1800s. Farm colonies were established with the assistance of the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA). In Saskatchewan, there were settlements at Moosomin (New Jerusalem) and Wapella, and later at Sonnenfeld, Edenbridge and Hirsch, near Estevan. In Manitoba, there were colonies at Camper (New Hirsch) and Bender Hamlet, near Narcisse. The Russian immigrants came to escape persecution and pogroms in Tsarist Russia; others came to escape compulsory conscription, or poor economic or social conditions in their country of origin. Whether they had any experience with farming or not, they came - in response to the government's offers of free land and freedom in Canada, or to the encouragement of their relatives or friends who were already there. Jewish settlement in Canada was not undertaken in pursuit of ideological goals. The JCA assisted settlers because it believed that shifting the emphasis of Jewish life from trade to agriculture would reduce anti-Semitism among gentiles. Imagine their dismay when they arrived and found heavily forested land that required clearing in order to build a primitive house and plant crops (Lehr 23).

Men and women faced incredible hardships in coming from cities or villages with some modicum of comfort and modernity to the harsh climate of the Prairies, where sub-zero winters and the scorching heat in summer were compounded by such factors as hail, drought and grasshoppers. The women had to cope with furnishing and decorating the one-room sod houses, participating in all the farm chores as well as raising children, sewing and cooking for their families while also trying to observe the laws of kosher killing! Ann Springman described coming to Edenbridge in 1912: "When I seen Star City, it was a station and a few houses and one Jewish person was living there... they had a big store there and a drugstore. That's all there was." When they got to Edenbridge, her brother-in-law "had built up a house of logs, plastered with mud-so you can imagine how happy I was!" (Stone 14). While some people stayed with farming, many left. Some became peddlers and many eventually became merchants. In fact, the Jews who did not remain on the land were among the early independent entrepreneurs in western Canada (Arnold 25).

Following the Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada's (JHCWC) inaugural Switzer-Cooperstock lecture by Professor Theodore Friedgut in September 2008, which focused on the Lipton Colony in Saskatchewan, many audience members

indicated that they had stories to tell about growing up in the one of the few Jewish families in a series of small towns in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, such as Winkler, Portage la Prairie, Kipling, Quinton, Verigen and Melfort. While a great deal had been written about the early farm colonies on the Prairies, such as Edenbridge, Lipton and Sonnenfeld, there is not much material about Jews living on small farms or in villages and towns.

A hallmark feature of the Jewish Heritage Centre's (JHC) projects has been the gathering of information through oral history. The individual's story gives a human, personal slant to history and adds to the less personal information that has already been documented. We therefore felt it imperative to record the oral histories of older members of our Jewish community while they are still available. I applied for, and received, a small grant from the Jewish Foundation of MB to start the project. The JHCWC then applied for and received a grant from Manitoba Heritage Programs to gather these histories.

The JHC hired me to prepare a questionnaire, identify appropriate subjects and conduct face-to-face interviews. Advertisements were placed in the Jewish Post & News and the JHC Bulletin. I also contacted synagogues in Winnipeg, Regina and Saskatoon, who advertised in their newsletters. Over the space of a year or so, mainly in 2010, I interviewed thirty-three men and women who had grown up on farms or in small rural Manitoba and Saskatchewan towns, often as the only Jews in the area, and made written transcriptions of the interviews. Some of the interviewees were able to provide photos and other artifacts for the JHCWC Archives, where the recordings and the transcriptions are being kept. Copies were also deposited with the Manitoba Government Archives.

Of the thirty-three people interviewed, three lived on family farms, one grew up on a First Nations reserve where her father had a store and a mink ranch, and the rest lived in small towns and villages. I asked them about how their families had gotten there, their general and Jewish education, the family's Jewish observance, involvement in the community, social relations with non-Jews and experiences of anti-Semitism (Thau 2010: see Appendix 1 for the questionnaire).

The late 1880s were marked by the arrival of the railway on the Prairies; the Canadian Pacific Railway set up stations every six to eight miles, which became the nuclei of towns. Next would come the grain elevator and the country store, as often as not owned and operated by a Jewish storekeeper. There were several reasons for this. Many Jews had entrepreneurial backgrounds; also, they could speak the many languages of the farmers: Russian, Ukrainian, Polish and German (Hollenberg 93). Sidney Buckwold elaborates on this: "... when new settlers came, the storekeeper picked up a new language. When I was a travelling salesman, I witnessed a Jewish merchant speaking Cree in a far northern store just as easily as others might speak Ukrainian" (20). He goes on to say that not only was the Jewish merchant adaptable and hard-working, but "perhaps his most important contribution was the institute of credit" (20). The fact that Jewish merchants were generally sensitive to social circumstances and would extend credit and help customer-families contributed to their success.

Rabbi Arthur Chiel states that, at the height of the rural Jewish population in the 1920s,

Jewish country merchants could be found in at least one hundred and eighteen towns and villages of Manitoba where they spent from ten to twenty years. As country merchants, they were more than mere storekeepers. They served as interpreters, counselors, and trusted friends, and their stores became informal gathering places- institutions of friendship. These associations led to rich, mutual loyalties between storekeeper and customer. (58)

Louis Rosenberg, western manager of the Jewish Colonization Association of Canada, wrote the same about Saskatchewan:

Without the Jewish storekeeper, Saskatchewan could not have developed as it did. ... Every eight miles, there was a stop. The train came twice a week and brought passengers... brought in produce and took away produce and cattle... the Jewish storekeeper was usually the letter-writer for them [the immigrant homesteaders], he ordered the goods from Eaton's for them, he carried them – he gave them credit – until the fall (qtd in Stone, 27).

The oral histories collected for the project and for this paper, which provides an overview of the qualitative research carried out, convey the rich, subjective experiences of the interviewees. In keeping with the principles of this kind of research, the goal was to record the memories of the individuals who agreed to be interviewed, to preserve the history of Jewish society at the time for future generations. Every person has a story to tell and each one is unique. Indeed, some of the stories collected are especially unusual; for example, Perle Flam Selch speaks of growing up as a member of the only white/Jewish family on a First Nations Reserve in Scantebury, Manitoba. Marsha Trager Phomin recounts her experiences growing up as the granddaughter of Ben Dembinsky and daughter of Harry Trager, the two Jewish mayors of The Pas, Manitoba, without any real awareness that she is Jewish.

The experiences of various interviewees will be presented around the specific themes on which they were interviewed. Space does not permit including everyone; a few people were interviewed whose stories proved not to fit into this project. All of the stories were transferred to Archival CDs, one copy deposited to the JHC Archives, the second to the MB Archives. Written transcriptions were also made of the interviews.

1. How Families Came to The Rural Settings

Most of the first Jewish immigrants came from Tsarist Russia to escape compulsory conscription or pogroms. Others came from eastern Europe to escape persecution and poverty. They had not been allowed to own land in Russia, Poland and Romania for centuries, and were treated as second-class citizens, so the offer of free land in Canada was especially enticing. As Lehr expresses it, “Like most migrants, Jews who left Europe were *pushed* out of their old World settlements and *pulled* into Canada. Unlike many other groups, they were not recruited and transported en masse to Canada by Canadian immigration authorities”, but rather financed their own way, from their limited means (19). Some came via South Africa (Ed Lazar) or Argentina (Allan Stern), others came directly. Many were brought over by family or friends who had preceded them to Canada.

Sam Baker arrived in Canada around 1905 at age two. His family moved from Winnipeg to West Kildonan, then a separate village. Although there were many Jewish dairy farmers there, the Bakers planted five acres in potatoes. Sam recalls, “Zipurskys had a general store in West Kildonan at that time. We lived there for a couple of years. I remember I was picking potatoes to sell” (Baker 2009). At one time, the Bakers had a store on the Brokenhead Reserve in Ladywood, Manitoba.

Pearl Friedman Kredentser and her brother, Lloyd Friedman, grew up in a succession of small towns in Saskatchewan: Piapot, Rock Glen, Hazenmore. “My dad came around 1905-06. He left when there were wars in Russia and they were conscripting all the Jewish men” (Kredentser 2010). Her brother, Lloyd, adds that their father’s elder sister had come with her husband to the Lipton Colony.

It was my aunt who really was responsible for bringing over her siblings, one by one. She brought Dad to Lipton, where he took up a homestead. He did not really have farm experience; he took a farm because that was expedient. He had to “prove up” the homestead. The conditions were that he break up half of it, which meant 80 acres, and build a house on it. He fulfilled those conditions. But just as soon as he proofed it up and was able to sell it, he did that. As I recall, he went into the store business in Lafleche, Saskatchewan, in the southern part [of the province], near Assiniboia. Some of those towns aren’t even on the map (Friedman 2010).

Allan Stern grew up in Verigen, Saskatchewan. His dad immigrated from Russia.

He went to Argentina, I guess the immigration company ... funneled Jews from Argentina to North America. When he arrived in Canada, his father and mother were already there, in Winnipeg [as were one of his older brothers and two sisters]. My father came to Saskatchewan from Winnipeg, and he worked for a family by the name of Lertzman in Canora/Wynyard. They had quite a large department store. I think he worked for them around three years. Then he wanted to have his own store, so he picked a town two towns to the east of Canora. That

was the village of Verigen (Stern 2010).

Although most started out homesteading, not many stayed with it. The only families interviewed who actually stayed with farming were the Lazars in Springfield/Birds Hill, the Steeles - in the Stonewall/Stony Mountain area and the Henteleffs - in St Vital, then a separate town. Ed Lazar, who grew up on a farm in Birds Hill/Springfield, Manitoba, relates,

My grandfather came out about 1904, from ... South Africa. When he first went in there, he was working in the diamond mines. And he worked very hard. He came from Latvia to South Africa. In Latvia, he was quite well off. He had a flourmill in Riga, but I guess maybe anti-Semitism, pogroms or whatever...so he went to Africa to make his fortune there. And then, he went into the ... [what] he called "carriages", because at that time, there was no taxis or anything. So he was a partner with Sidney Spivak's grandfather, and they had 40 carriages in there and a blacksmith's shop ...Then, after the Boer War, the English took the whole thing over, and they wanted their own people in there. They said, 'Your horses are all diseased, they have distemper. We have to take 'em out and destroy 'em.' They wanted all the business for themselves. They didn't want any people that were with the Boers, you know. So he got mad and they came to Canada. [There] he went into the dray business -hauling stuff with horses. They all settled over there because I guess maybe they got the land for nothing. It wasn't big tracts of land. You couldn't make a great big farm out of it because they were all the tail ends of those river lots. Because those river lots followed the Red River (Henteleff 2010).

Maurice Steele's father actually had owned land in Poland, in partnership with a Ukrainian farmer. The family was accepted for immigration to Canada on the strength of this agricultural background. They "were destined for Saskatchewan but we found a farmer, a Ukrainian coming back from Poland and he said, 'Don't go to Saskatchewan. It's a wasteland.' So we stopped here [in Winnipeg]" (Steele 2010). As they knew no one in Winnipeg and had not been brought over by any Jewish organization, they ended up boarding with a German family in Old Kildonan whose farm they were considering buying. "My dad felt that he came as a farmer, he should remain [as one]" (Steele 2010). The farm they bought was just outside of Stony Mountain, between Stony Mountain and Stonewall.

Yude Henteleff's grandfather, who had originally homesteaded near Ste Anne, Manitoba, from 1907 to about 1921, also had some agricultural background, "most unusual for a Jew living in Russia. He had been employed by one of the aristocrats in the town they lived near - a small town near Kiev, who had hired him as a bit of a supervisor on his land" (Henteleff 2010). Since other family members lived in Winnipeg, and his grandmother was very lonely, his grandfather bought land in St Vital in 1922-23.

They had fallen so much in love with farming - to own land was of course such a privilege for a Jew - that he wanted to continue to do that. They ran a very interesting mixed farm in Ste Anne. They actually imported wild horses from Alberta, and broke them and trained them and sold them. Anything to make a living! But things were still very, very difficult. So, when this land came up in St Vital, they were looking for, it was by tax sale... You were able to buy it for whatever outstanding taxes there were on the property by the municipality. At that time and for many years thereafter, St Vital was a separate municipality. It was totally... farming [community] but mostly cattle - dairy cattle, and some grain but mostly market gardens. The land around there, adjacent to the river, was extremely rich and water was available, of course, for irrigation purposes, although that was not available at the beginning. It only came along later. So that's when the farm began. It was only about 60 acres all told. Only a very small portion of it was arable. The rest of it was all heavily treed. They had begun some clearing when I moved out there. We moved out there permanently when I was about six years of age (Henteleff 2010).

Yude continued to live there with his parents until he was 25.

2. The Jewish General Store

Several of the people interviewed described what the family's general store was like, and how running the store affected their family life. I am including their descriptions here, to invoke the flavour of these experiences, the details of which would otherwise be lost to subsequent generations. Fredelle Bruser Maynard describes the general store as "Ali Baba's cave" (62). She continues, "entering, you moved from prairie sun or prairie wind into a world where the floors were oiled, the walls a heavy dark oak and the ceiling an extraordinary canopy of raised and patterned metal painted a dull bronze." (62) Her favorite department was Ladies Wear, especially fabrics, always referred to as "dry goods", which baffled the little girl, who wondered "Which goods were wet?" (62) Orders had to be filled manually. Self-service was not yet common.

Ettie Peikoff Robinson relates that they sold "All kinds of groceries...on one side of the store and dry goods on the other side, shoes and yard goods and ladies' dresses, and even things like coal oil. You had to go down the basement for it, that people used for their lamps" (Robinson 2010). They lived above the store and she worked in it after school and summers. In 1940, the store burned down.

The townspeople arrived with all kinds of clothes and things, and even people that hardly had anything brought things because they knew we didn't have anything. Well, we didn't really use very much of it. We came in to Winnipeg and bought what we needed. We had nothing. But the townspeople were very good...(Robinson 2010).

The store was open six days a week, from early morning to early evening, and Saturdays until late. That is when farm families came to do their shopping for the week, so it was difficult for Jewish storekeepers to observe the Sabbath.

Adele Maslove Wortzman provides an excellent description of her parents' general store in Roblin, MB.

This one didn't have hardware. Some of them did. But this was full groceries, then clothing and shoes. My dad used to do - he'd measure people, send away for made-to-measure suits for men. It was a large store and it was kind of *the* store in Roblin. It was called The Roblin Trading and people still remember my dad and know the store. Working in the groceries, they would get in bulk flour, bulk sugar, bulk everything, and we would have to measure and pack things up in small, like in paper bags. We'd measure out two pounds, five pounds, and that was part of the work you did in the groceries. There was produce but you know, that was very dependent. In the winter, you never had very much, you know. Lettuce and tomatoes, that was about it. Some came from Dauphin, some things came from Winnipeg (Wortzman 2010).

Lillian Bober Zentner recounts that her mom and dad ran the family store as partners. She describes how the store was laid out, and how certain stores would specialize in a certain type of item, to give them an edge over the other, competing stores in town. Their store was divided up into sections.

There would be one section where there were groceries, and there would be one section where there was clothing, and then there would be a section where there were materials - they called them "dry goods". We had a big section of sewing materials because there were about eight or nine hundred people in our town. My mom was really wonderful at sewing and she could give really good advice. You had to kind of specialize because there were three or four general stores. So my mom made sure that she ordered a lot of material, bolts of cloth and all that went along with it...patterns (people used to actually make their own patterns). But people used to sew a lot in that town. There were two other general stores. One of them was my parents' very close friends; they were competition but I used to call them "auntie" and "uncle" ... You had to do something different or people wouldn't necessarily come to your store. They would come depending on whether they liked you, and they became close with your family, so they would patronize you rather than going to somebody else (Zentner 2010).

As mentioned earlier, credit was a significant factor and so was the multilingual ability of the storekeeper. Lillian continues,

Most people [stuck with one store] because they had accounts. They didn't necessarily pay cash. They had an account and then they came and bought their groceries or whatever they wanted, and then at the end of the month, they paid

for everything. It was really quite trusting. You didn't really worry about people paying because they just automatically did. My dad came from Poland but I think it was, part of it was the Russia/Poland border, so my parents spoke all kinds of languages. My father spoke Russian and Ukrainian - really very fluent in Ukrainian, and Polish...The town had quite a large Ukrainian community so the Ukrainian people used to come in 'cuz they loved to talk Ukrainian to my dad. So he had a lot of Ukrainian people patronizing him. Once they came and they got to know you and they liked you, then they would keep coming. That was one advantage. My uncle was from Czechoslovakia, so he spoke Czech. So they had a lot of customers that spoke Czech and Hungarian, so it was almost on ethnic lines how they would patronize your business. (Zentner 2010)

In most stores, the children, in this case, Lil and her brother, Harold, started helping out in the store from a relatively young age, especially by today's standards:

...as we got older, Harold and I worked in the store - I started helping out when I was eight or nine. When I was ten, I was like a full member of the team, selling. We never had a cash register. We didn't even have a calculator. We used to do everything by hand. So we made out bills, and you had to itemize everything in a written book. So I could do it as soon as I could write. I did it. And people would come and they would give me the order. You couldn't pick, all the merchandise was behind the counter, so people didn't get a chance to pick out and put it on the counter. They would come to you with an order and they would wait in line, and so there would be room for my brother, my mother, my father and me, or the person who worked for us ... Saturday night... That was our busiest time. We would be open until 11 o'clock at night. Because we were closed Sunday and Monday. So, my brother and I never had a social life - we had to work on Saturday night. And we would have four different stations and people would line up. Say they came to me, I would write it on this order sheet and then I would give it to them, like put it on the counter. At the end of their order, I would add up how much they owed me and they would pay me or they would put it on their account. Then I would pack it in a bag or a box and they would go. And then the next person would come up. That was the way we sold our merchandise. That was the only way that we could do it... (Zentner 2010).

Lil also related how careful they would be not to make any mistakes in addition, so as not to awaken the ever-present but latent anti-Semitism of their customers.

3. General and Jewish Education

There are no particularly striking or unusual features in the general education of those interviewed, often in multi-grade classrooms, sometimes in one-room schools. However, school Christmas plays were a particularly challenging part of the school experience for the Jewish students, making them achingly aware of their being different. Many wished they too could have Christmas trees, stockings and presents. While some had modified versions of these wishes, e.g. a Christmas tree in the store, a gift supplied by mom, most did not. For many of those I interviewed, neither the school nor their parents minded their inclusion in the Christmas plays; the Jewish parents were generally agreeable to this, as long as the parts were not of a religious nature. This was an experience described by many of those interviewed. Lil Bober Zentner, on the other hand, has a more painful memory. Because of her beautiful singing voice, she had been given the part of an angel in the Christmas play when she was about eight. When her mother found out, she said that Lil could stand in the choir and mouth the words but not sing the Christmas carols. After she explained to the teacher that Jewish people did not sing carols, the teacher found someone else to be the angel. Lil was both disappointed and mortified. Similarly, Rose Stitz Muchnik was allowed to be in Christmas plays “but my mother told me not to sing loud, to just mouth the words” (Muchnik 2010).

Those who lived in communities near Winnipeg, which are now part of the city, benefitted from coming into town for their general education, which was of a better quality. Yude Henteleff was fortunate that he lived in St. Vital, quite close to the city of Winnipeg.

... the schooling I received [in St. Vital] was pretty dreadful. What happened was, when I finished Grade Six, my parents knew even before then that I was not getting a quality education but they couldn't afford to send me out of the district. It cost five dollars a month and they didn't have it. So, I had an aunt in the North End, and I became “her child” and I went to Machray School for Grades 7, 8 and 9. Every day, I'd be up at 6:30 in the morning to get to the 9 o'clock class. [To get there] there was a little, kind of a commuter bus that you took to the “end of the streetcar line”. And then you took a streetcar all the way to the North End of Winnipeg (Henteleff 2010).

The City also provided greater and more varied possibilities for Jewish education. Perle Flam Selch, whose family managed first a general store, then a mink ranch, on the Brokenhead Reserve in Scanterbury, Manitoba, was sent into the city at age six to live with her Baba. Her mother would come into the city on Thursday nights to see her and return by train to the Reserve. Pearl would spend school holidays and summers on the Reserve. She received an extensive Jewish education in Winnipeg, as she relates:

I was one of these “wunderkinder” at Talmud Torah. I was like a sponge with Hebrew and I loved it, and there was a wonderful, wonderful man whose name was Kowalson and he was my teacher. He used to come to the house. They lived on Selkirk and we were on Pritchard, and when I came home for lunch, we’d sit at that table and study, Hebrew and *Tanach* [Bible] and Talmud and... (Selch 2011).

In addition to this private tutoring, she attended Talmud Torah and later, while still in her early teens, taught there, often to students older than she was. In fact, after high school graduation, Perle went to study at the Jewish Theological Seminary and Columbia University in New York, and became a Judaics teacher.

It was common for boys, and sometimes girls, to be sent into Winnipeg to live with relatives or at the Jewish Orphanage on Matheson Avenue, especially in the year leading up to Bar Mitzvah. Maurice Steele and later, his sister, Mira (Spivak) did so. Maurice’s early Jewish education had started in Poland:

I spoke Yiddish to my parents and I was fluent in Yiddish. [When I was three or four] my dad was ill [so] my mother sent me to her father, my grandfather, in the village about 12 km away and I spent two years with him. He was a very religious fellow. He taught me. By the time I came back to my parents, I was up there in the stratosphere as far as a Jewish education. I was into Talmud – I was six years old. I could read Hebrew, everything – quite advanced. Of course, I forgot all of it (Steele 2011).

Maurice’s family lived on a farm near Stonewall and he completed Grade Seven there. He recalls how, in preparation for his Bar Mitzvah, he was sent to board at the Orphanage on Matheson Avenue.

I was already late for Bar Mitzvah, they arranged for me to go to Winnipeg and I boarded out at the Jewish Orphanage. It was common. It was called the Jewish Orphanage and Western Canada Children’s Aid, because a lot of SK people sent the children into Winnipeg for bar mitzvah or Jewish education. So I came in ahead of my sister and I spent two years there. I was 14, and got my bar mitzvah. [It was] at the Orphanage. My parents came in. We had a little bit of honey cake and some schnapps and that was my bar mitzvah. I had Mr. Rachlis and Mr. Frankel as my teachers. He [Mr. Frankel] was very strict. So was Mr. Rachlis... (Steele 2011).

Allan Stern tells how his three brothers had a *melamed* [Hebrew teacher] to prepare them for their bar mitzvahs, held at the synagogue in nearby Camsack. By the time it was Allan’s turn, money was tight, so it was decided that he would be sent into the city for his pre-bar-mitzvah education.

About 1938-39-40, things got tough and we weren’t able to support a *melamed*. So that was it. ... There was no *melamed* for me, so the decision was made that, because two or three of the other families were in the same situation, they were

going to send me and two boys from another town in to the Orphanage in Winnipeg. We'd stay there for the grade, maybe Eight, and learn. I said, "I'm not going unless I go to the Orphanage" (Stern 2010).

However, Allan did not get his wish to live in the Orphanage with his friends because he had an aunt and uncle to stay with in Winnipeg.

Most of those interviewed did not get any specific Jewish education in their rural settings. They picked up a certain amount through the family's observance. But there were exceptions, whose families hired Hebrew teachers. If there was someone in the family who could teach, such as a grandfather, he did so, as in the cases of Aubrey Asper and Ed Lazar. Ed went to a *melamed* but his grandfather taught the boys their *maftir* [Bible chanting/reading for the bar mitzvah ceremony].

Aubrey Asper recalls his Jewish education, which involved a succession of teachers in a variety of locales. At one point, he would take the bus from Neepawa to Brandon, where he was going for Hebrew lessons, with a stop in Minnedosa for a music lesson.

When we were still in Minnedosa - about 1939, give or take a year, a fellow by the name of Meyer Sharon was an itinerant Jewish teacher, who would go to these Jewish families. He used to come Friday night. We'd have a lesson Friday night and another lesson Saturday morning, and then off he'd go to the next one. So we did have some understanding. It was mostly Yiddish, although there was both reading and writing, and speaking. But then we also learned a little bit of *Siddur* [prayer book] reading. My sister was included in the lessons. But it was during the war and he eventually went into the Army, so that ended that. And there were no Jewish lessons except for our preparation for Bar Mitzveh. In my case, I started by travelling to Brandon by bus every week. I would stop in Minnedosa, have a music lesson, then go on to Brandon, stay with the Robinovitches, then Sunday morning have my Hebrew preparation for Bar Mitzveh. ... My grandfather said I was not learning a damned thing. So what they decided to do - my birthday's in November, they sent me off on my own to live with a teacher in Winnipeg - Greenberg was his name, Louie, I think. Anyway, I lived in that home, went to Machray School for four months. I had my performance... my Bar Mitzveh at the beginning of December... [at] the Ashkenazi Shul. Izzy also went to Brandon when it was his turn, and that went through to completion. There was a young guy in Brandon who was leading the congregation there, and he was accomplished as a teacher. So Izzy was prepared there but he had his Bar Mitzveh in Winnipeg (Asper 2010).

Sid Robinovitch had lessons from a man named Dressler in Brandon:

I didn't really learn any Hebrew. I learned how to pronounce "*aleph-bais*" [Yiddish alphabet]. I learned to pronounce with a Polish accent or pronunciation and then, when I came to Winnipeg we'd come into the synagogue for High Holiday services,

they'd say, "Gee, you pronounce...gee, it's very different." Anyway, he prepared me for my bar mitzvah. (Robinovitch 2010)

Adele Goldberg Standil recalls her early Jewish education and how the man who went on to become Winnipeg's well-known and beloved teacher, newspaper editor and Yiddish radio announcer was hired as the live-in Jewish teacher for the children in her family when he first arrived in Canada.

When we got old enough, my parents engaged or hired our first Jewish teacher that came out and lived in Altona. We were four children. Well, I guess when my brothers, quite a while before they had to have a bar mitzvah, they started learning the Hebrew and so on. And, this would be interesting to a lot of people in Winnipeg, my father hired Noah Witman to come to Altona. I can remember hearing Noah at one point, later on when we were in Winnipeg, he said that was the first job he had. I think he was about eighteen - very young when he came from the Old Country. Dad hired him to be our teacher and he lived with us. It was very satisfactory. It was great. But he didn't stay all that long. Over the years we had several. (Standil 2010)

Norman Vickar grew up on the Edenbridge Colony, which was never without a Hebrew teacher of some sort - there was either a rabbi or just a Hebrew teacher.

In the later years, my parents built a little shack - we called it a granary - a building on the farm, and heated it in the wintertime and made it into a school, so that after English school, we would gather there, and some of the community people that lived within a mile or two would also come there, and the rabbi or teacher would come there to teach us Hebrew, after four o'clock. Girls were included. As a matter of fact, Freda Baron (nee Fenster) lived a mile from our place; she attended sometimes. (Vickar 2010)

Norman and Florence lived and worked in Gronlid after they were married, but when their children reached school age, he moved the family to Melfort and continued to commute to Gronlid.

I used to drive Larry and the two girls to Melfort for Hebrew lessons. We had a teacher by the name of Herman Mahlermann. We considered him as the rabbi. In the community at large, he was the rabbi, and everybody called him Rabbi Mahlermann but he actually never was a rabbi. (Vickar 2010)

The Kleiman brothers, Harvey and Jack, grew up on the Hirsch Colony, which, in its heyday, had three synagogues and, says Harvey, "a lot of Jewish people. There must have been about 250 people at one time." Harvey went to Jewish school every day for two hours after regular school, plus 10:00 am to 12:00 pm on Sundays. There, he was taught "Hebrew and Jewish. I used to know the 'shmoneh esrey' [daily prayer]

by heart” (Kleiman, H. 2010). For a couple of years, he put on *tefillin* [phylacteries] with his grandfather. He had his bar mitzvah in the synagogue in Hirsch. By the time Jack was of bar mitzvah age three years later, “We had no more Jewish teacher. That was the end of it” (Kleiman, J. 2010). Since there was no teacher or rabbi, Jack did not have a bar mitzvah.

Irvin Greenberg, who grew up in Gimli, reports that he had no Jewish education. “Some of my older brothers had some but none of us had bar mitzvahs. We knew the holidays [from the parents and home]. When I came to Winnipeg, I started taking Hebrew lessons from ... the violinist? ... Serlin. That lasted very [briefly]” (Greenberg 2011).

It is interesting to note that Sandy Glass (nee Springman) received no Jewish education in Lac du Bonnet and, in fact, was sent to Sunday school at the church because “mother wanted us to get some kind of religious education” (Glass 2010). As well, Yude Henteleff was taught catechism along with all the Catholic kids in his school in St Vital, until the priest learned he was Jewish and came to apologize. His parents reassured him: “Look, don’t worry about it. He’s a Jew and he’ll remain a Jew but thank you very much. We appreciate it” (Henteleff 2010).

4 - Family Observance of Jewish Traditions and Holidays

The closer a family lived to a larger Jewish centre or city, the easier it was for them to keep kosher, as this entailed getting the meat from the city, often meaning Winnipeg. For storekeepers and farmers, strict observance of Shabbat was usually impossible, although many lit candles and had special meals and *challah* [braided egg bread for the Sabbath]. However, Ed Lazar’s grandparents ensured that the family did observe Shabbat, insisting that, “you’re not supposed to write, stuff like that”. They also had a “*shabbes goy*” [non-Jew to do chores not permitted on the Sabbath] to make the fire for Shabbat and *yomtovim* [holy days]. However, “when you’ve got cattle, you have to feed them, you have to milk them twice a day...” (Lazar 2010). For Jewish holidays, they had a synagogue right there, and “would bring out a couple of people to make up a *minyan*” [required prayer quorum of ten men]. His zaida, Mr. Daiter, was the “*baal tefilah*” who led the services. They had three Torah scrolls.

Many interviewees indicated that they used to come into Winnipeg, or nearby larger towns such as Camsack or Melville, Saskatchewan, for High Holidays and Passover. Sam Baker would come into Winnipeg, although Brandon had a synagogue for many years. Ettie Peikoff Robinson says that “if we didn’t come into Winnipeg, we got together with Jewish families from the towns around” for High Holiday and Passover observance (2010). The Stitz family in Hazeldell used to go to Yorkton, Rose Stitz Muchnik relates. Dora Paul Rosenbaum recalls that her family used to go from Morden to the synagogue in Winkler for the High Holidays, and later to Winnipeg. Shirley (Segal) Rypp’s family would travel from St Walburg to North Battleford for the holydays.

Kashrut [keeping a kosher home] was a difficult issue. Many families tried to keep kosher when they first moved to the towns but gave up when the meat would

arrive spoiled, among them, the Chaikins in Grandview and the Sterns in Verigen. Some families did so when the opportunity presented itself. Aubrey Asper recalls,

We did not have a Kosher home. It would have been very difficult. But my grandfather on my mother's side was a *shoichet* [ritual slaughterer] and was Orthodox. I recall once when he came to visit us in Minnedosa, we drove out to Bethany, eight miles away, to a farm. A prominent Winnipeg lawyer who is my contemporary, Harvey Pollock, it was his parents' [farm]. There we got chickens, brought them and kept them in our yard for my grandfather to kill so we could enjoy his kosher meat. (Asper 2010)

Some did manage to keep kosher. When Paul Divinsky's father had a store in Arden, Manitoba, he kept kosher for the sake of his parents, Paul's grandparents. Irvin Greenberg's family in Gimli had no problem getting kosher meat from Winnipeg Beach in the summer, where there were a couple of butchers seasonally, and from Winnipeg in the winter, because they had trucks going back and forth for their business. His father used to go into Winnipeg himself for Rosh Hashana, and sometimes for Yom Kippur, but the family observed the major holidays at home. Helen Diamond Kahane, from Plum Coulee, relates that they did, "amazingly", keep kosher. While the family hotel was "definitely not kosher", her grandfather was a butcher, retired by that time, and sent them kosher meat. In fact, after her grandmother and uncle moved to Winnipeg, the family used the room they vacated to eat all their Passover meals. Shirley (Segal) Rypp reported that for her parents, food "had to be kosher" (2010). The meat had to be ordered from Saskatoon and stay overnight in North Battleford. Since the meat would arrive spoiled, they would get a *shoichet* to come and "do chickens" for them. That was the only meat they ate.

Perle Flam Selch's family was very observant, although they were "not shul goers". Shabbat was observed: "Candles were lit, there was a white tablecloth. We didn't turn on lights – there were no lights to turn on!" For the High Holidays, her family would go into Winnipeg, and for Pesach, "everybody came to us", since it was Depression times, and people had little money. Adele Maslove Wortzman's parents kept kosher in Roblin, where they constituted the only Jewish family during the time she was growing up. "My dad would get a kosher rib and he'd cut it up into different parts and freeze it. So it was difficult" (Wortzman 2010). They also kept the dietary rules of Passover strictly, although they did not have seders "because it was just our little family" (Wortzman 2010). Sid Robinovitch indicates that, although there was no synagogue in Brandon by the time he was growing up, and they were not very observant, he did have a "strong sense of being Jewish-an awareness that you were different" (Robinovitch 2010).

Yude Henteleff's parents were "secular Jews" and "devout Socialists." But they still celebrated the Sabbath, including blessing the candles, and ate challah baked by his mother. Kashrut was not observed in their home. He remembers having a bar mitzvah "in the sense only that I read something in English" but there was nothing formal. They celebrated Passover with matzo, traditional food and songs – "from a

cultural-ethnic perspective” (Henteleff 2010).

Maurice Steele reports that his family showed “no observance at all, except the High Holidays. His father had been a “*yeshiva bocher*” [student in a religious seminary] but became disillusioned in Poland after his “*tallis and tefillen*” [prayer shawl and phylacteries] were stolen by a Polish worker while he worked in the fields. The same man later tried to sell them back to his dad. His mother’s family was “left-wing radicals, revolutionaries” (Steele 2010).

Lillian Bober Zentner’s parents kept kosher in Esterhazy, SK. In today’s terms, this was quite a feat, because people did not have home freezers then and would have to pay to store the meat at the town “freezer building”.

Chickens, we would buy from farmers and we would take them live in a crate in the trunk of the car to Melville, where there was a *shochet* [ritual slaughterer] and he would butcher them and then we would bring them back. I remember helping my mom pluck the chickens and cut the heads off and everything and clean them and pluck them. In the town there was a building called the “Freezer Bldg”; you could rent a locker that was a freezer and so we would put all the chickens in there and we’d have chickens for the whole winter. If you wanted beef, you’d have to order it from Winnipeg or Regina and it would come by train, frozen. So my parents had this huge locker because we didn’t have electricity for a while, in our other house.

With regard to holiday observance, she reports that,

For Jewish holidays, we always closed our store and we drove to Melville... Melville was the closest Jewish community. They had two synagogues and they had a large Jewish community. It was 60 miles away. There were people there that were wonderful and they used to put you up for the two days of Rosh Hashana... We would go every Rosh Hashana and every Yom Kippur. For Pesach, my parents would alternate. There were other little towns around with Jewish people, with maybe one family per town. So usually there were several other families that my parents were friends with, and we were friends with the kids, so they would come in and we would trade off. Like one year, my parents would make a *seder* with all the people (and our place wasn’t big but we would squeeze in). The next year ... my auntie and uncle would make it, and the other auntie and uncle, so we would trade off. And there were always from 10 to 20 people at the *seder*, ‘cuz there were always at least two or three families that would get together. We kept strictly Pesach. We would order from either Regina or Winnipeg. We ate dairy. We just didn’t eat bread. I don’t think we were that strict that we would have kosher-for-Pesach milk. But we always had matzo, and my mom cooked. And I know we never ate out on Pesach. That was a rule. (Zentner 2010)

For the Bobbers, as for many of the shopkeepers, it was not possible to have Friday night dinners or keep the store closed or avoid working on Saturday. “The weekend was *the* time when we did business” (Zentner 2010). Lil’s brother was sent to Winnipeg when he was twelve, to live with his grandparents and study at Talmud Torah to prepare for his bar mitzvah.

Gertie Lev moved to Estevan when she married her third husband, Morris, a farmer in the area. She lived there from age 50 to 90 and never encountered any anti-Semitism. She recalls that, “For the High Holidays, Morris and I would go into Winnipeg, every time we could. We would go into Winnipeg to be with family, for Passover” (Lev 2010).

Marsha Trager Phomin, the daughter and granddaughter of the two Jewish mayors of the Pas, MB, had a rather unusual Jewish upbringing. She was never explicitly told that she was Jewish or that the family did certain things because of their religion.

We did the Lord’s Prayer, we did the Bible, we went to every church in town. We were in business, right? We didn’t attend regularly; we went - to every church in town. We took lilies to the sisters at the Catholic Church because they taught us piano. They taught my mother piano too. My father took whisky and chocolate to the bishop. We were in business, what do you want? (Phomin 2010)

Marsha would read the Jewish papers that came to the store and meet the travelers who would stay over. Her mother would order Jewish food from Winnipeg, and ‘kosher for Passover’ food, but Marsha and her sister knew the matzo only as ‘Easter crackers’. “My mother ordered all that stuff and we loved it. We had no idea [it was Jewish food]. We thought it was just stuff you couldn’t buy in The Pas” (Phomin 2010). Yet, her mother was very upset when Marsha’s sister started to date a non-Jew, maintaining that she wanted her girls to “marry Jewish”.

5. Relations with the General (Non-Jewish) Community

For the most part, interviewees described good relations with the non-Jewish community. In many of the families, the fathers belonged to the Masons, the Rotary Club or Legion and the mothers to three major women’s organizations, which almost by definition, were service-oriented. The Eastern Star was affiliated with the Masons, the Rebekahs, the women’s auxiliary of the IOOF or Independent Order of Odd Fellows, and the Women’s Institute. Many fathers were also involved in sports such as hockey, curling and baseball. In general, rural Jews had more social interaction than their urban counterparts with non-Jews and a more open attitude, largely because there were few, if any, Jews with whom to socialize.

Jewish men were usually active in the town’s government and activities, and often helped bring about positive changes in the town’s infrastructure; they also got involved in cooperatives and farm organizations. Karen Isman Wise’s father was mayor of Kipling; Lloyd and Pearl Friedman’s Uncle Pete was the mayor of

Hazenmore for a time, and Yude Henteleff's dad was one of the founder's of the Winnipeg Gardeners Cooperative in St Vital. Marsha Trager's father and grandfather were both mayors of The Pas, and Norman Vickar's family distinguished themselves in politics, a path that he too followed. He recollects,

My Uncle Dave was the reeve or the Mayor of the Rural Municipality of Willow Creek for about 22 years. He was elected but by whom? There were no Jews to elect him. My dad was a councillor on the same group for about 18 years and then he became the mayor after my uncle quit. Again, an elected position. After my dad finished his stint as mayor, my cousin Charlie Vickar became the mayor...all Vickars, all the way down the line and they were all elected by the non-Jewish community. I was elected as an MLA in Melfort and I could count my Jewish votes on my five fingers; the rest were all non-Jewish. This gives you an indication of the respect that we had in the non-Jewish community. We had it all the way from [youth]. (Vickar 2010)

When asked whether her parents socialized with the non-Jews in Roblin, Adele Maslove Wortzman responded, "Oh, absolutely. They had a big circle of friends. My dad was very involved in the community. He was on the council and was a school trustee, so he was very involved" (2010). Her parents had very good friends in the community and "We always went for Christmas dinner to one family and they played canasta with a certain group. The neighbours were all very friendly. Nobody locked their doors in those days so neighbours would wander in and out (Wortzman 2010). Lil Bober Zentner's parents likewise had a large circle of friends.

Sandy Springman Glass recalls that her father "coached hockey, he coached baseball. He was very active bringing running water to the town, because we didn't have running water". Her mother, on the other hand,

wasn't really involved in the community that way, but she had a lot of girlfriends in the community. She would go visit them in the evenings and she would play whist, I think it was, and stuff like that. My mom and dad always went to the dances at the town hall. And when they left, the community made a big party for them. They gave them a big farewell party in 1953 when we left Lac du Bonnet, so they were popular. (Glass 2010)

Darlene Chaikin Davis also has very positive memories of growing up in Grandview.

It was a great place to grow up. I had terrific friends. Your activities were outdoor activities. In winter, I can remember throwing skates over my shoulder and walking six blocks to the skating rink and you'd go skating. You went to all the hockey games. It was an athletic town - with a lot of hockey. We had a very aggressive hockey team, and a baseball team, and you took part in all of those

sports. You associated with people - their holidays, our holidays, everybody's holidays got mixed. We used to swim in the swimming hole - with bloodsuckers in it. They didn't build a pool there 'til long after I left the town, so if you wanted to go swimming, you swam in the river. (Davis 2010)

Aubrey Asper relates that his father, "because he was in business, felt he had to be part of the community and was very active in promoting, particularly music, in the community and also making contributions charity-wise in the community" (2010). His mother was also involved in the community because she worked in the business as well. "She belonged to the Eastern Star, [which] is associated with Free Masonry. My father joined the Masons which, being Jewish, was unusual. It was part of his desire, I suppose, to ingratiate himself with the non-Jewish community" (Asper 2010).

Darlene Chaikin Davis says there were three Jewish families in Grandview when she was growing up, and since the other two were "older", her parents basically socialized with local people of their own age.

My father curled, he played hockey, he played baseball. He coached hockey - the young ones. He was on the volunteer fire brigade. He was a Mason. He belonged to the Legion. My mother was a Rebekah. She wasn't quite as involved as my father was. [Rebekahs] were the female version of the Legionnaires. He was a war veteran, so he was part of the Legion. He was very involved with the community. It was his life. (Davis 2010)

Darlene, like many others, first encountered problems in her social life when she reached dating age. The young people mostly went out in groups. She did a little bit of dating there and "promised my parents nothing would ever be serious" (2010). To this day, Lil Zentner has a vivid recollection of what happened when she went against her parents' wishes with regard to inter-dating.

I completed Grade Ten in Esterhazy. At the end of Grade Ten, I was starting to date. And the only Jewish boy I could have gone out with was like my brother, Eugene, and he was a year older than me. He and I grew up together and I wasn't about to date him...I wanted to date other people and my parents forbade it. Absolutely, I was not allowed. So I used to sneak - that was the only way to do it. And they caught me, and they had an absolute bird. My father dragged me out of a restaurant one night, to my embarrassment, with all my friends sitting around, and literally almost dragged me out... and said, "You're not allowed to be here". [He] didn't say, "Because these boys are not Jewish" but that was the understanding. I almost died. I didn't want to go to school on the Monday following. I'll never forget that... Then we had a huge blowup ... I said, "What do you expect me to do? I'm not interested in being a nun. I need to go out. I'm 15 years old. All my friends are going out with boys." I was about to turn 16 and I didn't want to just be going with girls all the time. So I said, "There's no choice,

there's nobody else here". And they got really scared. (Zentner 2010)

Lil was then sent to Winnipeg to live with an aunt and complete high school there. It also precipitated her parents moving into Winnipeg sooner than they had planned. Adele Maslove Wortzman had the same experience: "And also with boyfriends, you know. It was kind of unspoken at that time, that they would frown on...anything getting really, really serious with somebody that wasn't Jewish..." (Wortzman 2010).

Paul Divinsky, whose family lived in Arden, Manitoba for only a few years, had an overwhelmingly positive experience. He relates,

Whatever there was going on in the community, we were part of. If there was a concert, if there was work to be done in the community...My father used to go to pick up from the farm all the excess metal things, so we could send them into Winnipeg to be used for the war effort. We were part of everything that went on. You can't live in a small town ... you're making a living dealing with them, you've got to become part of the community and there was no reason why not, because everybody was very warm and welcoming. We were part of the community. My father curled, I took part in the curling. That's one of the things I did after I came into town and got myself graduated. (Divinsky 2010)

Lloyd Friedman's family lived in several small towns in Saskatchewan. His Uncle Pete was elected Mayor of Hazenmore. Lloyd relates: "Uncle Pete was a visionary and he encouraged the community to build an electric plant. They did so; they bought an engine and a generator. That encouraged the population to bring electricity into their homes." Lloyd's sister, Pearl Friedman Kredentser, recalls of their time in Rock Glen, that it was

a very small village. My mother...Lloyd said that she chaired maybe - there was a little nursing station run by the Red Cross. He said that she was maybe head of the Auxiliary for a year or two. Mom and Dad, in the town they used to play bridge every so often. And they would entertain in homes. I can remember one time there being several tables of bridge at our house. In that community, the Anglo Saxons always gave off the feeling that they were the top layer in the community. And as I said, there were many different families of immigrants. Other families were lower down in the pecking order. And we were sort of to one side altogether.(Kredentser 2010)

Helen Goldberg Kahane's parents in Plum Coulee were, by her account, involved in everything:

My mother. My dad was busy with the hotel, and the beer parlour was open 'til 10 o'clock, so he couldn't participate as much. She loved dancing but he wasn't crazy about it. My dad, it's not from a business standpoint, he was the kind of person

who would guarantee, if there was a baseball tournament, in case of weather and it was cancelled or whatever, he was the one who would guarantee...He was involved in that respect. (Kahane 2010)

Karen Isman Wise's father, who had the Massey-Harris farm machinery store, made a significant contribution to the town's development through holding various government positions.

It was through his fund-raising efforts that a hospital was built. He became the mayor of the town. Before it was a town, it was a municipality and he was the reeve, so he sort of looked after the town. And then when they incorporated and became a town, he was the mayor, and the Justice of the Peace, and ... Everybody came to him for advice, so...it seems strange that, as the only Jewish family, he was sort of the anchor in the town. (Wise 2010)

Karen had extremely positive memories of her growing up in Kipling:

When you live in a small town, everybody does everything. I did figure skating for many, many years, I curled, I played in the school band. We did track and field - there just wasn't an activity that you didn't do, because everybody did it. On Friday night, everybody went to the movies; we had a movie theatre and all the kids used to go. There was none of this "You can't go and you need somebody to take you". It was just a lot of freedom. We never locked our doors. It was a great place to grow up. I have nothing but the most wonderful memories... It almost sounds like Norman Rockwell but that's the way it was. (Wise 2010)

Gertie Lev and her husband Morris were an active part of the community of Estevan. They were self-appointed Jewish ambassadors to the general community. Gertie was a charter member of the Estevan Multicultural Council formed in 1977. She and Morris ran an "Israeli Pavilion" every summer for over 12 years, where her "Jewish cookery was enjoyed by many area residents, who also were treated to Israeli, Hebrew and Jewish melodies," when visiting there (Lev 2010). Gertie presided over Passover services at churches in Estevan and spoke about the origins of Jewish holidays to various local groups. She was president of the Estevan Junior Concert Society and served on the Board of Directors of the Saskatchewan Junior Concert Society of Regina. Through her association with the Estevan Multicultural Council, Gertie was instrumental in bringing the Chai Folk Ensemble of Winnipeg to Estevan in October 1980 and again in October 1990, originally because her grandchildren were in it. She was also involved in the St Josephs Hospital Auxiliary.

Marsha Trager Phomin tells how her dad, as mayor of The Pas, achieved a great deal of progress for the town.

He did everything. They got new streets and they paved streets, and they got sewers and water. My father was a very good mayor and he travelled all over the

place advertising The Pas. He got them to come to the Trappers' Festival; he got the CBC up there. My mother decided there was no culture, so she got the Celebrity Concert Series to come up north once a month. She had the ballet up there; she had Shakespeare plays up there. She started the library. There was no room for it, she lobbied ...and got a room in the basement of the town hall. (2010)

Ettie Peikoff Robinson has only positive memories of the Rosssburn community, where her father too had grown up.

The community was good. In the town, there were a lot of, what we called "English" - the people were English, Irish and Scotch, you know. But on the farms and also in the town, there were a lot of Ukrainian and Polish people. And my father spoke all those languages because of the store and the people ... it was a good community. I was trying to think to myself of whether there was anti-Semitism. There must have been, you know, but we didn't feel it if there was. No, we had very positive relationships in the community. My father was very well liked, did a lot for the community. He grew up there. [My parents] had a lot of friends and they played cards with their friends...non-Jewish. We were really a good part of the community. There was no separation. As a matter of fact, the day before my family left Rosssburn, they had a big reception in the Town Hall for our family, with speeches and all kinds of things. The feelings were good. I still have my best girlfriend all through school - I still keep in touch.(Robinson 2010)

Karen Isman Wise had similar positive feelings about Kipling, SK. When asked whether her parents had friends in the community, the answer was an emphatic:

Absolutely! They had very good friends and, as I said, we always went for Christmas dinner to one family and they played canasta with a certain group. The neighbours were all very friendly. ... Both my parents were Masons and my mother belonged to the Rebekah Lodge, which was for the women. And they were both very, very active in that. (Wise 2010)

Her mother was involved in the home and school association as well.

Maurice Steele recalls that his family in Stonewall socialized with the community, to a certain extent.

There were a few people, a few immigrant people... my dad spoke Ukrainian, Polish, Czech, German so he could communicate. There was the artist, Kureluk, you know. He was in Balmoral, a few miles away. He did a painting of my dad... There were gypsy families - Romanian, but dark; I think they were of Romanian extraction and spoke Yiddish! I don't know how that happened. So we had interaction. (Steele 2010)

When asked whether they went to each other's homes, he replies, "My dad did. I don't think my mother did" (Steele 2010).

Adele Goldberg Standil remembers her mother belonging to a local chapter of the Women's Institute. She describes the activities of that group.

I don't think they did fundraising out there, but they had sewing lessons and they had cooking and they had speakers. People came from the other towns. It was like a network. And if there was somebody that was a very good...you know, had a lot of ability in one way or another, they could pass it on to these women. They had their meetings and it would be very sociable. Like, when we would belong to a book group here in the city. And they'd have a lunch and it would be a social event. My father and mother both curled and they did even after we moved into Winnipeg. Everybody curled in the country. That was a great sport for them. (Standil 2010)

Allan Stern describes his mother as "one of the most respected business persons in the area. Everybody liked my mother. She was a very kind woman. She would help some of the farmers out by giving them credit." He says that there were two or three couples she associated with. Also, "the women ... would get together in the evening and they'd play bridge and cribbage. They played a lot of cribbage. That was it as far as that part" (Stern 2010).

As far as the social scene in Gronlid, Norman Vickar comments on the positive interactions he and his family had with the local people.

It bothers me sometime when I hear people here in Winnipeg talk about non-Jewish people and living in a community together. We lived there all our lives - on the farm as well. We interacted more with the non-Jewish community than we did with the Jewish community, even in Edenbridge, and so did everybody else, because you had to. You depended largely on some of these people. In my business, selling implements, who am I going to sell it to, if not non-Jewish people? I dealt with Ukrainians, Scandinavians, Mennonites, you name it. But very few Jews...I don't need all my fingers to count the amount of Jews I had as customers. (Vickar 2010)

He points out that, while his parents' generation did not socialize much, his generation did. Their positive experience was not only in the area of business, but carried over to social life.

We were invited to every Ukrainian wedding, while growing up as well as in adult life. With our parents, it was a little bit different. They socialized to a certain degree with these people but primarily they picked their few friends in the Jewish community at large. (Vickar 2010)

Hans Werner, in writing of the relationship between Jews and Mennonites in Winkler in the 1920s, says, “on the whole, [they] lived in separate worlds socially and culturally... the Jewish community worked hard to maintain social connections to other Jews. Over time, they increasingly looked forward to visiting with Jewish family and friends in the growing Jewish community of Winnipeg” (33). This appears to be the case in communities that had enough Jews to form a social group, among them Winkler and Brandon, in the early 1900s. Among the individuals interviewed for this project, there were also families who socialized mainly with other Jews. Some of them, like Sam Baker and Ed Lazar lived in, or near, a town with a Jewish community.

Sam recalls that the Jewish people in Brandon did not mix with Gentiles much: “Their social life was playing cards every Saturday night in different [Jewish] homes” (Baker 2010).

Ed Lazar’s family of origin, too, did not have very much involvement with the general community. Like many Jews, they socialized mostly with family who lived nearby. They would visit back and forth with non-Jews but, because of kashrut, would not eat at their homes.

Gladys Pearlman Love recalls that during their time in Shoal Lake, her husband became a Mason and she belonged to the Rebekahs, who met about once a month. But they did not socialize much otherwise, except with the Jewish travelers who came through and were invited to join the family for dinner.

Rose Stitz Muchnik’s parents, too, were not really part of the community. Her mother was generally busy cooking, cleaning and taking care of the children. Her dad “was different. He mixed with the people, but not really socially” (2010); he was too busy working in the store. On Sundays, their only day off, they would get together with other Jewish families.

Sid Robinovitch’s father had a clothing store in Brandon. Sid was always aware of a “disconnect” between different aspects of his life; he had his public life, which was going to school and mixing with the non-Jewish kids, and

I was involved in Scouts. We went to the church and things like that, and school and plays and everything, and I had friends. But that was completely separate from my home life and my Jewish life. It was that way ... I’d say in my parents’ [lives] as well. They had a public life. My father was in business; they mixed with people in business. My mother came actually from a pretty secular background, growing up in Saskatchewan, so they got along very well and they were pretty secular people. [Father] was what they’d call a “modern” guy. All the rest of his family wasn’t but he was. Their private life was with Jews; all their social contacts were with Jewish people. These poker games that they played was all Jewish people. And there was nothing religious; they were just socially Jewish... But they had a very strong sense. (Robinovitch 2010)

As a little girl, Ruth Promislow Rachlis lived in Quinton, Saskatchewan, where her father had a general store. Her family moved into Winnipeg where she did all her

schooling but her dad continued to work at the store in Quinton, and she spent every summer there while growing up.

The thing I remember is the closeness of all those [Jewish] families. They used to get together Sundays. They would visit each other, they would socialize. The other socialization that I remember is the Jewish travellers from Winnipeg, like from Weidman brothers and from the other grocery stores, used to come out, and the travellers would stay for lunch, often sleep over. That was the social milieu for them and for us ... and the excitement! (Rachlis 2010)

Shirley Segal Rypp's father was the mayor of St Walburg in northern Saskatchewan for a time,

so there were meetings all the time. There were dinners, and my mother would find out the menu and she would make exactly the same [but kosher] at home. My mother was, it's called Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire. She was the secretary of this organization. Although they socialized with people in the community, she would not eat in their homes because of kashrut. (Rypp 2010)

Lil Bober Zentner's family, too, kept to themselves and the available Jews in the area. "We weren't that integrated. We weren't that friendly. My parents pretty much stuck to the Jewish friends. My parents never did anything with just the two of them. We always did it as a family" (Zentner 2010). As far as socializing with non-Jews, the main contact was through sports and the school. Her father used to curl and her brother was a champion hockey player. Her mom was involved in the school – both parents were, for example, in fundraising and costume making.

Jews were often involved in philanthropy. In addition to extending credit to customers of the general stores, they would help individual families in need. Women belonged to women's groups – the "Women's Institutes", the Rebekahs, the Eastern Star. Helen Goldberg Kahane's mother belonged to the Women's Institute in Plum Coulee. She recalls that the group raised money for a young boy in town who needed glasses and couldn't afford them.

Ettie Peikoff Robinson's father would help the community in many ways. She recalls one case in particular:

I remember this one family where the father was an alcoholic. Children running by - they had to go by the store to go to school, and they had no shoes on in the fall. And he just brought the kids in and put shoes and socks on them and sent them to school. He did that kind of thing, you know. Another incident was, there was a woman who had all these babies and there was no hospital in Rosburn. I can remember them coming to the door and saying that she had to get to the hospital and my father just getting in the car and taking them to Russell, you know, that kind of thing. (Robinson 2010)

Perle Flam Selch's parents would outfit those in need on the Brokenhead Reserve in Scanterbury, Manitoba, providing them with jackets or other clothes. Her father, Harry Flam said that the family had "very good relations" with the Aboriginal people. "They used to come and help and do work. We paid them and gave them presents and credit..."(Flam qtd in *Rural* 30). Being the local storekeeper led to various forms of community involvement, "because there was not [sic] social welfare, there was no social workers. My wife used to go and help them and share...what we could... My wife organized the Red Cross" (*Rural* 30).

Marsha Trager Phomin recounts her family's charitable deeds, although she did not realize then that they stemmed from the Jewish tradition.

We went to the Salvation Army because with us, anybody who died and didn't have anybody, my grandfather and later my father would outfit them in a new suit, because my grandfather said everybody should have a new suit to be buried in (2010).

6 – Anti-Semitism

Ernest Sirluck, who was born and raised in Winkler, and went on to become a prominent English scholar, member of the community, president and vice-chancellor of the University of MB, has written about the anti-Semitism he suffered from his very first day of school. It included not only name-calling, since he was a "dirty Jew who had killed Christ", but getting hit (8). This tendency was partially confirmed by some of those interviewed. For them, the holidays of Christmas and Easter were particularly difficult because, at these times of the year, the Jews were accused by the church of being 'Christ killers'. Boys definitely suffered more, getting into physical fights. Aubrey Asper, who lived in Minnedosa, then Neepawa, observed that "It became tougher when we moved to Neepawa, especially on [brother] Izzy, who got into fights. He experienced it more than I did, partly because he was not selective in what he heard" (Asper 2010).

While some degree of anti-Semitism definitely existed in many areas, for many of the interviewees, it was limited to their being called "dirty Jew", with no further action. Shirley Segal Rypp relates how badly she felt when, as a little girl in St Walburg, she, who was incapable of killing a mosquito, was accused of killing Christ. Sam Block, who lived in South Headingley until age eight, recalled someone saying to his dad, "Block, you're a Jew but you're a white [i.e. good] Jew" (Block 2009). Adele Maslove Wortzman relates a similar feeling growing up in Roblin: "we were 'good' Jews, if they thought that Jews were something else" (Wortzman 2010).

A few of the interviewees had quite miserable experiences, being made to feel like they were always outsiders. For Lloyd Friedman,

Life in Piapot ... wasn't a very happy experience. I began school there. We, with my aunt and uncle, were the only Jewish families there. We didn't have a name; it was

“Mr. Jew” and “Mrs. Jew”... “Sammy Jew”. (Friedman 2010)

One incident stands out in his memory:

I got into a fight with a Gentile kid and the father of this little boy that I supposedly “beat up” came out. He grabbed me and held me while his little boy was able to bash me. It couldn’t have been very severe, but it was enough to make my nose bleed. Anyway, Dad was quite forward and he made a charge against the man. We went before the Justice of the Peace - it was an evening trial, I recall - I don’t think Piapot had electric lights. This trial was held in the basement of the church, and - some of these things are quite vivid and others are very faint - I stood beside my dad - I don’t think I gave any testimony. I was only six years old, possible seven. (Friedman 2010)

Lloyd, in a subsequent phone conversation, told me that the Gentile father was fined \$5.

In the rural communities of western Canada, “those who might have been adversaries in the Old Country usually reached amicable relationships. [But]... anti-Semitism did exist, especially with the pro-Nazi sympathies in many small towns in the 1930s” (*Rural* 33). Things changed during World War II, especially in the towns with large German populations. Sirluck tells how a number of local people subscribed to German Nazi publications, especially after Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933, and William Whittaker’s Canadian Nationalist Party, “which wore brown shirts and swastikas... formed a flourishing branch there” (Sirluck 21).

Helen Diamond Kahane comments on her family being the only Jews in the school in Plum Coulee:

It didn’t affect me. I think my brothers sensed it more. They were afraid to go to the washroom, because the boys would pull their pants down. I know they were not happy campers. There was generally no overt anti-Semitism, but there were a few people - this is during the war - that were real Nazis. As a matter of fact, I was still at home. I can remember that the headquarters were in Winkler of the Nazi party, and they were having a meeting in Plum Coulee in the school auditorium. And I remember my dad phoning the police to be around, just in case, because we were the only Jewish family and we weren’t sure what was going to happen. But nothing happened. There were a few, I can visualize them, who would not come into our store because we were Jews - during the war years, or from the time of Hitler’s propaganda. (Kahane 2010)

Dr. Philip Katz grew up in Hubbard, SK, a town with a large German population. When asked how anti-Semitism manifested itself, he replied, “ For me, a lot of comments: ‘Jews killed Christ’, ‘Damned Jews, they screw everybody’. A couple of times, I did [get beaten up] but others interfered.” He continues,

I mixed with all the different kids [from school]. But there were times when it was not good. There'd be times when something would stir them up and ... the anti-Semitism would really follow. They tied my brother, who was six years older than me and partially deaf, to a fence. He got picked on more than me. We had a dog [that] was big and savage, so we kept him chained up ... if I hollered for him, he snapped the chain and came. If I walked out of the school and I looked around, and there was sort of a gathering of the kids, usually the Ukrainian kids were around, and I didn't like it, I just yelled for Jack, who was two blocks away. Dogs have great hearing, and within a few moments, you'd see this big black thing comin' [sic] down the road and by the time he arrived, everybody else was gone.

When the Germans entered Paris, there was a torchlight parade on the main street of Hubbard to celebrate. And my parents were pretty concerned about what would happen but they'd gotten along well with all the people, the various groups. I was told by the other kids, "Don't worry, when Hitler comes, we'll tell him you're good Jews." After that torch-light parade, the next day, (the RCMP station was in Ituna, the next town), the Mountie drove in with a big truck, loaded 20 German heads of families onto the truck. And there was a huge gathering of people - their families [asking] "What's going on? What's going on?" He said that they were being taken to a concentration camp in northern Saskatchewan. "If you people behave and if there's no sabotage at the railroad, you will be able to send them parcels, send them mail. They'll be able to write to you and you can go visit them. But if anything happens, there will be no contact and no communication." So there was no problem...That was in June of 1940. I don't think they came back until the war was almost over. (Katz 2010)

In Altona, Adele Goldberg Standil also found things changed during the war. Before the war, she had never experienced anti-Semitism out there. "But once the war started in 1939, there were a few Germans out there that were a little pro-Nazi. And they were known to the Mounties. And the Mounties would come and check up on them. One or two got sent away..." (Standil 2010).

Lil Bober Zentner talks about how careful they were not to make mistakes in doing business in their store, so as not to provoke any anti-Semitic reactions. She notes,

Even in my father's business, there were people that would not come to him because he was Jewish. He knew it was that. If there was ever a discrepancy in anything...automatically, he was 'Jewing them down', taking advantage of them because he was Jewish. Oh, yeah, people would say it. They would absolutely come out and say it. That's why we were taught to be so careful with adding, because we had to make sure that the bill was correct. ... in fact, lots of times, I would add it up, my father would check it, give it back to me to make sure it was correct. Because he didn't want to have any problems. Oh, yeah, there was anti-

Semitism in the town. And there were my uncle and their store, my dad and his store, and there was another store that was not Jewish. And people would go there specifically because they weren't Jewish, because they were Christian...There was, but it wasn't that much outwardly shown because my parents didn't wear their Jewishness on their sleeve, and because they spoke all these other languages...it was a real benefit for them. I guess after a while people would forget that they were Jewish, except when they closed for Jewish holidays. Then it would be very well known. (Zentner 2010)

Norman Vickar points out that the only time he experienced any direct anti-Semitism was in Melfort the second time he was running for mayor. It was relatively short-lived, as he later served two terms and was elected by acclamation the second time. They had moved there in 1958.

I became an alderman there. I ran for mayor and lost the first time round. I ran again the next time and I made it by a vast majority. That's when I encountered some anti-Semitism. I knew it was there, but not really 'til then. During the election campaign, there was one church group in Melfort that became "anti-Norman Vickar". They never came out and said, "because you're a Jew" but "you're Norman Vickar and you should not elect a Vickar". Anyway, I won that election. After that, I was elected by acclamation - I didn't need any votes anymore. I served two terms - seven years, and I quit because I became a cabinet minister, and I couldn't handle both. That's when we moved to Regina. (Vickar 2010)

Sidney Buckwold had served as the first Jewish alderman in SK, but ran into anti-Semitism when he ran for mayor of Saskatoon. He wrote how his 11-year term, starting in 1958, involved "certain tensions." He was the recipient of "insulting remarks by phone and by letter" (63).

Irvin Greenberg comments that, "In Winnipeg Beach, the locals were more anti-Semitic than, we'll say, the Gimli locals. Because some of the boys would say, "Thank God, the summer's over with all those Jews" (2010). These were local kids. His wife, Gilda, offers the explanation that, "There were more Ukrainian people in Winnipeg Beach. And I think because of the ethnic history, they had more anti-Semitism. The Icelanders maybe weren't brought up with Jews" (2010). Irvin remembers one incident that was told to him about some anti-Semitic feelings manifested in the sale of real estate in Loney Beach, Gimli.

Up until right after the war, there was this big cottage for sale, and my father had the rental agency and Dr. Abe Hollenberg wanted to buy it. My father wouldn't sell it to him but the owner sold it to him. And the people in Loney Beach said that he was the first Jewish person to own a place in Loney Beach. They called a meeting and said [that] because Charlie Greenberg sold that cottage to a Jew, we should bar him from doing business in Loney Beach. There was a Dr. Sigurdson. He got up and he let them have it. The rest is history. He said, "You have no right doing that.

Charlie Greenberg provides a service and Dr. Hollenberg is allowed to live in Loney Beach.” The next couple of years, Dr. Rady bought a place at the end of Loney Beach. That was it. (Greenberg 2011)

Yude Henteleff and his family did experience some anti-Semitism in St Vital from the Métis children, who called him a “Christ killer” and a “maudit juif” [damned Jew].

It was rather sad because I remember so well one incident: on a Sunday morning, my dad and I were going for a walk along St Mary’s Road and this little kid was walking there. He didn’t say, “Bonjour, Monsieur Henteleff, bonjour, Yude,” he says, “Bonjour, juifs” - “Good morning, Jews”. He didn’t know what it meant but clearly there was talk in the family and all this kind of thing. So, I fought back and I was very strong and very tough. And then some of my non-Jewish friends came to my rescue, came and saw what was happening, and we had some real to-dos, I tell you. Real fights with these Métis kids, in particular. The adults then became involved. I don’t remember the particulars of it but I know it stopped and we really became friends again. (Henteleff 2010)

7 - Perceived Effects of Growing Up Jewish on the Prairies

Ultimately, almost all of the families left the towns and farms, for the same reason that the previous generation had left the farm colonies – post-secondary education and social/cultural contact with other Jews. They sent their children to university in Winnipeg not only for higher education but so that they would have the opportunity to meet and marry “Jewish”.

Most of the interviewees, when asked how they felt growing up Jewish in small towns on the Prairies had affected their later lives, shared the sentiments expressed by Darlene Chaikin Davis: “I think that it gave me a broader outlook” (2010). In reflecting on his experiences, Sid Robinovitch observes,

For somebody growing up in a non-Jewish environment, I became pretty Jewish subsequently - not there at all. I don’t know why that was. I just gravitated to it. At the same time, growing up in a non-Jewish environment, I think I relate differently to the non-Jewish world. Even though I felt like I was an outsider, I felt more connected with it. I don’t feel so separate from it the way people do who grew up in Winnipeg. I have more of a connection with the secular world. (Robinovitch 2010)

Ettie Peikoff Robinson expresses a similar sentiment:

Living in a small town affects you in a lot of different ways because you interact with a lot of people who you’d never get to meet if you just lived in Winnipeg. I think it makes you more accepting of all kinds of people. I think that a lot of the people [from Winnipeg] that I know didn’t know anybody except Jewish people.

They knew some in school but in their lives, they didn't. Where in a small town, you do. I think it [made me more liberal]. (2010)

Paul Divinsky had a singularly positive experience in the town of Arden, from beginning to end of the few years he lived there. When his father died suddenly in the middle of winter, Paul and his mother returned from sitting *shiva* [the week of mourning for a close relative] in Winnipeg to find “our yard was full of wood that people had brought... we could have started selling, that's how much... It was no furnaces, it was all wood stoves”. Also, when he returned to school, he found his classmates had taken turns taking notes for him so he would not get behind. He says,

I have memories that are very precious because there was no such thing as racial discrimination. There were other minorities there and everybody got along. It was a very, very tight-knit community (of about 250 people) but there was a large farming area around there, so they were actually part of the community as well. (Divinsky 2010)

Paul attributes his later involvement in the interfaith work of B'nai Brith and on the board of the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews, to his experiences in Arden.

Conclusion

The oral history interviews cited in this paper, about growing up Jewish in rural MB and SK, are consistent with the published literature. They add many fresh illustrations and details that help to flesh out the outlines provided by earlier published material, providing a rich sampling of the range of experiences and the diversity of rural Jews in the early to mid-twentieth century through the participants' direct, personal recollections.

Two somewhat surprising findings were the low level of anti-Semitism and high level of interaction with Gentiles. The overwhelmingly positive experiences of several of the individuals interviewed, notably Karen Isman Wise in Kipling, SK and in MB, Darlene Chaikin Davis in Grandview, Ettie Peikoff Robinson in Rossburn and Paul Divinsky in Arden, were also a pleasant surprise.

Eventually, most rural Jewish families moved into the city by the nineteen-fifties, most frequently into Winnipeg, for the same reason that the earlier farm colonies had ceased to exist: “the inability to ensure Jewish culture, religion and the need for higher education for children” (*Rural* 22).

As Arnold concluded, “The western experience points to an inescapable conclusion that a viable Jewish community is feasible in Canada today only within a large urban setting” (*Rural* 30).

Many of those who had very little Jewish content in their rural lives sought it out and acquired it when they moved into Winnipeg. Also, many members of the second generation, and the third, became professionals and had an impact on the

development of Winnipeg's Jewish and general communities. In the group interviewed, there are several teachers and social workers, an accountant, a lawyer, an engineer, a psychiatrist, a composer and several business people; most are now retired. It is interesting to note that of the thirty-four people interviewed, only Jack and Harvey Kleiman still live in the country, in the house where they were raised – at Hirsch, SK, across the highway from site of the Hirsch Colony. Gertie Lev continued to live as the only Jew in Estevan, and to be a lively and sought-after representative, until just one year ago when, at age 90, she moved into Winnipeg to be closer to family. The rest of the interviewees have been long-time residents of Winnipeg.

It was an honour and a privilege to interview this group of people and to have them share their life stories. Their histories reflect not only a time but a way of life that is no more.

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APPENDIX 1

Interview questions for Oral History Project:

Growing Up Jewish in Rural MB and SK

Prepared by Chana Thau, late 2009 to 2010

1. Where would you like to begin? What are your earliest memories?
2. Schooling: What was the highest level you reached? (Were girls treated differently? how?)
3. How did your family observe Jewish customs, laws and religious traditions? (Shabbat, holy days, kashrut)
4. What do you remember about the community at large?
5. How was your mother involved in the general community? Your father?
6. How were you involved in it?
7. Was there a Jewish community in your town? Were your parents involved in it? How?
8. Can you tell me about your Jewish education or schooling?
9. What was it like to be a Jew in that place at that time? (Do you think that living in a small town with an even smaller Jewish community, if any, affected how you thought about yourself as a Jew and how you practised your Judaism? e.g. Did you try to “blend in” more with the non-Jewish community than you might have in a place with a larger Jewish community?)
10. Did you feel more of a need to assert your Jewish identity in certain ways? Can you tell me about this? How do you remember doing this? (If no, what can you tell about this?)
11. Did you have Gentile Friends? If yes, who were they? What kinds of things did you do together?
12. Were there any problems because of the differences in your respective cultures? If no, why not? / If yes, why?
13. What was Christmas like for you? What was Easter like?
14. Did your parents have Gentile friends? Were they invited to Gentiles’ homes?

15. Did you sustain contact/friendships with any of the families or individuals who lived there? In what way (visits, cards/letters, phone)? Why or why not?
16. Were there any instances of anti-Semitism that occurred? Describe.
17. When and why did you leave there? How did you feel about that? (Economic, for kids to meet other Jews, never felt part of the community, sorry to leave but...) Where did you move? (Why)?
18. What was your occupation or business? Was it at all affected by your being a Jew in that place, and if so, how?
19. Tell about your marriage/children. (Leads to genealogy)

