

## **JEWISH EDMONTON STORIES ONLINE**

### INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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The two places that came to my mind - one is the Jewish Community Center that was, and the other is the building that's known as the Chesed Shel Emeth, so it's the building that belongs to the Chevra Kadisha and those are two significant places because of my connection to Temple Beth Ora. So I joined Temple Beth Ora a week after I moved to Edmonton because my cousin's son needed a brit [milah] and I was living in their dining room at the time and they had to join the temple in order to access that resource of the synagogue and so I decided to join as well. So that was in 1987, and so for me the Temple Beth Ora was my Jewish experience, really is, in Edmonton intertwined with Temple Beth Ora.

Intertwined with the Jewish Community Center because that's where it was situated, I initially got involved in communications and coordinated communications committees and then I got drawn into being on the board. I always say I was like on the board for most of my adult life so I started off as I moved into the role of VP administration and then VP ritual and then became president of the synagogue so I got deeper and deeper into it and I spent a lot of my volunteer time in Edmonton, a lot of my volunteer time in Edmonton was being involved with the synagogue.

The space that we used, the Jewish Community Center, was very much a part of the identity of the synagogue and all the stories and associations in those first few years were with that space, where we were a tenant in that building. Lots of different things that went on there, but that space was a shared space as you know, and so the room that was our sanctuary, during the week it was sometimes used for *feldenkrais*, movement therapy classes, and I don't know what else went on there, and then you know on Friday night it was transformed into a sacred space for our congregation. If it became our sanctuary, the same room could take on a very different significance for the people who were making use of it.

There was a lot of uncertainty about what would happen with that site for years and years, so we always knew that there was a possibility that we might have to relocate, but I think that Temple Beth Ora was in that building for 25 years. So it was a long association with that building. Knowing that we might have to relocate, Marshall Hundert, who is a developer and very knowledgeable about land and space opportunities, landed on one option which I was thinking about as kind of a "confluence of opportunity". So he knew that the apartment was on the second floor of the Chesed Shel Emeth, where the Chevra Kadisha has their building for funerals. He knew that the second floor apartment was being rented out to tenants in the community. That apartment is where Les and Mary, the couple that manages the cemetery, actually lived and raised their three children.

The other important piece is that at the cemetery the community had renovated the little chapel, so almost all the funerals were being held in the chapel at the cemetery, and so the sanctuary

[at Chesed Shel Emeth] was only being used a handful of times during the year on average. It was really being used for the “markers of the community” -- not necessarily major figures in the Jewish community, but people where the family thought it was going to attract a lot of people. I have some very specific memories of huge funerals in that building.

So Marshall knew that that apartment was being rented out and that the sanctuary wasn't being used very often. He pictured that the space upstairs could be transformed into being our offices and space for our school, the *Beit Sefer* -- the Sunday school -- and the meetings. The living room, he imagined, could be for the rabbi's office and the administrative person, the bedrooms could become the classrooms and meeting space, and then the kitchen could be renovated. He also had the idea that we could take out the back few pews, the rows of beautiful, wooden pews and put them into storage, and then we would have a social hall at the back of the sanctuary. So that, for myself and for a number of people, the idea of using that space as a sanctuary in particular was hard to get our heads around because it was a place that had only the saddest of memories, the biggest funerals. There was one for Alan Stein, who did a CBC broadcast. Another one was for Earl Klein who died at 33, and I was very good friends with his former wife. He had young kids and he had a brain aneurysm when he was on a tour as an actor. The sanctuary was full of people who were sad and so it was a place that only had memories of sadness, mourning, and loss. The notion that we would use this space for other purposes was really hard to picture, but one of the thoughts that helped me was thinking about smaller Jewish communities that don't have separate buildings for funerals and for congregations. Where all those life cycle events take place in the same space, so I think it was like starting to put a crack in that shield of protection of thinking that we couldn't possibly use this space for that purpose. So that decision was made that we would make the move there and Marshall almost single-handedly did the renovations upstairs. He negotiated the terms of the lease so the move from the Jewish Community Center to the building downtown was on a particular day.

We actually did different things to make that an important move, so on a particular day we had a plan to walk the Torah scrolls from the Jewish Community Center to the Chesed Shel Emeth. We had arranged for people to handle different segments of that walk from the west end to downtown. I think Felix Friedman was the president of time and I think he walked the whole distance. We had our last service at the Jewish Community Center, walked the Torah scrolls, and then had our first service at the Chesed Shel Emeth downtown. So that was how we marked that occasion. We actually have, since then, had a couple of other occasions so we had an event that we called the *Chanukat Bayit*, the dedication of our new home. We invited the whole community for that and then later on we had a “rededication” of the stained glass windows that Vivian Manasc and her father had designed and created. So we had a special event to rededicate those stained glass windows which now sit at the back of the sanctuary. So those are some ways in which we marked that transition to give it meaning.

The first transformative moment I had was seeing Sarah and David Feldman's professional wedding photos. Theirs was the first wedding that took place in that building. That was led by Rabbi Carmit Harari and it was really an odd feeling because it was with this oxymoron of these beautiful photos and this happy occasion happening in that space. Their photos were just

beautiful and it just put a different light on that building. Then came a baby naming and the first Bar or Bat Mitzvah and gradually it felt like we had a chance to lay down new memories for that space. I think we started to fill it with music -- I was part of *Chavurat Hashir*, the group that was leading music, laughter, sadness, and holiday celebrations. Other people in the broader Jewish community came and they started to have different experiences. So, vicariously, you start to take the feelings that they were conveying, and I think it was that laying down of new memories was a really significant part of embracing that space. The other thing I just want to mention is that I think that Temple Beth Ora, for 25 years was a tenant in a recreation center and then we became a tenant in one of the most central institutions in the Jewish community. In a place that so many people have some connection to and we were in the center of the city. For me, having never lived in the west end, it felt like we were now in some ways legitimized as being now part of, connected, associated with a major institution. That felt different -- I mean my own feeling about being a member of the temple didn't change, but I felt like our place physically and kind of psychologically in the community had shifted by virtue of that move.

So we traded off a beautiful view out of those panoramic windows of the river valley. Each time it was a very contemplative view outside of our sanctuary at the JCC and we traded that off for a beautiful sanctuary in the building downtown. For quite a while, we kept calling it the Chesed Shel Emeth and at a certain point, someone said "we don't have to call it that, it is our synagogue." We put our sign on the outside and, for us, that *is* Temple Beth Ora. It was interesting to sort of see that transformation of feeling like this is our place now. It is a shared place for sure, but it is *our* synagogue.

Hello Deli, that's one that I do miss. There aren't truly places where people come and sit down and enjoy Jewish food together -- we really don't have that kind of place anymore. Because I didn't live in the west end, bakeries and things like that didn't have that much of a role in my experience. Hello Deli really stood out as just a place where it felt good. Having lived in Toronto for a number of years, maybe it gave me a little feeling of that association of places you would go and feel that connection because of food.