

JEWISH EDMONTON STORIES ONLINE

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Debby Shoctor - Beth Israel Synagogue

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I worked as the archivist for the Jewish Archives and Historical Society of Edmonton and Northern Alberta for 14 years so I did a lot of work with them on the Jewish history of the city. Some of that involved work with particular historical places. I was also president of the Archive Society of Alberta for five years, so I got involved primarily with the old synagogue, the original synagogue on 95th street and Rowland Road. We were, for a while, looking into maybe purchasing that back from the Catholic Church, because it is currently a Catholic church, and turning it into a museum. Barry Zalmanowitz and I got involved with that a few years ago and we had talks with them because they had said, at that time, that they were gonna close it down as a Catholic church. So we thought, well maybe we should get it back for the community and use it as a museum, but they haven't done that yet, so it's still functioning as Saint Boniface Catholic Church. When the community sold it back in the, I think it was the 50s I believe, when they built the Beth Israel synagogue which was on about 116th Street. They sold it originally to the Dutch Reformed Church, the First Dutch Reformed Church, and then they sold it to the Catholic Church. We interviewed people from the Dutch Reformed Church and from the Catholic Church and we went on a tour of the building, which was really interesting. We also employed David Murray, a local architect who does a lot of historical renovation. So we employed him to do a feasibility study on the building to see how feasible it would be to restore it to its original condition. That was really interesting, but since then, we've been just waiting to see what will happen with that building -- if the church wants to sell it. If they want to sell it to us, if we could get some grant money to restore it etc etc.

We did a lot of research on it. We interviewed a lot of people who remembered going there when they were young, including my husband's parents, which was interesting, as well as people like Mr. Mickelson used to live next door, and Arthur Hillier, who lived down the street. The whole Jewish community lived on that street, basically on 95th street. That building was built in about 1912, and we have pictures in the archives of when it was built. The first members of the community congregating, we even have a videotape which we've converted, of someone's wedding that took place there. So it's a very interesting building, and it was the nexus of the whole Jewish community in the early days. Of course, the first Jew came to Edmonton, Abe Crystal in 1893, but the community had to grow a bit and they had to get some money together. He donated the land, looking for that building before it was built in 1912. That served the community for many years, probably about four or five decades.

The second Beth Israel Synagogue was just around 100th Avenue and 116th Street and then eventually they sold that building about 20 years ago. I don't know, I don't have the figures in front of me, but they sold that building and then they moved and they built the present building in Wolf Willow. So that building also has a lot of memories for me when I first moved here and got married. We were members of that synagogue and we used to go there on high holidays and I remember -- you know when there's the break in the services at Yizkor, we would go over

to the Beth Shalom, which was a couple blocks away and visit with people there, outside and then go back. That was a great building too, you know a lot of memories, a lot of people who are no longer with us used to go there.

My husband's father and grandfather helped build that synagogue as well as the grandfather helped build the first synagogue, Morris Shoctor, down on 95th Street. Then when they sold that building and then they moved over to the one in Wolf Willow, my father-in-law was on the committee to build that one and designed it as well. So we were very involved in that and I remember being at the groundbreaking ceremony for that and special occasions that we had there. Like I remember the 100th anniversary of the community that we held at the Beth Israel Synagogue in Wolf Willow and we did a full display and historical display of photographs that's still on the wall there, so that was very meaningful for me. I think the original Beth Israel Synagogue is the oldest synagogue still standing west of Winnipeg. The only older one is the one in Victoria, Temple Emmanuel, but that is on the island so it's a little bit different. Because it's brick, it's very solidly built and very little has changed since it was built. They built a kind of addition on the back for the priest to live in, there's like a little apartment there, but when you go inside there not much has changed from the original configuration. So I think that building could be restored as a museum and I think that would be nice because Edmonton tends to tear down its historic buildings, which is very sad, and people are always complaining about that. I hate to see that happen and I would hate to see it be developed for a commercial site, like apartments or something like that. We need these historic buildings and it's a very small piece of land, so I don't think it would be good for anything like an apartment building or a condo building. I would really love to see that preserved.

When they sold the second Beth Israel building, the one on 116th Street I think it is, the fellow who bought it invited us over there after he renovated it. That was really interesting because he's renovated it into a single family home and it's quite unusual. He did it all himself and in the basement he has a mini golf course and on the first floor there's a bowling alley and there's kind of like a disco and a movie theater in the main area. He's turned a third floor and made apartments at all the corners, so it's quite interesting to drive by there and see what people do with buildings like that. The last Beth Israel building has very interesting architecture. It was designed by the Manasc Isaac Architects and my father-in-law wanted it to be built kind of like a theater, he built the Citadel Theater as well, so that's the style of it. It's kind of a thrust stage, so everybody sits around, it's raked, and people can see what's going on. There's some other interesting touches in that building -- Roy Ledbetter did some of the sculptural work, as did Ivan Clark on the *Aron HaKodesh*, also the metal work and on the door handles and elsewhere so that's interesting as well.