

JEWISH EDMONTON STORIES ONLINE

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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My father was an observant Jew as best he could be and felt that his two daughters, well more particularly, he felt that his youngest son, me, should have a Jewish education more than he could provide than in Roblin [Manitoba] where there were about 100 Jewish families. So we moved to Edmonton when I was in about grade five. I couldn't go to Talmud Torah at that time because I hadn't started with my contemporaries. In those days they had night classes and I wasn't even equipped for the night classes yet. The night class teacher was a man by the name of Charles Koliger, Mr. Koliger, a delightful fellow, who I, in later years, learned to respect and reflectively enjoy, but I can't say I embraced him with enthusiasm as a youngster. Because I was obliged by my father to attend the private lessons which would enable me or equip me to go to the night classes that would enable me to go to Talmud Torah. None of us in the night classes really were very attentive to our studies, we were young and wanted to play, but that's why we came to Edmonton. My father sold a successful business to make the move and became a wholesale dry goods man in Edmonton. He purchased a business called Bond Dry Goods Limited from a Jewish man in Edmonton by the name of Mr. Jake Samuels. Then his entrepreneurial skills kicked in and, in addition to being a dry goods wholesaler here, he became interested in real estate and property. Having said that, he was a very active member of Beth Israel Synagogue and the Masonic Lodge. I followed in his footsteps into the Beth Israel family of synagogues but never joined the Masons.

That's interesting, my Bar Mitzvah was held at the old synagogue on 95th Street and I remember it well. I remember the party we had at our homes, Bar Mitzvah celebrations were a little more modest in those days. It was a lovely event, I know it pleased my parents to equip me to become a Bar Mitzvah. In addition, visiting with Charlie Koliger who went into business incidentally and opened a frozen meat business very successfully. But it also gave birth to his nickname amongst some of us -- we called him "Frozen Charlie", not to his face of course. We had a wonderful rabbi in those days in Edmonton, Rabbi Postone. My father was less than pleased with the lack

of religiosity that the more secular study at the Talmud Torah presented, so he sent me to have lessons with Rabbi Postone twice a week. At the time I was a little resentful of having to take away play time for study time, but as the years followed I came to appreciate enormously the wisdom and the affection not only that I had for Rabbi Postone, but that many of my peers had for him. I don't know if you're aware that Rabbi Postone was, in football terms, a "triple threat" -- not only was he a rabbi, and could *daven* beautifully, but he was a shochet, and also a mohel. So almost without exception, my contemporaries had been subject to his ministrations at *Brit Milah* though I missed out on that from him (I had elsewhere). We were all very fond of him. He was wise, gentle, and a wonderful rabbi. I still consider him retrospectively as my *rebbe*. Our night classes at Talmud Torah at that time, I think it was 103rd Street, just off Jasper Avenue. That was also the home of and the beginning of my involvement with the Jewish community. It housed the various youth Jewish organizations such as Young Judaea and eventually AZA (I don't think they spent much time meeting there). Certainly Young Judaea spent a lot of time there. It was a building that was much used. It had a huge second floor and one of my early memories is the celebration and large meeting that was held there in 1948 when Israel was declared a state. Then the school moved to its new location and that's where my children attended.

It's interesting because we were members and the new Beth Israel was built on 119th Street and again, Rabbi Postone held classes there. I don't know if we had a junior congregation -- the junior congregation was held on 103rd Street at the old Talmud Torah building and Rabbi Postone prepared many of us to *daven*. His word was "This week you'll be the *shliach tzibbur*" -- the leader of the congregation, and we had to do *shachris* and then we went on to learn. Subsequently, we moved to the new synagogue. As a youngster we had Sunday morning *tallis* and *tefillin* clubs. I can still hear and see the deliberate cadence of Rabbi Postone leading us in the prayers so that we would learn them with him and be able to memorize them or say them with cadence and deliberation. All my friends were there: David Grossman, now gone; Aaron Shtabsky, now gone; my venerated friend, Ron Bercov; Ed Pakes, who's still alive ministering to the needy and in Toronto; Jack Cohen; we had a whole cadre of people.

The other building that I should mention is Beth Shalom, the building on 119th Street. When it was first built, the community contributed to it, even members of Beth Israel -- my father contributed, my wife's father, Abraham Estrin, was a contributor. Many, many people contributed because they held out that it would be a location where we could meet and play, which we did. AZA [BBYO] used to have its meetings there and they had a gymnasium on the second floor. As a grade eight, grade nine, great ten, we played basketball and it was a wonderful time in Edmonton because there was less abrasiveness between synagogue affiliation and more unity amongst young people as being just members of the community that could hang out together and play.

I suppose I wasn't a part of the Federation when the location was purchased overlooking the River Valley, but I was asked to be the first President of the Edmonton Jewish Federation when they emerged from the Community Council, as the spending element and United Jewish Appeal, the collecting element. That merger once again required some stick handling skill in terms of bringing the two facets under one roof, the spenders and the gatherers, so to speak. Over those years I used to take a different role because originally, I was an advocate for the Talmud Torah to receive funding from the United Jewish Appeal. Afterwards this new Federation set up had to adjudicate on applicants seeking funds.

There are other buildings as well we could spend a little time on: the 95th Street building which apparently has had a number of renovations that became a Catholic church. As I understand it there's rumblings that it might be available to become some sort of archival location and I'm hoping that it will. One of the great moves in Edmonton was the building and the creation of the new Talmud Torah which I believe was built in about 1999. At the same time that we were building the new shul in the West End there's a bit of an unsung hero involved in Edmonton, perhaps a controversial figure but one who has done some essentially good things. His name is Barry Slawsky and he almost single-handedly took on the fundraising role to establish a new Talmud Torah school and he with his then-wife Cheryl were very, very instrumental in organizing a cadre of people that moved heaven and earth to get enough private funding to put this school together. Kudos to them because the school itself is beautiful and it's a wonderful location. On a personal note, of course you're speaking to me, my family contributed to this

school building project as did the family of my wife, as well as hundreds of others in greater or lesser degrees. What's interesting to me is the fact that the land and that building belong to the Talmud Torah Society. It was purchased through negotiations by Barry Slawsky and from the school board and does not belong to them. That seems to be a thread that we have in Edmonton, hardcore capital places that we built and that have been created by public contributions remain. So hopefully as time changes in our community as it demographically shrinks with the inevitable ebb and flow of population trends in Canadian communities. Edmonton seems to be on a bit of a wane right now but there are great opportunities for young people to move to this great city. We do have a Jewish community that can be made as vibrant as the members of the community want it to be and the city itself has the opportunities that make life here quite pleasant, and I might say, affordable. When I hear about the cost of tuitions in major cities like Toronto and Montreal and reflect on tuition costs at our Talmud Torah which are significant for an age group of parents that have children here, our parents in Edmonton are blessed with the situation of being a member of the Edmonton Public School Board and having defrayed ever so much of the possible in that context. I just have one general observation, again in that context, Edmonton has nurtured me in terms of being a young man involved in Jewish organizations where I learned and had the opportunity to chair meetings and to see how organizations run. It served me personally in good stead. As a high school student, a few of the Jewish community attended Victoria Composite High School as a brand new school as opposed to Westglen High School where most of our Jewish youngsters took their secondary education, notwithstanding the small number of Jewish students at Victoria Composite High School which was a veritable melting pot at that. In the '50s as a brand new school I became school president of that school and once again, learned to swim in waters that carried diverse interests and a cooperative way of diversity into a cohesiveness that moved forward. That too served me in good stead at the University of Alberta where I studied Political Science and extracurricularly where I was a member of the debating society and the Political Science Club, I think I was president of both of those, as well as other organizations. I remember in 1956 or '57 hearing John Diefenbaker speak for the first time on the Suez Crisis. His voice still resonates in my ears. While I didn't become a member of his party, I did answer the speech from the throne in our Mock Parliament where I was involved, and we changed the name from Mock to Model Parliament. That political involvement moved forward when I graduated from law school and both my wife, who was the real politician in our family, and I

became heavily involved in a variety of public political processes, provincial and federal. We've been recognized so much by the community and we're so grateful to the community. One of the highlights and memories we have is our involvement at the Negev Dinner, it was a grand affair. Important to note as well, in terms of Beth Israel not only was I *Bar Mitzvahed* in Beth Israel but Esther and I were married in the Beth Israel on 119th Street. Each of our children were married in Beth Israel; the two girls married on 119th Street and my son Daniel and Marina were the first marriage to take place at the new Beth Israel Synagogue on Wolf Willow. I think that that's a history for my family worth remembering and certainly makes the facilities of. Since I was *Bar Mitzvahed* at the old 95th Street synagogue, it gives me a really unique connection to those buildings.