

JEWISH EDMONTON STORIES ONLINE

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Howard Starkman: Misericordia Hospital & The Keegstra Affair

June, 2021

I was a board member of the Misericordia Hospital for about 13 years and became a secretary of that board. It's a community hospital and they want to do new buildings now [again]. Back in the '80s I think, I became chairman of that. I was the first chairman of their foundation and Marvin Weisler was involved in that and other doctors as well, but it was not necessarily doctors involved. The point was to raise money to build a renovation that is now becoming in need of further renovations. We raised 21 million dollars to assist in the building of this expansion to the hospital. It was an exciting time and lo and behold, it became the time that Mr. Klein became Premier of the province. As a result, there was belt tightening and as a further result while the building got to be built, the operating rooms within were held vacant for a period of time because of funding shortages. What goes around comes around; we always seem to be in those cycles.

There's one other location that is of significance in my memory and history as President of the Edmonton Jewish Federation. I think the most challenging job I had was to deal with the then infamous Keegstra case. That case ultimately went to the Supreme Court of Canada, I think in 1990. Prior to that, it came to the attention of the Jewish community that a teacher in a small town called Eckville, Alberta (I think he was also the mayor) was a Holocaust denier firstly, and teaching Jewish conspiracy theories emanating out of the Elders of Zion Protocols. It was brought to the school board's attention by a non-Jewish parent whose child was in grade 12. Well, this created a stir, because the Ontario folks had a problem with a similar hate advocate by the name of [Ernst] Zundel. We had Keegstra, and so our efforts during one or two terms of my office was to coordinate an effort to deal with this man. So in terms of the Jewish community, we held a number of meetings: the important thing we thought to do was to get the then Premier of Alberta, Peter Lougheed, to make a declaration in the Legislative Assembly disassociating right-thinking Albertans from hate. Well easier said than done. Eventually we held a meeting hosted by Premier Lougheed at Government House. An enormous and diverse segment of the organized Jewish community through representatives coalesced at a meeting at

the boardroom, I think it was the Shocter law firm boardroom. It was overflowing and we had a consensus to meet with Premier Lougheed to express our concern about this hate-filled diatribe that was being passed on as free speech by a teacher in an Alberta classroom. Well it was an extraordinary meeting of people of diverse backgrounds and interests, and we determined that we were able to get a meeting with Peter Lougheed who hosted the meeting at Government House. We attended there and for many of us, it was a first time personal meeting with the Premier of Alberta. He indicated that he would indeed make a statement in the House. We agreed that our advocate or our spokesperson would be the venerated Joe Shocter. He spoke very well and we had members of the courts in attendance, as well as members from all facets of the religious spectrum in Edmonton attending, and representatives of all organized Jewish organizations in attendance. Indeed, Mr. Lougheed came through and made a wonderful statement in the Legislative Assembly that gave comfort to us. I think it ultimately led to legislation that added penalties to hate crimes in Alberta. The case became a very famous case and went on to the Supreme Court of Canada. Rather disappointingly, the decision upholding the application of the Charter that there are limitations to speech in the Charter, and while the Charter was sustained, you couldn't spout, espouse, and talk about hateful things to an identifiable group -- it's an interesting decision.