

JEWISH EDMONTON STORIES ONLINE

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Esther Starkman - Biography

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My roots with the City of Edmonton's synagogues are long and deep. My paternal grandfather, Solomon Estrin, was the “sexton” or the *shammash* of the old Beth Israel synagogue on 95th Street. He did that in about the 1920s and his primarily religious duties made it the job of his dreams. When they sold the homestead and came into Calgary, it was very difficult for him to get a job because he wouldn't work on *Shabbat*. When he got this job in Edmonton, it was amazing. From the information I've gleaned from his obituary, written by Mr. Jacob Baltzan, he was fulfilled and happy in that position until his death in 1932. Actually in the written material, it was apparently the largest Jewish funeral of that time. Solomon was beloved and respected for his knowledge of Torah and for his people skills. Our grandfather Solomon bought a small two-story house next to the synagogue on 95th Street. I have a copy of the invitation for my parents' wedding which took place at that synagogue on July 5th, 1925 at 5 pm 101110 95th Street, and the reception following at 9510101 Street or Avenue (I'm not sure which one it is today).

My siblings, three of them, were born and lived in that house along with our grandparents until 1939 when the house was sold. The family moved three miles west to 122nd Street, which was then the “new West End”. It was a better house, a better neighborhood, and a more affluent lifestyle. Lots of Jewish families moved to that area from the East End and we were surrounded in our neighborhood by, if I recollect correctly, the Superstein family, the Taradish family, the Ritches, the Shtabskys, Dr. Shlain and his mother, and on and on. I personally was born on January 7th, 1940 and was transported to that home on 122nd Street. It was a small-ish two-story yellow stucco house and it was in the location where Paul Kane Park is today. The corner was Christ Church, where I attended Brownies, and one block away was Robertson Church, so you can identify it. Our house was also in proximity to what was going to be the “new” Beth Israel synagogue on 119th Street, but it hadn't been built yet. It was also close to the Glenora Figure Skating Club on 120th Street where I spent every day after school doing figure eights and three jumps trying to improve. I think I was then in grade six and seven at Oliver School. On the same

street, on 120th Street, was the Glenora Figure Skating Club and next to it was the Royal Curling Club. They actually merged and became the Royal Glenora Club, which is in our River Valley today and where Howard and I have membership and enjoyed a lot of athletic activities with our children in the coming years. I do have a few memories of the old Beth Israel on 95th Street: one memory is of my mother, Rebecca [Becky], and I climbing the stairs to sit in the balcony with the other ladies where we could throw candies at the Bar Mitzvah boys below. I also have a memory of standing with my father close to the front of the synagogue underneath the balcony and he was holding my hand. I was surrounded by lots of elderly men with *tallesim* on and one of which I think was Mr. Nelson, who was then the *shammash* of the shul on 95th Street. In that front corner there were benches and you lifted up. almost like a shelf, it was on a hinge and underneath that hinged piece were the *siddurim* and the *tallesim*. That's how they were stored then and those are my memories of that synagogue, even though I was a very small girl at the time.

In the early 50s, our parents moved again to the “new West End” and their new home was at 13822 Ravine Drive and they designed and built that home. They were not the only ones -- all of those people mentioned before all moved to the “new West End” again. We were surrounded again by many people: the Rollingers, the Bernsteins, the Laskins, the Pekarskys. So many people bought homes in that area at that time. I guess when we moved I was in grade eight and I was enrolled at the new Westminster Junior High School. When I went there, I have to say I loved the school, I loved my teachers, I loved my classmates, and I think it was there, I believe, that I learned to love school. My destiny was set -- it was going to be education and ultimately, teaching. Westminster at that point had been open for about a year, and I was tasked with writing the school constitution for Westminster School. Well the good news was that I had a brother, Saul, who was then enrolled in law school at the University of Alberta. Together we produced the constitution. Much later in life, well not so much later, I returned to that school, Westminster and I was a teacher there of Drama and English. One of my star students in Drama was Fred Singer. I enjoyed my time there, really enjoyed. My children were junior high age and it was just a pleasure to teach junior high students then. Much, much later our granddaughters Molly and Hannah picked Westminster as their school of choice for junior high school, so it does have meaning for us.

I mentioned the store and I think that's kind of interesting and that you might like to hear about that. When I said that my dad worked six days a week, he owned one of the wooden stores on 101st Street between the King George Hotel and the CN tracks. That stretch had a multitude of Jewish men selling goods, from fur and hides to hardware, all along that strip. My father's store was called the Standard Exchange and the sign above it read "we buy and sell anything of value". After many years of making a very nice living there he replaced his wooden store with a smart new brick structure. He sold that building at 10235-37 101st Street to a developer who was developing the Four Seasons Hotel, which is now the Sandman where Chops is located. I've actually got the cornerstone of that building in my garden.

I'm going to go back a little and transition from that Westminster school that I told you about. When it was time for me to go to high school most of the Jewish kids went to Westglen High School. Very few went to other schools, a couple did, but Westglen was the key place for Jewish kids. It turned out that Westglen was way overcrowded and they were going to build the school Ross Sheppard then. In the interim a certain group of young people were asked to go to Victoria Composite High School and I was designated as having lived in the area which would go to Vic. It was the newest and largest high school. It was called Vic Composite then because it had a big academic building in the front and at the back, were tons of buildings where they provided education in the trades. You could study plumbing there, you could study any of the trades, and so it was really a huge school. Anyway, I was in the academic section and I came in and I spotted an individual. At that point I thought to myself "I think this guy (who was then the president of Vic) is going to be my life companion". Sure enough, it was Howard Starkman and he did become my life companion. Some years later I returned to Victoria School and I taught there. I was an English teacher there. Then a third reiteration, I actually came back to Victoria School in Continuing Education. It's interesting to note that the old Vic School, the predecessor of this giant composite school, educated most of the children of the Jewish families from the East End. That's the school that Joseph Shoctor, who founded the Citadel, went to, that's the school that Arthur Hiller, the famous director, went to, and so it does have a huge history for our Jewish families and for the city of Edmonton.

My first teaching position was at Queen Elizabeth High School where I taught English and Drama. That first year I had grade twelve students who were almost as old as I was, and certainly larger and very much taller, even when I wore my three-inch heels, which in those days teachers wore, believe it or not. We produced our first year play which was “Arsenic and Old Lace” and my then fiance Howard sold out the house to everyone he knew, his relatives, his friends, other articling students, other lawyers, and we jam-packed the place.

At that school where I taught, Queen Elizabeth High School, I first met and worked with Mr. Michael Strembitsky and he went on to become the superintendent of Edmonton Public Schools. He was superintendent during my tenure as school trustee. If we're talking buildings, one of the buildings that means part of my essence and part of my being and where I reinforce my support for excellence in public education, is the big blue building on Kingsway in 101st Street.

I have to say that I believe strongly in a high quality public education system based on fairness, inclusiveness, accessibility, fiscal accountability, and a commitment to excellence for all students. I was really thrilled to be elected to serve on the public school board for two terms and part of that as board chair. So needless to say, that blue building became a home to me every Tuesday night, and sometimes more often, for about eight years. So it's a place of quiet, it's a place of intelligence, it's a place that I like to come to, and even now, I've been privileged to work on a diversity day conference for youth. I come back to that building to work with some of the staff and I'm always pleased to be there.

I was a teacher for over 30 years, but in 1975 I took a little bit of a slight career change. I went into Continuing Education teaching adult upgrading first at Vic and later at Alberta Vocational College, now Norquest. What is adult education? Well at the beginning, when I worked in those two places, we were adapting high school courses for adults. You can't teach the same literature and you can't have the same stories or perspective for adults that you have for young students, so that was our challenge. AVC, as it was known, was located on 108th Street and 102nd Avenue, it's still there but it's greatly expanded. They have almost taken over all of 108th Street between 102nd and 103rd Avenues. It was a return to a downtown school from the old Talmud Torah to AVC where I worked for more than 15 years.

It might interest you to note that Alberta Vocational College was established for army veterans who came back and wished to have some retraining. That was the beginning of that school and it subsequently has maintained its main purpose of retraining, but of course has added things since that time. I had fun there. I did teach some regular classes teaching English to the equivalent of grades 11 and 12. I also did some Continuing Education in the sense that I developed an English program for Russian physicians. They were young kids in their 20s who were already accepted at a medical school in Canada and we worked for the improvement of their language skills before they went to Dalhousie to take their medical training. I also did, which was kind of ahead of its time, I created and managed a cross-cultural training program with an Aboriginal focus for a power company. We were teaching them how to deal with their customers when they went out to deal with power issues.

In 1989, I was elected as a public school trustee. In the fall, when civic elections are on and sometime late September, just after the election, I was called into my senior supervisor at the college. I thought I had really done something wrong and that I was in trouble but it turned out that he asked me, now that I was an elected school trustee, if I could coordinate an initiative for literacy. He had been involved in an adult literacy group, along with a chap from Edmonton Catholic Schools and they wanted to have a major bang-up initiative because 1990 was declared the International Year of Literacy by the United Nations. There's been another one since, but that was the one. So he said "because you're a trustee, maybe you can get Edmonton Public Schools involved and we can do something". My answer to him was that I didn't want to do any fundraising, but would be happy to do other things. I went back to my school board people and actually the idea caught fire. This was the first initiative and the only initiative, really, for school children to hold hands with adults and to preach literacy. It had always been adult illiteracy and the schools looked after literacy, because that's what schools are about. The project started with Alberta Vocational College, Edmonton Public Schools, and Edmonton Catholic Schools, probably the first time they joined hands to do anything of this nature. There was no cost -- everything was done by the personnel of those three organizations. In those years AVC had a printing shop and we did the print there. It came into being, some time later we were joined by the Edmonton Public Library, by Grant MacEwan College, by the University of Alberta, by the Francophone School District, and one year even by the Royal Bank. It became a weekly annual

celebration of literacy. So every year, the first week in October, schools throughout the city (Public, Catholic, Francophone) celebrate Read In Week.

Read In, which I was lucky enough to create and share and participate in over the years, is a city-wide initiative which raises public awareness for literacy and its important role in the success of individuals and communities. The event is an annual week-long celebration during the first week in October, There's usually about a hundred thousand students and volunteers reading in schools, libraries, and other public places. One year, we bungee jumped for Read In, one year we did poetry at an Edmonton Eskimos football game, and we had an opening at the beginning of the week and a closing at the end of the week. In more than 75% of the times over the years, the Minister of Education would come. People just loved reading and they loved to participate. It was a great opportunity for adults who hadn't been to school for a long time to come into a school, to talk to the kids, read them stories, and get feedback from the kids. It is great for the kids to find out what they do in real life and how important literacy is for them. I was very fortunate to be in attendance and to participate in 2019 when we had a huge celebration for the 30th anniversary of Read In, in the public school which bears my name. I have to say, there are not many initiatives which last, now, 32 years -- it's been a long run for Read In.

In 1996, you may find this interesting, I was honored to be named ship sponsor of HMCS Edmonton. I had the great thrill of cracking a champagne bottle to launch the ship in Halifax and then the next summer, to commission the ship in Esquimalt, BC at the other coast. I believe that I'm the only Jewish person to have launched a Canadian naval vessel. The ship is an adjunct to the City of Edmonton and proudly represents our city wherever it sails. If you don't get out to the West Coast to see the HMCS Edmonton in dock, you can go to City Hall here and you can see a perfect two-scale model of it done the year that it was commissioned. It was flattering to me and it was exciting that some of the sailors from the HMCS Edmonton were so inspired by Read In -- one captain whose wife was a teacher, decided to have a Read In at her school and the winners who read a certain number of lines and books were invited to be take a trip on the HMCS Edmonton to have a scavenger hunt there. Another year, the sailors who always donate a certain amount to charity, took their money and three sailors came to Edmonton and spoke to the kids at

Read In. Then donated x number of books to the Read In, so it was really very interesting to have those two initiatives cross paths.

I guess it's no secret to say that not only my vocation but my passion in life was and continues to be education. The old mantra “free education with the addition of excellence” remains part of my advocacy. When I'm privileged to speak to the young sailors at Esquimalt, I advocate for and reflect on the benefits of life-long learning, which they're doing as they man these ships. Our children's future and, indeed, our country's future is dependent on the fundamental core value endorsed by so many and certainly by so many of our Jewish faith. We are called the People of the Book. Following my years as a public school trustee and chair of the board, I'm so humbled and appreciative to have my name associated with a very successful K-9 public school in Terwillegar. It was opened in 2010. The Esther Starkman School may pay tribute to me on a personal level, but it should be noted that it reflects as well the inclusiveness of our community of Edmonton, inasmuch as I am identified as Jewish by faith. Thank you.