

JEWISH EDMONTON STORIES ONLINE

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Howard Starkman: Talmud Torah President

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That's a very telling and interesting story. Alberta was one of the few provinces that supported independent schools with financing and, in fact, they had an association called the Independent School Association. Independent schools at that time, initially under the Social Credit government, received about 70 percent of the funding that the public school received. The Talmud Torah was a member of that association and I was a board member of that association, which became interested in independent schools. The cost of the school and the cost of maintaining the school and paying teachers became very much an issue for the then board and it was my term, while I was serving as president, that we explored the possibility of becoming a "program" as they called it under the public school umbrella. That was facilitated and basically conceptualized by the then superintendent of schools, Mike Strembitsky, a giant in education. He felt that there was no reason why schools of diversity couldn't fit under the umbrella of a public system and so we were the first to explore and invited to attend. We attended many meetings and there were wonderful board members that were involved in this entire process, but it wasn't without opposition. The group that opposed giving up the independence of the school was led by a most formidable member, a senior and respected member of the community, Alderman Dr. Morris Weinlos. I don't know at whose behest or if it was his idea, but anyway, he mounted a challenge to this whole process. As a result, a huge community meeting was held, I think, in the boardroom of the Talmud Torah school, which was located near the road bridge, I think 132nd Street. I think to this day, it was probably the largest attended meeting in the city. I was privileged to chair that meeting and to try to hold the diverse arguments in favor or against this acceptance of this opportunity to join the Edmonton Public School system -- together with the arguments back and forth and finally a compromise was put forward and accepted. The compromise was that we would caveat our school: we would not sell the school, the physical school, to the school board. We would continue ownership of it, lest we get cut out or we decided to cut out. A key question was would they interfere with the Judaic study or not? They assured us they wouldn't, then of course we became a member of that system. Then we had to sell the concept to the then school board and we attended two or three meetings in that context. It was not entirely easy but the school board accepted us and this became the precursor of a multitude of independent schools that followed us into the umbrella of the public school system. It's interesting to note that not against, again amongst those who were opposed we had some formidable opposition. There was a member of the Legislative Assembly out of Calgary, Sheldon Chumir I think was his name, and he felt that the Talmud Torah should not be funded with public funds. He was against the process in Calgary but wisely, Calgary found a way around the process and associated themselves with a separate school board in Calgary. They became a program there under the separate school board, the Roman Catholic school board, while we remain with the public system. I think it's worked out over the years, certainly to save thousands and thousands and thousands of dollars for our parents who sent children to the school.