

TRANSCRIPT

JEWISH EDMONTON STORIES ONLINE:

Person: Lewis & Freya Wasel

We've been here together for 24 years. *(Did you come here together?)* Yeah *(And where are you from originally?)* We came from Winnipeg and that's where Frey is originally from. I'm originally from Saskatchewan. *(And what brought you to Edmonton?)* Oh, something very special brought us to Edmonton: the birth of our first granddaughter, Aliza Asbell and she was born on July 4th 2000. We arrived here 2 days before on July 2nd 2000. Oh we were very definite that we were no longer going to be in Winnipeg when our granddaughter was here. We needed to be with her.

Well the Beth Israel Synagogue is one for sure, absolutely that's like our home. We became members of that synagogue shortly after moving here and there's other institutions too, Jewish Family Services, the Jewish Drop-in Centre, yes the JCC, yes. *(You're talking about the original one in the Hillcrest location?)* Correct, yes we used to go there very often. We take the kids there, the grandkids there. We go play sports, just hang out, and visit. The day camps were held there. So we do miss that place, and we've also attended Chabad sometimes and we have friends at Beth Shalom and Temple Beth Ora, so we've attended there as visitors.

(But you mentioned you're members of Beth Israel, what are some of the things you've been involved with at Beth Israel?) Well, I was a vice president for a couple years and I was Gabbai there for eight years. And I'm a number one volunteer. I've done many projects around the synagogue, especially that display in the foyer I shared that 100 years of Beth Israel in Edmonton -anything that needed done I would be there volunteering and when we've had functions there I've decorated the hall, prepared food, welcomed people, and I was a board member at the Beth Israel. I'm retired now from the board.

(The location of Beth Israel, has it mostly been the one in Westridge or were you involved when it was still downtown?) The present location opened two months before we moved here. But that's an interesting question because our son and daughter-in-law were married in the old Beth Israel on 119th, in -Lewis what was it 1999? Correct. Right, our children both lived here for 5 years before we came to move here. So they were both married in Edmonton. I worked for the Law Society for 16 years, so my place of employment was important to me, and I curl, so curling clubs are important to me.

(Any particular one specifically?) Well I curled at the Crestwood Club and then the Saville Centre and I curl in the Lawyers League at the Granite Curling Club, and I'm a member of the Edmonton Bridge Centre. So I play bridge there. And when Lewis and I moved here, I was the nanny to our grandchildren. So what was important to me were places that I could take them and we could have fun, for instance the West Edmonton Mall Galaxyland or the play areas, you know I just forget all their names now, but the standalone climbing structures and things like that and, yeah so I would say that was really important when we first came here.

Places where we could take the grandkids and entertain them. I could add that when we moved here we also moved my mother here from Winnipeg and she lived at first in Canterbury Court, and then in the Allen Gray Care Centre in Mill Woods. My mother was here for seven years. She passed away in 2007.

Jewish Family Service: when we were fairly new here, maybe I was here a couple years, I was sitting in my office one day and I received a phone call from Ronda Adelman of Jewish Family Services asking if she could arrange to have meals on wheels sent to my mother and that really touched my heart. A couple years later Rabbi Freedman who was active with Jewish Family Services was going to become the President, asked me if I could become the Vice President, which I did and then eventually I became President and it does very important work. So that's why I was involved with Jewish Family Services. *(Do you remember what year you were President, approximately?)* Yeah I think it was about 2009 to 2011, somewhere in that range.

When I first came here, I was looking for a social outlet and so I hooked up with Hadassah and I met so many wonderful women, and they became some of my very very good friends, and, interesting I talked about that photo display in the Beth Israel lobby and it was very soon after we arrived that I received a phone call from, just wait, just wait, Esther Starkman and I didn't know who she was then. She asked me if I would be interested in coming on the Committee planning a big simcha for Beth Israel's 95th anniversary, and you know, having come from Winnipeg and done hundreds and zillions of hours of volunteer work, my head said "no", but my heart said "yes", and so I said "yes" and those people that I worked with getting that simcha together are some of my best friends now. I was so pleased that I followed through on that and I had a very rich...I'm going to say that being together with all my Hadassah buddies really helped me in the transition here, also and you know when we moved here, I know I'm jumping a little, but when we moved here, we found Edmonton so warm and welcoming. When Lewis and I moved here we said, "Oh how are we ever going to make any friends?" You know we left such a rich community in Winnipeg which we loved. But it was so easy. People here were amazing and embraced us.

I connect with that. Yeah, I wanted to add a bit more about the Jewish Drop-In Centre for Seniors. We've been members there for 20 years or more. But for quite a while we weren't active members. But after I completed time on the Board at the Jewish Family Services, I came on board at the Drop-In Centre, and eventually became President of the Centre, and now I'm Past President, and wonderful programming there. I enjoy going there for lunches, and for programs, and meeting people.

One other thing I wanted to add was that we were honoured by the community, particularly by Jewish National Fund in 2019. We were the honourees for the Negev Gala and we're happy to support JNF, and were very flattered by the honour given to us, held at the Fantasyland Hotel. And it was a very special event in our life. I think I will tell you what I'm going to tell you. I am emotional, but we were asked to be the JNF honourees and maybe a couple weeks later I was diagnosed with cancer, and it was a very dark period in my life. But thank God I had that JNF dinner to look forward to because it took my mind off my *tsuris* and it was from a very dark time in my life, it turned out to be one of the most beautiful, wonderful happiest times of my life, that JNF Gala event. So that's what I want to do.

My cousin Leonard Stone played a large role in arranging the entertainment for that event and it really was a highlight. My cousin just passed away a few months ago, lived in Denver, Colorado. But so he did that from there. Well of course he was here for the event, (*and what was the entertainment?*) It wasn't just ordinary entertainment. I'm going to rewind and tell you a bit about Lewis's cousin: for 42 years, he was in symphony management, and he was in some of the top Symphonies in the United States and Canada, and it's really a cute story. When he was in Dallas with the symphony, he organized a fundraiser, and the fundraiser, they had to fundraise mega bucks because they wanted to build a wing on a building or a new building, I just forget what. But he organized that.

President Carter and Rosalynn would come for an evening and that he organized a format that was highly successful, where he sat the former President and first lady in the centre of the room with tables all around and at those tables where people sat who were supporting the event he put six singers and during the dinner, one popped up, sang, sat down, then a short while later another one popped up, sang, and nobody knew where these singers were sitting, and who was going to pop up and what they were going to sing. It was all very exciting and it got rave reviews.

So our cousin Leonard Stone said "Freya, Lewis, I want to do the same for you. He came to Edmonton. He found six singers. He said "Freya, Lewis you're sitting in the middle of the room at the Fantasyland Hotel." No raised platform. You're just going to be like all the other guests and during the dinner we're going to have these singers pop up. Now he created a theme, and the theme was the birth of Israel to present day, and he decided on the six songs that were going to be sung, and it culminated in the singing of "Hallelujah" by Leonard Cohen. Now when people left that dinner, many of them said "wow, I'm so touched, I'm so emotional." I can't describe the feeling in that room from the entertainment that Leonard planted, with something special. And I'd like to add that he arranged this through Sean Sonogo, local member of the community. Sean helped him find those six singers. Yes, that's true.

I played hockey in the Edmonton Jewish Hockey League, until COVID. Then I stopped and I still play baseball in the Edmonton Jewish Baseball League. Yeah you can't play hockey anymore. He gave away his equipment. (*What position did you play?*) Usually left wing. I've done so many things in the last 24 years that I've been here. But as I say in Yiddish, "shein fergessen". She likes to play MahJong. Oh yeah I play MahJong with a group of women. I call that "making my living".