

# A History of Beth Jacob V'Anshe Drildz

*by Howard Markus*

*Assistant Archivist, Ontario Jewish Archives*

The first Jewish immigrants arrived in Toronto in the 1830s. By 1850, there were about 50 Jews living in Toronto and by 1880 the Jewish population had reached about 500. A majority of the early Jewish settlers had emigrated from either Germany or England. They were merchants or professionals and many of them established their businesses along King Street and Yonge Street. The Jewish residential area was at first in the Richmond and York area and later in the Wellesley and Jarvis area.

After the 1880s, the pattern of Jewish immigration changed. With the increase in anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe and the Russian Empire, there was a dramatic increase in the number of Jewish immigrants from those areas. By 1890, the Jewish population of Toronto had jumped to 1,500 and at the turn of the century there were 3,000 Jews living in Toronto. During the next decade, there was an even greater increase in the Jewish population and by 1911 there were 18,000 Jews in Toronto. The majority of the Jewish immigrants who arrived between 1880 and 1905 lived in an area which was north of Queen Street, south of College Street, west of Yonge Street and east of University Avenue.

These Jews established landsmanshaft synagogues and societies (all of the members of a particular synagogue or society were from the same area of Europe). Adath Israel (Roumanian), Beth Jacob (Polish), Shaarei Tzedec (Russian), and Shomrai Shabbath (Galician) were some of the synagogues that were founded during this time period.

Beth Jacob (whose legal name was the Congregation of the Russo Polish Jewish Synagogue of Bais Jakov Anshei Poland) was initially located in rented quarters on Chestnut Street and subsequently on Centre Avenue. In

1905 a building at 17 Elm Street was purchased and renovated for use as a synagogue.

In 1915 the congregation was instrumental in founding a talmud torah. Initially, the classes were held in the Beth Midrash of the Beth Jacob synagogue. Shortly thereafter, the school moved to a house on Chestnut Street and afterwards to a house on Simcoe Street. This talmud torah eventually became known as the Eitz Chaim Talmud Torah and a building on D'Arcy Street was purchased several years later.

By 1915, the Jewish residential area had shifted westwards and the majority of Jews now lived between University Avenue and Bathurst Street. A decision was made to move to a site west of University Avenue and in 1919, the property located at 23 Henry Street was purchased.

The congregation decided to build a new synagogue on the site. They hired Benjamin Brown, who was a graduate of the University of Toronto and had become the first Jewish architect to practice in Toronto, to design the new building. (During his career, Benjamin Brown designed many buildings for the Jewish community including the original Primrose club and the Brunswick Avenue Talmud Torah.)

The synagogue which was built on Henry Street was one of the largest in Toronto. Its sanctuary had a seating capacity of 800 (500 in the men's section and 300 in the women's section). On the balcony, there were paintings of the signs of the Zodiac and on the walls of the men's section there were paintings of scenes in Israel. The Aron Kodesh and the Bimah, which were later moved to the new

synagogue on Overbrook Place, were made of wood and had very intricate carvings.

Above the Aron there was a stained glass window depicting the altar. Above this window there were circular stained glass windows, one for each of the shvatim. Each of these windows had the emblem of one of the shvatim. The central Bimah had a chuppah frame to which lamps were attached. A brass chandelier was hanging from the domed ceiling above the Bimah.

Behind the sanctuary was a Beth Midrash whose length was the entire width of the synagogue. In the back there was a brick succah and an apartment for the shammas. In the basement there was a mikvah and a hall which could hold 500 people. The exterior of the synagogue was Romanesque, an architectural style which was popular in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The walls were of brick and on either side there was a tower which had narrow arched windows. The main entrance to the synaogue had 3 large arched doors. Above the entrance was a large arched stained glass window and the words Beth Knesset Hagadol Beth Yaakov were carved in the stone blocks which formed the arch above the window.

The dedication ceremonies were held on August 20, 1922. An advertisement placed in the Yiddisher Zhurnal proclaimed "the opening of the large, new Beth Jacob synagogue...a day of satisfaction and happiness...all Jews must come". Thousands of people came just to have a look at the magnificent structure and the crowds were so large that the police had to be called to direct traffic. The world renowned chazzan, Yossele Rosenblatt, the synagogue's chazzan, Avraham Sherman and Rabbi Yehuda Leib Graubart participated in the opening ceremonies.

Rabbi Graubart, the chief rabbi of Toronto Polish Jewry, gave the opening address "A synagogue has four essential functions. It is a house of prayer where services are conducted

and it is also a centre where Jews can gather for commual and social celebrations. It must also play a vital role in supporting Jewish educational and welfare institutions and in transmitting Jewish religious values to succeeding generations."

The celebrations continued for the rest of the week Chazzan Rosenblatt remained in Toronto, giving a concert on August 22 and conducting Friday night and Shabbos services in the synagogue on August 25 and 26.

For many years, the Henry Street synagogue was one of the largest orthodox synagogues in Toronto. Many prominent rabbanim gave sermons and many world famous chazanim conducted services and gave concerts in the synagogue. The synagogue served as a focal point not only for its members but also for the Jewish community in general.

Events such as the donation of a Sefer Torah to the synagogue would attract diverse groups within the Jewish community. After the end of the Second World War, the Tepperman family gave a Sefer Torah to Beth Jacob. The Ivansker Mutual Benefit Society placed a notice in the Yiddisher Zhurnal "inviting all members to the simcha of our brother and sister, Mr. and Mrs. Tepperman, who are donating a Sefer Torah to the Beth Jacob synagogue". Synagogue and society members, relatives and friends gathered at their home on Oxford Street. They carried the Sefer Torah under a chuppah to Spadina Avenue and then proceeded along Cecil Street and Henry Street to the synagogue. After they arrived at the synagogue, Rabbi Price delivered a sermon and a sum of \$236.00 was raised for the war effort in Israel.

Students at the University of Toronto were another group within the community who also used the facilities of the Beth Jacob synagogue since it was the closest synagogue to the University of Toronto. During Chol Hamoed Succos students would come to Beth Jacob to eat in the succah.

The synagogue was always seeking to attract new members from the downtown Jewish community, “inviting all unaffiliated families and newly married couples to join a modern and progressive orthodox synagogue”

Beth Jacob was constantly striving to expand its activities, establishing a sisterhood and a brotherhood as well as a young men’s brotherhood. The latter held a weekly Sunday morning breakfast following Shacharit services. Rabbi Burak, who became rabbi in 1962, would usually speak at breakfast however, guest speakers were also invited. The topics included basic values of Judaism, technological advances in Israel and many other subjects, both secular and religious. The young men’s brotherhood also organized special events such as Hannuka and Purim parties for the children.

Until the late 1940s, the majority of Jews lived in the downtown area which had been settled in the early 1900s. However, in the early 1950s they began to move to the suburban areas. Therefore, in the early 1960s a decision was made to sell the Henry Street synagogue and relocate in North York.

In the 1950s, there was no orthodox congregation in the Wilmington and Overbrook area and the closest orthodox minyan was on Sheppard Avenue. The increase in the number of Jews living in this area led to the establishment of the Shaarei Emunah Congregation of Bathurst Manor in order “to provide traditional synagogue services with beauty and dignity for the orthodox community of Bathurst Manor”. Friday night and Shabbos services were held in the home of Rabbi Abraham Parshan who lived at 160 Overbrook Place. In 1962, the property at 139 Overbrook Place was purchased and construction of a synagogue was begun. A basement (which is now the Silverstein Auditorium) was completed and weekday as well as Shabbos services were conducted there for several years. The

congregation never built any upper floors and the sanctuary remained in the basement.

In 1966, Beth Jacob amalgamated with Shaarei Emunah and with the funds which they received from the sale of the Henry Street synagogue, they were able to complete construction of the synagogue. The new sanctuary was built on top of the basement where the former sanctuary had been. The building was expanded by an addition containing a Beth Midrash on the ground floor and a kitchen in the basement. The Aron Kodesh and Bimah were taken from the Henry Street synagogue and installed in the new synagogue.

The dedication ceremonies for the new synagogue were held on June 1, 1969 and the guest speaker was Rabbi Fabian Schonfeld, vice president, Rabbinical Council of America. The dedication banquet took place on June 8, 1969 and the guest speaker was the Honourable Mr. Justice Abraham Lief of the Supreme Court of Ontario.

In 1971, another amalgamation took place. The Drildzer synagogue (Linas Hatzedec Anshe Drildz) was a landsmanshaft synagogue which had been founded in the early 1920s by Jews who had immigrated from the town of Drildz which is located in the Kielce region of southeastern Poland. At first, they rented a house on Baldwin Street. In the mid 1920s, they purchased a house at 112 Huron Street and they remained there until 1946. Then, they moved to a house at 414 Markham Street which they had recently purchased.

In 1934, the Drildzer Young Men’s Mutual Benefit Society was founded. It held its meeting in the same house which the synagogue occupied. At both the Huron Street and Markham Street locations, the synagogue was on the main floor and the society was on the second floor.

In 1949, Rabbi Meyer Gruenwald, who was also known as the Teitcher Rav, immigrated to Toronto. He became the spiritual leader of the

Drildzer synagogue and remained in that position until the mid 1950s.

By the late 1960s, most of the members had moved to different areas of North York and joined other congregations situated in the suburban areas. A decision was made to amalgamate the Drildzer synagogue with an existing synagogue in order to perpetuate the name of the synagogue. In 1971, they amalgamated with Beth Jacob and the new congregation was named Beth Jacob V'Anshe Drildz.

The house at 414 Markham Street was sold and the Drildzer Young Men's Mutual Benefit Society purchased a building at 326 Wilson Avenue. They received 2 Sefrei Torah from the Drildzer synagogue and the remaining Sefrei Torah were given to the Beth Jacob V'Anshe Drildz congregation.

Beth Jacob V'Anshe Drildz has been involved in fund raising on behalf of the United Jewish Appeal, Jewish National Fund and State of Israel Bonds. In 1974, the synagogue was the recipient of the Izy Stern trophy, presented annually "for outstanding achievement in the UJA ISF Toronto campaign". The synagogue also conducts an annual Shavuot Yizkor appeal on behalf of the Association for the Soldiers of Israel. In addition, the congregation raised funds to purchase an ambulance for the Magen David Adom.

Beth Jacob did not have a full time Rabbi until 1953, when it hired Rabbi Benjamin Hauer. He received smicha from the Yeshiva Torath Chaim in Toronto and graduated with a B.A. from the University of Toronto in the spring of 1953. He became spiritual leader of Beth Jacob later that year and served as rabbi of the congregation for the next decade. Rabbi Hauer also taught at the Yeshiva Torath Chaim and Eitz Chaim.

In 1962, Rabbi Dr. Moses J. Burak became rabbi of the congregation. He received 2 smichas from Ner Israel Rabbinical College of Baltimore and following his ordination, he

served as rabbi of Hebrew Men of England in Toronto and then Beth Jacob Congregation of Hamilton. He returned to the United States and became rabbi of United Orthodox Synagogue of Norfolk and Congregation B'nai Israel of Logan. In 1961, he returned to Toronto to become the Chancellor of Ner Israel Yeshiva College. He was appointed principal of Shlomei Emunei Israel (Yeshiva Yesodei Hatorah) several years later. In 1962, he became rabbi of Beth Jacob. It was during his tenure that the congregation moved from its downtown location to its present site in North York, built a new synagogue and merged with Shaarei Emunah and Linas Hatzedec Anshe Drildz.

In addition, Rabbi Burak also has a B.A. from McMaster University, an M.A. from the University of Richmond and a Ph.D. in history from Dropsie College, Philadelphia. The title of his doctoral thesis was "A History of the Introductions to the Talmud from Sherira Gaon to Zacharia Frankel". His book, *The Hatam Sofer*, was published by the Beth Jacob congregation in 1967 as a Canadian centennial project. Rabbi Burak wrote a weekly column for the *Canadian Jewish News* and has also contributed a number of articles to the daily newspapers.

Rabbi Burak has served his congregation with distinction for the last 35 years and is now rabbi emeritus. Last year, Rabbi Jay Kelman, who received smicha from the Rabbi Isaac Elchonon Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University was hired as associate rabbi. As Beth Jacob V'Anshe Drildz enters its second century, may it continue to be a Beth Tefillah (house of prayer), a Beth Midrash (house of study) and a Beth Knesset (house of assembly).