

“Her Voice is Full of Wisdom”

Jewish-Saskatchewan Women in a Small Urban Setting

by Anna Feldman

L'auteure se penche sur la vie des femmes juives orthodoxes de 1930 à 1960 à North Battleford où il était particulièrement difficile de maintenir «un style de vie juif».

“In the summertime, the meat came and it was full of worms.... So I gave up kosher meat. I wouldn't dream of eating non-kosher meat. When I gave my husband and children non-kosher meat ... they said, 'If you don't eat it, we won't.' I started eating it.”

Her mouth is full of wisdom,
Her tongue with kindly teaching.

(Proverbs 31:26)

In orthodox Judaism, woman's paramount role is that of teacher and guide as it is from the mother primarily that the child learns the fundamental concepts and principles of Judaism (Zolty; Feldman 1995). But because not all Jews are orthodox (Sachar) and because Canada is a free and open society where there are few boundaries (see Molohon; Paton; Lambert), maintaining a Jewish identity is an overwhelming task in a community where there are few Jews and few facilities for a “Jewish way of life” (Tsukashima). This preliminary study examines how Jewish women, young and old, orthodox and non-orthodox, attempted to meet this challenge in a small urban setting in North Battleford, Saskatchewan, from 1930 to 1966 when the Jews made up approximately one per cent of the city's total population (Statistics Canada; Rosenberg).

Women, including the late Anne Werb, contributed significantly in many ways to a “Jewish way of life” for Saskatchewan's Jews. The Werb's first family home was in the hamlet of Richard where, as Anne recalled, there were few people and she could hardly speak any English:

... but everybody was nice. In the old days every small town had one or two Jewish families. I remember we went to the Leo Goldstein family in Hafford for Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur where other Jewish families from small towns gathered. They had a minyan [the quorum of ten men traditionally required for congregational services]. Mrs. Goldstein was such a berye [an efficient housekeeper]. She used to feed us all. They used to make up beds in the store.

After living in Richard for 12 years, the Werb family moved to North Battleford. In response to questions concerning the difficulties of maintaining the Jewish dietary laws,¹ Anne remembered that she always kept two sets of dishes.

In Richard, we used to get kosher [ritually slaughtered] meat by train from Saskatoon ... and this I can't forget. One day, in the summertime, the meat came and it was full of worms.... [There was] no refrigeration. So I gave up kosher meat. My parents were very religious. I wouldn't dream of eating non-kosher meat. [In Richard] when I gave my husband and children non-kosher meat ... they said, “If you don't eat it, we won't.” And I started eating it! In North Battleford, they sometimes got kosher meat from Regina but mostly from Saskatoon. Also, in the wintertime they used to bring in a shokhet [ritual slaughterer]. He used to butcher and we used to freeze it. I can't remember what we did in the summertime.

During the '30s, when women rarely prepared boys for their *bar mitzvah* and North Battleford had no Hebrew teacher, Anne Werb filled that role.

They needed somebody and I was “it.” I am ashamed to say I knew so little. But I could daven [pray in the correct manner] and I could read Hebrew, so I knew more than the average ... especially the women. So I was the teacher. I knew the broches [blessings] but I did not know the maftir² and their melodies. So I used to be in touch with the rabbi in Regina and then in Winnipeg. I asked them and they made a record for me. I used to teach the boys and we used to sit for hours. I had a lot of patience. The boys, the kids.... I think they liked me.

Later, Anne organized a kindergarten as well as more advanced classes for boys and girls in Yiddish and Hebrew. When I told some of her former pupils that I had interviewed Mrs. Werb in a Vancouver home for the aged, the unqualified response was:

This woman did something unusual. She loved Israel and she loved tradition. I am sure she told you that she was from a religious family. Her father was a rabbi. She projected the enthusiasm she had [and now] we too have that enthusiasm.... She gave us a good Jewish education too. I remember going [to her house] three times a week after school for Yiddish and Hebrew. [Because of her] we are staunch supporters not only of Camp B'nai Brith but also of many, many other things. (B. B., D. K., & E. C.)

1930–1966

The North Battleford chapter of Pioneer Women was organized in 1933 when Golda Meir, later Prime Minister of Israel, spent some time in this small Saskatchewan city. Pioneer Women offers social services such as nurseries, kindergartens for children, hostels, youth villages, voca-

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tional schools, and cultural centres in Israel. Anne Werb recounted that she and her friends worked very hard for this group:

... We raised as much money as possible. We used to have rummage sales. I shlept mit boxes, plenty! [I dragged many boxes with me.] I was head of [our] Pioneer Women’s group until I left [North Battleford] in 1966.

Community involvement touches on many facets of Jewish life, including experiences of anti-Semitism. Anne Werb remembered only one significant incident.

Once a young girl was crying something terrible. It was on a Monday. “Why are you crying,” [I asked]. She was so upset.... She said, “That priest preached and he said that the Jews killed Jesus.” Well, I just didn’t know what to do so I got in touch with Mr. Hock. He was my advisor. I told him about this little girl. So he got in touch with Mr. Goldenberg in Saskatoon. He was a lawyer. They discussed what to do and they got in touch with this man who [had] said it. Of course, he never said that again.

Another woman, younger, told me how, several years later, she too dealt with an anti-Semitic incident.

The only anti-Semitism that my kids encountered was [from] a Royal Canadian Mounted Police [RCMP] that lived next door to us. My daughter and his daughter had a fight. He sat on his back step and said, “You don’t have to play with those kids anyway. They are just a bunch of Jews.” I phoned his commanding officer. (M. F.)

She continued by describing an elderly woman who used to send her family “Jews for Jesus” literature.

If she hadn’t been so old, she would have been offensive. Her daughter, who lived with her, was a teacher. She [like her mother] was very strong in her religion and her one mission in life was to save the souls of Jews. My daughter was going into her grade one and I was not going to have her subjected to this. I phoned the school board and [it] sent me a list of acceptable prayers to be used in the public school room. I knew that this teacher was saying prayers over and beyond [this list] and giving her own interpretation of [these] prayers. [I decided that] if they chose to put my daughter into this classroom, I would go to court. The only way I could go to court was that the teacher was teaching these religious lessons with the permission of the principal. [I wrote to the authorities and] they wrote back and said that they welcomed the opportunity to move my daughter out of that particular classroom into another grade one. So I said, “Thank you very much” and that was it. That teacher retired two years later ... but not without still pressing her own religious beliefs on many children. (M. F.)

Although reactions differ with each individual, for some Jewish children Christmas can be a stressful time of year. An informant stated that it was hard to grow up in North Battleford as a Jewish boy: “My parents did a few things to make Chanukah more special or as special as possible” (B. B.).

One mother told me that she always presented a Chanukah program at her children’s nursery school.

My girls have always felt kind of special being different. [Also] they have never made a complaint about the High Holidays and going to supper at one person’s house one night and [on the next night] going to supper at another person’s house. [On the other hand,] my son’s attitude is that it is kind of weird to be different. (M. F.)

The reminiscences of two informants revealed feelings of warmth and pride in both family and Jewish community life. Sabbath family meals at the home of grandparents evoked memories of favourite foods. One said, “Babba [Grandmother] always made *verenikas*.³ All day long ... pinch ... pinch ... pinch.” They added:

Our community was famous for its hospitality. Jewish travelers who were supposed to have stopped over in Saskatoon used to come to North Battleford for the weekend [instead]. If we had a brit,⁴ bar mitzvah, or

wedding we invited the community, including non-Jewish friends. We liked to celebrate. We had a good life in North Battleford. Even when we lived in another city we always came home for Yom Tov [a Jewish holiday] because we felt so good in our synagogue. (B. B. & D. K.)

The topic of marriage leads to questions of "dating" and intermarriage within about predominantly non-Jewish community.

My grandparents were from the old school. Heaven forbid that we should interdate. My father and mother felt that a 15-year-old girl should go away to school. They put an ad in the Jewish newspaper in Winnipeg for me to stay at someone's house for room and board. It was a nightmare! My parents paid good [money] for room and board. [Yet] the people [with whom I stayed made me] do their dishes and clean ... [even] their toilets. They thought I came from the farm. I didn't stay very long. The next house worked out very well. [However] I don't think I would do it to my children. (B. B. and D. K.)

"Match-making" was not uncommon. One informant recalled her mother-in-law's plan to find suitable husbands for her five daughters.

My mother-in-law had five daughters to marry off. She came up with a plot. She would have all the singles over [to decide which ones she wanted]. She had my husband in mind for one of her daughters. (B. B. and D. K.)

Conclusion

Jewish women, like Anne Werb in North Battleford, fulfilled the role as set out for them in Proverbs 31 by providing guidance as well as through teaching Yiddish and Hebrew, history, religious practice, and rituals. They participated in festival and life celebrations, organized a variety of community groups, acted as "matchmakers," and defended fellow Jews against anti-Semitic threats and proselytizers. Despite the difficulties, North Battleford's Jewish women contributed towards their group's Jewish identity by creating a 1n environment where a "Jewish way of life" could flourish.

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¹For an excellent source of information on Jews and Judaism see Roth.

²The readings from the Prophets.

³Pouches of noodle dough stuffed with sour red cherries or blueberries, for example, and boiled.

⁴Circumcision is performed upon the Jewish male child on the eighth day of his life (Genesis 18:10-18).

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