

# The Canadian Jewish News



## YIDLIFE CRISIS

stare down our current crisis in 'Pandemish'

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# Public safety minister Marco Mendicino says Ottawa is considering expanded security measures for Jewish buildings

/ Ellin Bessner

In the aftermath of the Jan. 15 hostage-taking at a Texas synagogue, police forces in many Canadian cities stepped up their patrols around Jewish buildings and other potential targets of copycat hate crime attacks.

Although the leaders of the Jewish federations from Edmonton, London, Ottawa, Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto, downplayed any known immediate dangers to the community, they were grateful and reassured by the increased surveillance.

When Canada's new Minister of Public Safety, Marco Mendicino, first learned of the Texas hostage taking last weekend, he turned on the news with a heavy heart.

"There is a particular shock of the conscience that we all feel when those attacks occur in a house of worship, in a synagogue, and frankly, anywhere where people go to congregate, to pray, to reflect in peace," Mendicino told The CJN in an interview on Jan. 18. "I will say that it is a very tragic and harsh reminder of the ongoing, incessant attacks of antisemitism that the community faces around the world."

Mendicino, the Liberal MP for Toronto's Eglinton-Lawrence riding which has a large Jewish population, was appointed to the post in November after his previous cabinet role as the minister in charge of immigration, refugees and citizenship. Now, he is in charge of the Communities at Risk: Security Infrastructure Program (SIP) which is making \$8 million available to faith groups at risk in 2021-2022, the highest level of funding since the program started.

It usually takes between four and eight months for the applications to go through the vetting process, according to the department's website and security experts who have coached the Jewish community on how to apply.

"I think everybody is clear within my department that this is a priority and that we have to deal with these applications on an urgent basis, and we will continue to work closely with the communities to make sure that we get that support out as quickly as possible," Mendicino said.

He added that he has heard from Jewish groups who want expanded government funding, including more money to cover staff training and security personnel costs for Jewish sites.

"Those are not easy questions to navigate because, as is the case with any government initiative, there is a finite universe of resources," the minister said. However, with the Texas attack

coming on the heels of the Tree of Life synagogue killings in Pittsburgh in 2018 and as "other incidents occur with greater frequency and intensity, there is a corresponding obligation on the part of the government to respond in equal measure where we can."

According to Mendicino, the SIP program and any possible new funds such as the British Community Safety Trust (CST) model which pays for security guards among other things, should be used in combination with other measures which the Liberal government recently adopted to fight antisemitism in Canada. These include Parliament signing on to the IHRA definition of antisemitism, and renewing the position of Prof. Irwin Cotler for a second term as Canada's Special Envoy on Preserving Holocaust Remembrance and Combatting Antisemitism.

Ottawa has also promised to re-introduce legislation to clamp down on hate speech on social media. While the legislation did not pass during the previous Trudeau administration, due to concerns about free speech in a democracy, Mendicino is expecting the revamped bill should be ready before February or March.

## Recruit Jewish volunteers

But some security experts say police patrols aren't the long-term solution to keeping Canadian Jewish buildings safe in this climate of rising antisemitism. Instead, they're calling for an army of trained community volunteers and staff to add a level of protection to the phalanx of security cameras and fortifications already in place.

"I'm the least worried about security of Jewish institutions during the High Holidays, for example, because everybody is on their toes, everybody hired the guards, everybody's trained, everybody is watching," said Adam Cohen, the owner of Montreal-based Perceptage International, who counts the Jewish General Hospital and Bialik High School among his clients. "What worries me the most is a random Tuesday afternoon when everybody goes back to normal, everybody's back to being complacent, that's what worries me."

The Israeli-trained Cohen worked as security director for CIJA until 2016, advising Canada's Jewish community how to fortify their buildings. He also regularly led training sessions for staff and students in active shooter safety drills.

Now, with the majority of Canadian Jewish buildings already equipped with security cameras, lighting, fencing and in some cases, even panic buttons, Cohen believes local community volunteers should be recruited, because they are familiar with their membership and Jewish customs.

"For that Navy Seal, he doesn't know if the person idling in the car watching them is a bad guy planning something, or maybe it is the father of a kid waiting for him to finish his Torah lesson," Cohen said, referring to a hired guard on duty at a hypothetical synagogue. "Maybe a retired person... who grew up in that synagogue, who grew up in that neighbourhood, he knows everybody. He knows who belongs and who doesn't belong to the street."

Although Cohen didn't elaborate, he said such volunteer systems are in place in Montreal and even in some Jewish schools in Toronto. It is also done for High Holiday services at many congregations, including Vancouver's Congregation Beth Israel.

“That volunteer, with the help of a security company, is the perfect combination because that retired person could come and say to the younger guard, ‘Hey, go check this. Hey, go check that.’ Cohen said. “[When] you have members of that place protecting their kids, grandkids, relatives, friends that are inside, on rotations, that’s what’s important because they’re invested by life and that’s priceless.”

### **Budget restraints a problem**

“The volunteer person or team of people should be empowered to deny access to any unknown person(s) wishing to gain access,” said Douglas Macy, the owner of Trust 1 Security, who advises Beit Rayim Synagogue in Vaughan, Ont., on security. “They should be well versed on the threats and the challenges facing all of us, as these threats exist all the time, not just on High Holidays.”

Macy acknowledges that financial considerations are a big factor for congregations who must try to balance safety with budget realities. Hiring security guards on a full-time basis—and not just for the major Jewish holidays and events—is often unaffordable.

“On the Sabbath, when our budgets cannot support the extra cost of additional security and paid-duty police officers, we must lean on our volunteers,” Macy said.

In the United Kingdom, the government provides the equivalent of \$23 million (£14 million) to a Jewish charity known as the Community Safety Trust (CST) to pay for private guards at buildings and 1,000 events per year. According to Adam Cohen, similar programs exist in some Central and South American countries.

“So I think Jewish communities here are starting to watch what other communities that have been facing that threat for longer have been doing,” Cohen said in an interview on Jan. 16. “Now people are more open to the fact that, okay, what can we do now? So I think we’re there.”

### **SIP grants from Ottawa**

For over a decade, the Canadian Department of Public Safety has allotted money through SIP to cover physical security systems. Although it is open to all faith groups who are targets of hate crimes, many of the approved applications have been for Jewish camps, schools, synagogues and community organizations.

- It paid for Beth Torah synagogue in Toronto to install a closed-circuit security camera system and cover their windows with safety film. Of the total cost, \$20,657.55 was covered by the Canadian government in 2019.
- In 2019, Ottawa paid \$68,675.00 for Calgary’s Chabad Centre for Jewish Life on Forge Road SE to buy anti-graffiti spray, an alarm system, extra lighting and window covering, plus a closed-circuit television security monitoring system.

In recent years, the eligibility has expanded to respond to the needs for training, and now successful SIP applicants can get up to \$10,000 to cover that.

In 2020, Montreal’s Congregation Shaar Hashomayim received \$20,802.56 for a closed-circuit television monitoring system,

lights, and training. A year later, in January 2021, the synagogue was the target of vandalism, when swastikas were sprayed on the building’s doors. A man was arrested a short distance away, after an alert security guard noticed the attack, and called police. The event could have been much worse: the suspect was in possession of a gas canister.

### **Security situation demands it**

During the federal election campaign in the fall of 2021, Canadian Jewish groups including CIJA approached candidates to expand what SIP covers for training, and to bring in a separate, dedicated security fund, modelled after the one in the United Kingdom.

Since Texas, that lobbying has become more urgent.

“We think the security situation demands it,” Martin Sampson, a spokesman for CIJA, said in an interview on Jan. 17. “The security of the Jewish community is our highest priority.” ■

Ellin Bessner is host of *The C-JN Daily*.

# **Winnipeg Rabbi Kliel Rose says his heart ‘just sank’ when he learned his friend Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker was a hostage in the Texas synagogue**

/ Lila Sarick

**R**abbi Kliel Rose says his heart “just sank” when he realized the rabbi being held hostage in a Texas synagogue was his good friend, Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker.

Rabbi Cytron-Walker and three congregants were taken hostage Jan. 15 during Shabbat morning services at Congregation Beth Israel, a Reform synagogue in Colleyville, Texas. The hostages were released unharmed after being held captive for 11 hours. The suspect died in the incident.

“Charlie Cytron-Walker is really one of the kindest people I have met in my life... There’s something entirely unfair about this given who he is and the amount of compassion (he has),” Rabbi Rose, spiritual leader of Winnipeg’s Congregation Etz Chayim said in an interview with The CJN.

“If I know Charlie, he was there just being a pastoral presence to everyone, including the person who was holding him hostage. That’s just his personality.”

The two men met when they were in a group of about 20 rab-

bis selected to participate in the two-year professional development program, called the Clergy Leadership Incubator. They also met monthly for two years in a small group to discuss synagogue practices.

“Over and over, I was so impressed by his level of compassion, his thoughtfulness,” Rabbi Rose said. “I know his community feels very fortunate, not only that he’s now safe, but in general to have him as their rabbi.”

The rabbis spoke several times about the importance of interfaith understanding and building bridges with the surrounding community, Rabbi Rose said.

“Over and over again we heard just how prominent and involved Charlie was in the local interfaith community. That’s just who he is, he doesn’t just talk the talk, he walks the walk. I know that is a critical part of his rabbinate.”

As the incident dragged on throughout the day, there was “an outpouring of love,” from a number of faith groups “especially from the Muslim community considering that the kidnapper himself was from the Muslim community,” Rabbi Rose noted.

The hostage taker, who had said he was armed, had demanded the release of a woman who is serving an 86-year sentence at a facility in Texas for the attempted murder of American soldiers in Afghanistan.

Rabbi Rose said he hopes the incident is not seen seized upon by “fundamentalist members” of faith groups as fuel for Islamophobia, but becomes an impetus to strengthen interfaith dialogue.

“If anything, I hope it propels all of us, rabbis, imams, ministers to do more. This is the right response of being involved in those interfaith networks and increasing our involvement and bringing that to our congregations and communities.”

Watching the hostage taking unfold, Rabbi Rose said it brought home to him how vulnerable rabbis are as they try to maintain a balance between being welcoming and protecting their congregations. At times he said he has had concerns for his own personal safety, when certain people have walked into synagogues he was attending.

“My wife, who is a really strong, really resilient person... just broke down and started to cry,” when she heard about the incident. “She said ‘that could have been you. That could have been any of our close rabbinic friends or our friends who are ministers.’”

“We in the Jewish community need to be vigilant about our safety but we can’t be over-reactive and stop ourselves from doing what is right,” Rabbi Rose said. “I hope to God that this doesn’t prevent us from really getting to know our neighbours and walking in the path that Rabbi Cytron-Walker is really regarded for.” ■

Lila Sarick is news editor of The CJN.

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# Edmonton unveils a mosaic that shines a light on antisemitism

/ Jeremy Appel

A mosaic that illustrates how the community feels about antisemitism was unveiled by the Jewish Federation of Edmonton at a Jan. 12 virtual event, featuring Mayor Amarjeet Sohi and artist Lewis Lavoie.

*Shine a Light on Antisemitism* features a large hanukkiyah over top of 613 small tiles of art, representing the number of laws in the Torah. It was funded with a \$10,000 grant from the Jewish Federations of North America

The artwork was a culmination of the federation’s Hanukkah antisemitism awareness campaign.

The tile artists, including Sohi himself, Senator Paula Simons and students from Edmonton’s Talmud Torah Jewish day school, were asked to illustrate how they feel about antisemitism and hate.

Sohi said when he spoke with Jewish students about their experiences of antisemitism, it reminded him of the discrimination he experienced in the 1980s as a young immigrant from India.

He said his tile represented “feeling lonely [and] trapped in isolation” as an outsider.

“When we started talking about that, I found there’s so much commonality between us,” said Sohi.

“That’s how we can do anti-racism work—diverse groups of people coming together, sharing our stories and really tapping into a sense of community that allows us to learn from each other, that allows us to grow together and face these challenges together.”

Lavoie, the artist, said the Hanukkah story, with its symbolism of the menorah’s light during a dark time of persecution, provided immense inspiration for his work.

He also situated his work in the context of *tikun olam*, or repairing the world.

“The world’s broken into pieces, so when I’m putting these murals together I see it as a community. Everyone’s trying to say something, and so trying to put the pieces together is such a great metaphor and description of how these murals are,” said Lavoie.

“When you look at them close, they’re not all perfectly fitted together. There’s little gaps and little pieces in between, and sometimes the colour doesn’t go right. But overall, it’s kind of what I feel a community is. Sometimes you can’t even find a tile in there because it blends so well with the others, and other tiles just jump out at you and scream, ‘Here I am!’”

Jared Paull, a federation board member, said when we discuss antisemitism, there’s often a semantic debate over what it means—what is or isn’t antisemitic.

“But when you place it in art, you discuss the emotions and experience of the thing,” said Paull. “You can’t argue with those things. Those things are real.”

Federation intends to place the mosaic in a public spot where it can be viewed, but the timeline is uncertain because of COVID. In the meantime, for a closer look at the mosaic and some of the artists behind it visit the website of Jewish Edmonton. ■

Jeremy Appel is a Calgary-based contributor to The CJN.

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## Ottawa's civil servants unite to fight antisemitism on the job with a new network of their own

/ Steve Arnold

After years of enduring antisemitic jokes and thoughtlessness, a new network of federal bureaucrats wants to tackle the problem head-on.

The Jewish Public Servants' Network includes about 250 members in the Ottawa area. It has taken on the challenge of changing a culture of antisemitism throughout the public service.

It was formed last year in response to a global spike in antisemitism following the most recent Israel-Gaza confrontation.

Founders Jonathon Greenberg and Kayla Estrin say that in addition to giving public servants a safe space from the antisemitism they face on the job, the network also hopes to work with government to change that culture.

"With this we are actually doing something to help public servants deal with the antisemitism they experience," Greenberg said in an interview. "I think there has been a real lack of awareness about what Jewish public servants have been experiencing."

Greenberg, an analyst for the CRTC, said while the public service has made great strides in recent years dealing with many forms of prejudice, action against antisemitism has struggled to find a place on the public agenda.

"Antisemitism has not been included in Canada's anti-racism agenda," he said. "A ton of progress has been made in many areas, but management needs to know that this is an issue that still needs to be addressed."

Artur Wilczynski, Canada's former ambassador to Norway, sees that issue. He is Jewish and gay and has found the antisemitism he faces on the job far greater than the homophobia.

He tells of one incident during his posting to Norway when a member of his embassy staff thought it would amuse his co-workers to share a vile joke. The ambassador's objections were dismissed with the usual "Can't you people take a joke?"

"I was made out as the person who could not get along with

others because I was insisting that there be consequences for that person," he added.

Wilczynski said the drive to form the new network followed years of individuals trying to get on-the-job antisemitism handled by their own managers—efforts that often proved pointless.

"It finally reached a point where a lot of our colleagues needed a space to come together and share their experiences and look at how we can address this issue of antisemitism in the public service," he said. "We decided we need a more direct action because doing it individually in our various departments and agencies was not being successful."

The network's push for action has included meetings with the Privy Council Office and Treasury Board—the formal employer of federal public servants—as well as with Irwin Cotler, the country's special envoy for antisemitism.

Aside from supporting each other in taking stands against antisemitism, the network wants education to stamp out Jew hatred among their colleagues.

"A lot of it is education," said Estrin, who works for Health Canada. "People need to learn about this and we hope to resolve the issue over time by working with good people."

"This problem won't be solved in a day, but this network is a good start," she added. ■

Steve Arnold is a former business reporter for the *Hamilton Spectator* who now contributes regularly to The CJN.

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## Pandemish is comedic YidLife Crisis's sendup of that other crisis

/ Janice Arnold

Last summer when the comedy duo YidLife Crisis conceived *Pandemish* they hoped its premiere in the new year would be a joyous victory lap as the world saw COVID's finish line.

In September, Montreal's Segal Centre for Performing Arts likewise bravely wagered that it could banish the darkness that had enveloped its stage since March 2020 and, with restrictions eased, launched its first subscription theatre season since the pandemic began after having had to cancel 2020-21.

*Pandemish*, the third show in the season's lineup, will run as scheduled this month, but online because performance venues in Quebec have been closed since Dec. 20 due to the Omicron surge.

Originally slated for in-person attendance from Jan. 22-30, with a virtual option for some performances, *Pandemish* is now being made into a film that will be available for viewing from Jan. 27-31.

That things are not yet "pandemish" but rather in full pandem-

ic mode, has not discouraged the new show's creators and stars Eli Batalion and Jamie Elman, who are making their Segal subscription season debut as a duo. Elman is something of a veteran, having headlined the hit play *Bad Jews*.

"We've had to use that P-word—pivot," said Batalion. "We had planned for a feel-good lampooning of COVID, a triumphant celebration, but then it raised its ugly head again."

The Segal had planned all along for a virtual option, likely a livestream, realizing that many patrons are away in January, or just don't want to leave the house.

Virtual audiences are nothing new for Batalion and Elman. Their 2014 breakout was a web series of short skits in which they played odd couple friends, who irreverently dissect the state of Judaism today—entirely in the Yiddish they learned at Bialik High School.

That original series, subtitled in English, has had over four million views. YidLife Crisis productions have received four Canadian Screen Award nominations.

Recorded on the Segal's main stage, *Pandemish* will be a fast-paced variety show (in English), a mixture of standup comedy, video content, and music that Elman and Batalion provide themselves on piano and guitar.

"This will be as close as you can get to live theatre performance without being there," Elman said. To keep it relevant, they are tweaking *Pandemish* right up to the last minute, rehearsing at the Segal with a skeleton crew and under strict health protocols.

"Eli and I can barely be in the same room," said Elman, who has lived in Los Angeles for more than 20 years and sees nothing funny in returning to Montreal in winter.

Finding humour in a pandemic requires sensitivity but the pair will not shrink from their trademark brashness. "As they say, comedy is tragedy plus time," said Elman. After almost two years, the lapse is sufficient, they believe.

"Jews have survived through comedy," adds Batalion. "The situation is so absurd that all we can do now is laugh."

"Instead of a celebration of a return to normalcy, this will be a celebration of having made it this far, of still being alive, and of showing we can still laugh... Just know that we're going to make it worth your while, because if we don't we know that we will never hear the end of it."

The pandemic has, of course, brought their live performances to a standstill elsewhere. The first in-person show they did in more than a year and a half was in Frankfurt, Germany at a Jewish cultural festival this fall during that brief bright spot when the pandemic was waning.

"It was one of the best-received shows we've ever had," said Batalion, "riffing on the relationship between German and Yiddish, and the more complex relationship between Germans and Jews."

With no indication from the government when the current closure will end, the rest of the Segal season is in question. Quebec allowed full capacity in theatres in early October, and the first two plays, the one-man *Every Brilliant Thing and SuperDogs: The Musical*, which closed Dec. 19 just before the reinstated shutdown, enjoyed successful runs.

Black and Blue Matters, a new musical co-production with the Black Theatre Workshop, is scheduled to open in February, followed by the English premiere of the Israeli play *One Night in*

*April*. The Segal had also tentatively chalked in the Dora Wasserman Yiddish Theatre's remount of the classic *The Sage of Chelm* for later in the spring.

"Unfortunately, right now we are in limbo," said Mélanie Thompson, head of communications. "Rehearsals and workshops for both of the last two productions are still (taking place) virtually and in-person when necessary with all safety guidelines in place while we wait for updates. Our other in-person programming is also on hold." ■

Janice Arnold has reported for The CJN from Montreal since 1976.

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## There's a new Torah in Aruba—and it contains a special word courtesy of Canadians

/ Ellin Bessner

To the sound of a fiddler playing Jewish melodies, about 80 people gathered on the north lawn of the Ritz-Carlton resort on Aruba's Palm Beach to complete the writing of a brand new Torah—in what might've seemed like an unlikely place.

It's the first scroll specially commissioned for the island's growing Chabad synagogue, established near the high-rise hotels and white sandy Caribbean beaches, which attract waves of tourists from Canada, the U.S., Israel and South America.

Among the guests on Dec. 22 was Maya Liberman, a former Hebrew studies teacher at Toronto's Holy Blossom Temple. Liberman, her husband and their two children took their seats beside Rabbi Dovid Ehrentreu, the sofer (the Hebrew term for scribe) who flew in from New York.

The family wanted to be in Aruba this winter for the dedication, in memory of her husband's late father, Nachum Liberman, who died in Thornhill in December 2017.

Eight years ago, during one of their annual trips, they met the newly arrived Chabad rabbi, Ahron Blasberg, through a chance encounter on the street.

"He heard us conversing in Hebrew and he was kind of fascinated," Liberman recalled. "How it is possible that we're meeting here in Aruba and Jews are meeting each other?"

After her father-in-law's death four years ago, they took their annual winter trip—but her husband, Boris, wanted to attend services with a prayer quorum.

"He didn't want to break his vow of saying kaddish the whole year," Liberman told The CJN.

Chabad of Aruba made it happen.

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## Major donor has long ties to Aruba

New York-based financier Philippe Heilberg and his family donated the Torah in honour of his own late father, Jean-Claude Heilberg, who died in 2012. Jean-Claude was a child Holocaust survivor from Belgium who escaped to Cuba before settling in the U.S.

Philippe's widowed mother Annie Heilberg now lives in Aruba. The donor runs a weather-data company called dClimate, which counts Mark Cuban as one of the investors.

It cost between \$50,000 and \$60,000 for the full package: a custom-made Torah scroll, the work of scribes in Israel and Aruba, the black velvet and silver Torah covers—and, of course, the commemoration ceremony.

"My mother's been coming here and dragging me since the 1970s... I was going to dedicate a Torah and why not here?" Heilberg said, noting how the proximity to New York and services offered by Chabad will draw more Orthodox Jews from other places.

The Blasbergs first arrived in December 2013 "on a one-way ticket," with some kosher chicken, a few prayer books, clothes for their two children (they now have four), and his set of tefillin.

To their surprise, they found a minyan that weekend at a local Marriott Hotel, attended by about 50 people. But there was no *sefer Torah* to read from, per the custom on every Shabbat.

So, faced with his first challenge as an emissary, the rabbi went on a mission to borrow a scroll from the Chabad centre in Venezuela.

Despite meagre beginnings, the community now has its own synagogue building, where weekly services are held. Friday night dinners are offered for free to visiting tourists, including from cruise ships and those who own time-share condominiums.

Chabad provides kosher meals by request to nearby hotels. There's also a community *Kiddush* following services on Saturdays. (Donations are welcome.) A new grocery store has opened nearby called Mazel Tov Mini Market, with kosher products imported from Holland and the U.S.

## Aruba has a historic Jewish community

This new Torah isn't the first on the Dutch island. (Aruba is part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.) There are several such scrolls at the independent Congregation Beth Israel in the capital city of Oranjestad.

But with the arrival of Chabad, Aruba's 125-member Jewish community now has two synagogues. Both advertise as representing the Jewish community of Aruba.

However, just as they're separated by denomination, they're

also separated by geography: the new Chabad centre is on the northwest tip of the island, in Noord.

On the south coast, the egalitarian Beth Israel was established in the 1960s by families of Holocaust survivors. But the Jewish presence on the island actually dates back to the 16th century following the Spanish Inquisition, according to local historians. There's an old Jewish cemetery with graves from 1563.

Aruba has had two Jewish prime ministers since becoming part of the Netherlands: the first was Henny Eman, in 1986; his brother, Mike Eman, was a strong Chabad supporter who held office until 2017.

## A magic word for four Libermans

Back home in Thornhill, the Libermans normally worship at the Beth Chabad Israeli Community Centre in Vaughan. They tried out services at Beth Israel of Aruba, but it wasn't for them.

"It's kind of in-between, a more liberal service, but at the same time it's not what we have here. Here it's like a home," said Maya Liberman, who now works as a special education teacher in York Region.

For her daughter, Michelle Liberman, who's now taking her masters in education at the University of Toronto, this unique Torah ceremony in Aruba isn't something she'll likely forget.

"To me, it's not the typical place for so many Jewish people to come together," Michelle said. "But it's really beautiful to see so many Jewish people all over the world... we're celebrating a simcha, in the middle of COVID."

It isn't the first time the Libermans have participated in an event like this. When the Holy Blossom Temple marked its 150th anniversary with the writing of a new Torah scroll in May 2007, the Libermans donated three letters in the Hebrew word *shamayim*—specifically *mayim* (מַיִם), which means water.

That word served as a talisman a short time later, when the family's home was struck by lightning. It saved them again, when a neighbouring house caught fire.

"The only thing that saved us was water," said Maya.

This is why they asked to apply their family's donation to the same word, when it appears to describe the heavens at the start of the Book of Genesis: *Shamayim*.

Now, with the Torah in place, Chabad of Aruba's next project involves fundraising to build a mikveh. ■

Ellin Bessner is host of *The C-JN Daily*.



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# Obituary: Cecile Klein, 114, spent seven memorable months as Canada's oldest person

/ Janice Arnold

**C**ecile Klein, who at her death on Jan. 13 at age 114 was the oldest person living in Canada, is being remembered for her positive attitude and zest for life.

Montreal-born Klein died peacefully at Maimonides Geriatric Centre, having lived through two pandemics, the first being the Spanish flu of 1918, not to mention two world wars.

Although she started to slow down after 110, family and friends say Klein retained her thirst for learning and new experiences, her determination to keep going physically, and her warm, gracious personality until her final years.

Cecile Edith Efros was born on June 15, 1907, a fact verified by the Gerontology Research Group, confirming her as Canada's top "supercentenarian" and among the oldest people in the world.

While her own parents' longevity was not extraordinary, she did have a great-grandmother who made it to at least 103.

After attending secretarial school, Klein worked in a lawyer's office and then at RCA Victor in what might be called today human resources. Her family says that during the Depression she did her best to find jobs for people.

She married Israeli-born Erwin Klein in 1932 in a ceremony at the old Windsor Hotel and they would have three children. She did administrative work in the pharmaceutical company he owned called International Drugs.

"During the Second World War they manufactured and delivered pharmaceuticals to Montreal hospitals in their rumble-seated car," eldest daughter Harriet Nussbaum said. The company was sold in the 1940s to the pharmaceutical giant Bayer.

The Kleins loved to travel around the world, and in later years did so with their children and grandchildren.

Cecile was an active community volunteer throughout her life, and could recall helping out during the Spanish flu and raising money with her father for the eventual Jewish General Hospital that opened in 1934.

She enjoyed taking courses and attending lectures throughout her life. With her daughter, she was a regular at the fitness classes at the Cummings Jewish Centre for Seniors.

After her husband died in 1999, Klein continued to travel and study. She went on cruises to Alaska and Mexico when she was 102 and 103. In winter she visited her children in California until she was even older than that.



Cecile Klein with her daughter Harriet Nussbaum (right) and granddaughter Elaine Nussbaum (left).

She especially loved the McGill Mini-Med and Mini-Law series at the Jewish General and attended well into her 100s. Always interested in current events, she read the paper until she was 111 and did so without glasses.

Theatre was a true passion, and in later years she was a devotee of the Côte St. Luc Dramatic Society. She never missed any of the amateur troupe's musical productions, and they celebrated her birthday each year with a special performance.

Côte St. Luc Mayor Mitchell Brownstein, the troupe's producer, was impressed by Klein's fortitude and common sense approach to life, which could be summed up as not worrying about the small stuff and just carrying on.

He remembers that when she was 106 Klein still insisted on climbing the stairs, unaided, to see *Fiddler on the Roof*. She said the exercise was good for her.

Three years earlier she had broken her hip and undergone surgery. Warned she might not walk again, Klein rejected the prognosis, went to rehab and was back on her feet.

One of family friend Rosemary Steinberg's favourite stories about Klein was the time she bought a new watch in her mid-90s and insisted on the 10-year guarantee. "She certainly was right and outlasted the watch."

In the past few years when she could not get to shows, the Dramatic Society brought excerpts to her at Maimonides. At her last birthday, Brownstein said Klein, who had become less verbal, still moved to the music in evident delight at a concert they put on in the garden.

While Klein did not get infected, the COVID-19 pandemic was difficult for her. Like other Maimonides residents, she was unable to see family during the first months, but did appreciate connecting with her many relatives via videoconferencing.

In addition to Harriet, Klein is survived by children Louise and Arnold, eight grandchildren, 18 great-grandchildren and five great-great-grandchildren.

Friend Miriam Cohen, who knew Klein from her participation in the Beth Ora Seniors group, says, "I never met Cecile's equal. Her beautiful serene nature was reflected in her smile. She was incredibly active and alert, even into her very old age, loving people and learning till the end." ■

Janice Arnold has reported for The CJN from Montreal since 1976.