

# The Canadian Jewish News



## ARI SITNIK

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# El Al to stop flying out of Canada, with no trips from Toronto starting this fall

/ Lila Sarick

**E**l Al's decision to stop operating flights out of Toronto, effective Oct. 27, 2022, is a serious blow to the tourism industry still recovering from a pandemic that restricted travel, says an Israeli diplomat in Canada.

Gal Hana, the Israeli consul of tourism for Canada, says his office had been in touch with the airline over the last few weeks. At first, it appeared that there were only going to be staff reductions in Toronto, but that flights weren't at risk.

"When we understood the (Toronto-Tel Aviv) route was being compromised, we reached out to the New York office and tried to advocate against it. The route was very successful in 2019 and there is no reason it won't be in 2022 and especially in 2023. We see bookings are already up," Hana said.

In 2019, pre-pandemic, 100,000 Canadians travelled to Israel. The goal was to increase that by 10 percent in 2023, but that figure will be "compromised" by El Al's decision, he said.

Canada is an important market for Israeli tourism: Canadians tend to visit more often, stay longer and spend more money than other tourists.

"We see that demand is really bouncing back and the biggest obstacle is the shortage of flights."

The market has also expanded beyond Jewish and other faith-based travellers to a younger demographic who are looking at Israel as a fun and novel place to visit. The recent Abraham Accords have also "raised a lot of interest" in trips from Israel to Dubai and Bahrain.

As a private company, El Al is focused solely on the bottom line, Hana points out.

"They think that shifting their fleet into the U.S. will gain them more revenue. I think otherwise. I think Toronto is a good gateway and it serves also many U.S. cities in the region."

The airline has not made a formal announcement that it will no longer operate in Canada. The company stopped flying out of Montreal in the early 2000s.

"There is no press release, it's just going to be ad hoc. I'm speaking directly to the community leaders and to our clientele," Dinah Kutner, the general manager for El Al in Canada, said in an interview with The CJN Daily host Ellin Bessner.

Nine people work at El Al's Toronto's office and 20 work in security at Pearson International Airport.

"This is an indefinite suspension, which means we don't know when and if we will come back. We certainly hope so," Kutner said.

El Al is also relocating its U.S. headquarters from New York

City to Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

Air Canada is the only other airline which offers direct flights to Israel from Canada. Travellers who wish to fly El Al after October would need to connect through the United States or Europe

The Israeli airline has been suffering financial losses for several years, which were exacerbated during COVID.

In July 2020, Eli Rozenberg, a New York-born 27-year-old yeshiva student became the controlling shareholder of the company. The \$107 million bid to buy a 43 per cent share of El Al came from his father Kenny Rozenberg, CEO of a chain of U.S. nursing homes. The older Rozenberg has since made a *liyah* and joined his son controlling the airline.

Although it is no longer officially the national airline of Israel, El Al's decision to withdraw from Canada has been an emotional blow those in the travel industry.

"I was shocked. It was like somebody just announced that somebody died that I know," said Ornan Sharaby, CEO of IBMT Tours in Toronto.

"It's very a sad thing to see our icon, the only Israeli airline," leave, he said.

El Al has been in Toronto for more than 40 years, and the route was very profitable. Flights out of Toronto have been full and even overbooked lately. But a recent decision to operate out of Boston, means that planes have been diverted there even though the market is smaller, he said.

As a Jewish-Israeli, Sharaby says he felt proud to see the flag on El Al's planes and the service was "fantastic."

But beyond emotion, he is also concerned that El Al's departure will mean that Air Canada has no competition on direct flights to Israel—and that ticket prices will soar.

Sharaby expects that El Al will eventually return to the lucrative Toronto market, but they may have trouble getting back in to Pearson airport, since there is a waiting list for space in the international Terminal 3.

"This is unbelievable. I am still thinking they're going to reverse their decision," he said.

Meanwhile, an online petition to keep El Al in Toronto had over 1,800 signatures a day after it was launched, with many people commenting that they felt safer flying with El Al, which has stringent security precautions.

Next year, which marks Israel's 75th anniversary, promises to be a banner year for Israeli tourism, with numerous groups—including UJA Federation of Greater Toronto—planning trips to commemorate the occasion.

But the El Al decision is unlikely to impact the UJA trip. While missions do book blocks of seats on Air Canada and El Al, most people don't travel that way, preferring to book directly to use points or to extend their trip by travelling through Europe or the United States, said Steve McDonald, vice-president of communications for UJA. ■

**Lila Sarick is news editor of The CJN.**

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# Debate heats up as Côte St. Luc tackles issue of illegal home-based shuls

/ Janice Arnold

**J**ust how divisive the issue of the growing number of illegal home-based synagogues in Côte St. Luc has become was clear at a public consultation held on June 20.

The city council held the meeting to explain its intention to oblige these shuls to regularize their status or find another legal location.

Residents in favour of the bylaw complained of the noise, traffic, parking and garbage problems caused by places of worship and study establishing themselves in their neighbourhoods. Those opposed felt the city was insensitive to the needs of these congregations, which are Orthodox and largely Sephardi, and fear that these shuls will be shut down.

Mayor Mitchell Brownstein cautioned at the meeting's outset that "the world is watching" how Côte St. Luc handles this delicate issue, given that the city's population is 73 per cent Jewish and that he and all eight councillors are Jewish.

"We all share the same values, though some are more practising than others...We are supposed to be an example to the world of ethical behaviour," he said.

Brownstein stressed the necessity of mutual respect as the city begins the lengthy process of resolving a situation the council considers has gotten out of hand due to previous administrations' tolerating synagogues setting up in private dwellings.

Home-based shuls have existed in Côte St. Luc for more than 30 years, but were few and small until recently. Brownstein said that there are now 17 known Jewish congregations in the city of about 35,000, of which a half-dozen are "non-conforming"

Brownstein said the intention is to work with all concerned parties to find the best solution.

"If the city wanted to shut down (these shuls), we could have done so already under the law," said Brownstein, who added that the longer-term goal is to find a way to accommodate the religious groups, while respecting the rights of all residents.

For now, he urged all non-conforming places to "to take advantage of this opportunity to get legal zoning and stay where they are."

In April, the council tabled a draft of Bylaw 2596 that sets out the mechanism for time-limited spot rezoning of a property in a residential zone for institutional use. Residents in a defined area nearby, however, would have the final say.

Two councillors voted against it, one of them, Lior Azerad, saying it "targeted the Orthodox community."

Applicants will also have to show they can meet safety and health standards, such as building and occupancy codes, and that the use and character of the building is compatible with the surroundings.

Each of these shuls would have to make an application, with feasibility studies and costing attached, to the urban planning department. The submission would then be reviewed by the planning advisory committee that makes recommendations to council.

Similar to any rezoning request, each case would go through a public consultation process with a register opened for anyone wishing to have a referendum. The council could only finally approve it if eligible residents give it the green light, but Brownstein said council hopes referenda can be avoided.

If the congregation moves to a different location, the city can withdraw authorization for non-residential use.

The draft bylaw names five residential zones where owners of properties now used as shuls which would be eligible to apply: two are on Eldridge and one each on Léger, Parkhaven, Heywood and Bailly streets. Any new place of worship or religious study wishing to open in these or other residential zones will have to follow the same procedure.

To address those illegal shuls that do not apply or aren't able to achieve the needed support among residents, the city is looking for potential alternate locations in commercial zones. In May, the council adopted a bylaw allowing four commercial buildings, mostly shopping centres, to rent or give space to religious institutions.

Councillor Mitch Kujavsky, whose portfolio is urban planning, said, "We are here today because the city has not done its job for many years... Unfortunately, it did not enforce the bylaws and that's unfair to residents, religious congregations and future administrations."

During the question period, a 28-year resident said he believes the council does not appreciate that Côte St. Luc's demographics have changed, that the number of Orthodox and Sephardic Jews is increasing and may soon be the majority.

Kujavsky said the city is developing a master plan that foresees possibly creating mixed-use zones where buildings could house residents, businesses and religious institutions. There is almost no more land available for new construction, he said.

A woman said she had little confidence that the city would enforce any new bylaw because it is not enforcing the existing ones, and dismissed Kujavsky's assertion that the council has "full faith" that these shuls will comply if they do not get rezoning or follow the plans they submitted, if they do.

Another man said he finds it ironic that "that in the month the City of Montreal unanimously adopted Jewish heritage month, our Jewish council has started a process that could close some of our Jewish institutions." ■

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# Shopify's Harley Finkelstein is ready to revamp Ottawa's Chabad centre to better meet student needs

/ Alex Rose

**F**our years ago, Shopify COO Harley Finkelstein orchestrated the opening of a new Jewish community centre in downtown Ottawa.

Today, after taking some time to observe the way people used the centre and what it most lacked, he is leading a large project to expand and renovate the space.

The building, which is called the Finkelstein Chabad Jewish Centre, is in the Sandy Hill neighbourhood, which its namesake called “the epicentre for students in the city of Ottawa,” who are mainly from Carleton University, University of Ottawa and Algonquin College.

Finkelstein and his wife Lindsay Taub originally donated \$500,000 to the centre and helped raise over \$1 million more, which included generous donations from the Shabinsky and Hart families. For this next round, Finkelstein is quadrupling his initial donation with a further \$1.5 million, and, along with local businessman and philanthropist Ian Shabinsky, is helping to raise the additional \$3.7 million needed for the construction.

In 2005, when Finkelstein was a student at University of Ottawa's law school, he would attend Chabad events. He promised the local emissary Rabbi Chaim Boyarsky to help Chabad's vision, if he was ever in a position to do so. At the time, Finkelstein was struggling financially—but by 2018, after Shopify's success, he was in a position to make the initial donation. Now, after seeing how popular the new Jewish centre has been among students, Finkelstein felt compelled to keep giving.

“What happened was fairly dramatic. We thought it would be a place where students would stop by, that would have events, that would have some Jewish programming,” he said. “But we pretty much figured out right away that this was something way more than that. This was becoming a magnet of Jewish life in Ottawa.”

The demand for the building was much higher than everyone had initially anticipated. Instead of “just a couple of students dropping in here and there,” over 100 students were showing up for Shabbat dinners, and the space got so crowded on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur that they needed to put tents onto the sidewalks to accommodate everyone attending.

Another consideration that arose, and was especially exacerbated during the pandemic, was being able to provide secure spaces for all kinds of needs, from day-to-day chores such as doing laundry, to COVID-safe ways of connecting to combat loneliness, to even providing sleeping arrangements for students who might be between moves or seeking respite from a bad situation.

It was only after Finkelstein observed the patterns of usage over the first few years that he committed the additional \$1.5 million, because it afforded everyone a better idea of where the demand lay for the student population who frequented the centre.

“The key to this entire story is that we didn't necessarily have a set-in-stone policy or strategy or design for what this building would be. It was, let's just put a building here. Let's invite any Jewish student, Jewish young person, or anyone for that matter, who needs a place to go or wants to get themselves deeper into Jewish life and Jewish tradition and Jewish community. And let's see how it gets used.”

The new vision for the centre is also all about flexibility. The original layout was too specific, and did not allow enough adaptability depending on what role the centre was filling on any given day. The new plans will allow the space to be converted as needed—for example, to fit in several hundred people on Rosh Hashanah.

Some other major changes are an expansion of the size, the addition of a mezzanine and an open-concept floorplan.

And, for this married couple, their donation has a personal significance. Their first encounter was at a Jewish event similar to ones set to be a fixture of the renovated building.

“And then the effects of it, we certainly can see in our lifetime. We actually get to see it every Shabbat when we attend these dinners at the centre, we see the impact it's having on people,” Finkelstein said.

“(This project) has made me far more emotional and emotionally attached to the Jewish community here in Canada.” ■

Alex Rose is a Toronto-based news reporter for The CJN.

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## Obituary: Child survivor Yehudi Lindeman was a pioneer in keeping the oral history of the Holocaust

/ Janice Arnold

**Y**ehudi Lindeman, who died in Montreal at age 84 on June 12, was well into middle age before he was able to frankly confront what it meant to be one of the youngest survivors of the Holocaust, and the responsibility that came with that.

The Dutch-born Lindeman was the founder and director of Living Testimonies, a video archive of survivors' accounts of their experiences, one of the first of its kind when it was launched in 1989 at McGill University.

He came to realize that older survivors, who had the most vivid memories, were not going to be around forever to bear witness to history and their stories had to be preserved and

made publicly accessible.

With a minimal budget and team of volunteers, Lindeman, a professor of English at McGill, conducted hundreds of interviews through the 1990s with survivors living in Montreal, which had the third-largest survivor community in the world.

Born in Amsterdam in 1938, Lindeman, an only child, was sent away by his parents in 1942 to be hidden in the countryside. He would be shuttled between at least 15 rural locations until the end of the war.

After liberation Lindeman was reunited with his mother, Bets, who survived by posing as a gentile. His father Nico, who was in the Dutch resistance, had perished, as did over 100 other family members.

Lindeman said his memory went “psychologically underground,” and for more than 40 years he never thought about his time in hiding, a repression he would learn was common among child survivors.

Of his time eluding the Nazi occupiers, he said, “The only sense of stability I felt was when another stranger—a courier working for the resistance, no doubt—would take me once again to a new place, usually on the back of a bicycle at night.”

After attending the University of Amsterdam, he pursued a PhD in comparative literature at Harvard and began teaching at McGill in 1971. He would earn a reputation as an accomplished scholar of Renaissance poetry, among other erudite topics.

In the early 1980s, the sight on television of women gathering daily in Argentina to plead for male relatives who had “disappeared” under the brutal military regime, he said, may have reawakened his buried childhood trauma and stirred a belated realization of the imperative of remembrance.

In 1986 he saw French director Claude Lanzmann’s monumental documentary on the Holocaust, *Shoah*, and the power of seeing and hearing survivors speak openly about what they had been through became clear to him.

Although *Living Testimonies* was based at McGill, Lindeman did not want to produce academic material, but rather capture stories that would bring the Holocaust to the general public in a way that touched them emotionally.

His research culminated with the 2007 publication of *Shards of Memory: Narratives of Holocaust Survival*, a collection of 25 particularly compelling accounts of loss and resilience. Elie Wiesel wrote the introduction and historian of the Holocaust Robert Jan Van Pelt hailed it, saying the book “frames and informs the emerging debate on the value of survivor testimonies in the post-survivor age.”

In his own video testimony for the USC Shoah Foundation in the 1990s, Lindeman stressed the importance of people of all backgrounds learning about the Holocaust, and for survivors to come forward, no matter how painful, to make that possible.

Until recently, he said, the past for him had been “a very dark place (he) did not want to visit,” but he came to realize it had a positive side as well.

“Most of all, through these stories we tell the world how fast we can go down to a space that is hard to escape from... (they) send out early-warning messages like the little bird.”

Lindeman described himself as “basically an optimistic person,” despite his being among the only 3,900 Jewish children

in the Netherlands, out of a community of 150,000, to have lived.

“For my single survival 40, 60, 80 people contributed in some essential way,” he said. “To each one I owe my survival. As a result, I have a very optimistic outlook on humanity.”

Lindeman was a co-founder of the Federation of Jewish Child Survivors, an international network of child survivors—whom he called the “one-and-a-half generation”—in 1990.

The board of the Montreal Holocaust Museum, where Lindeman was formerly a volunteer, stated his “impact on Holocaust remembrance and oral history in Montreal is unparalleled... His profound impact and leadership at the Museum played a key role in influencing how we collect and preserve Holocaust survivor testimony today.”

Furthermore, his organizing of child survivors came “at a time when their distinct needs were not always well recognized or addressed.”

As numerous condolences attest, Lindeman is remembered as a kind and gentle man, gregarious and warm, who loved nature, never lost his wonder at the world, and continued on a lifelong spiritual search for healing and meaning.

Lindemann was also fond of travel and just before his unexpected death he had enjoyed more than a month in Israel visiting friends and family.

Lindeman is survived by his wife Françoise De La Cressonnière and his son David, from his first marriage. ■

**Janice Arnold has been reporting for The CJN from Montreal since 1976.**

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## **‘I would have asked Drake to put on tefillin’: The real rabbi who presided over the Toronto rapper’s fake wedding**

/ Ellin Bessner

**C**ould the real rabbi recruited to be in Drake’s new music video convince the mega-star to do something exceptionally Jewish?

Ari Sitnik thought he’d give it a shot—and that’s why he brought a pair of tefillin when he arrived on the set of the new music video called “Falling Back,” filmed on the last weekend of May at downtown Toronto’s legendary luxury hotel, the Fairmont Royal York.

Should there be a break in the action, Sitnik reasoned, he could politely urge Drake to perform the commandment of wrapping the leather straps of the phylacteries around his left arm and his head: a sign of devotion to God that rabbis of the Chabad movement seek out fellow Jewish men to do.

But a complicated shooting arrangement meant Drake didn't hang around to chat after he heard his officiant recite his lines, about whether he agreed to be a good husband "according to our values" in this imaginary marriage to 23 women at once.

"The fact that he just ran in and out was a bit of a barrier," Sitnik told The CJN Daily podcast in an interview conducted June 17, the day the video was released in tandem with a surprise new Drake album, *Honestly, Nevermind*.

Sitnik appears for about 30 seconds in the nine-and-half minute clip—which quickly accrued millions of YouTube views. And the gig has catapulted Sitnik out of the obscurity of his stay-at-home job, handling IT support for a global company.

And, while he doesn't have an agent yet, Sitnik is thinking about hiring one.

After moving from Brazil to the United States to attend yeshiva, Ari Sitnik followed his new bride to Toronto 26 years ago. But once receiving his ordination, he did not pursue the path of other rabbis in the Chabad Lubavitch movement. Sitnik, 52, does attend services at the Clanton Park Synagogue in Toronto, where he is the volunteer secretary.

A couple of times each year, Sitnik does some dabbling in show business—including as an extra, mainly without speaking parts. He was in the 2004 movie *Crown Heights*, shot in Toronto, which found funnyman Howie Mandel playing a Hasidic rabbi, opposite Mario Van Peebles as a youth leader. The docudrama tried to make a profound statement about Jewish-Black relationships.

More recently, Sitnik appeared in an episode of *Nurses* on Global Television in Canada, which was picked up for airing on NBC during the pandemic. The episode was pulled from digital distribution after accusations that its portrayal of observant Jews was antisemitic.

Other than that? "Some that were made for TV—but they were all background roles. Somebody sitting, a Jew crossing the street, a Jew in the crowd, a Jew in the synagogue. Nothing major."

But it was a connection with Toronto event planner Jian Magen of Magen Boys Entertainment that paved the way to Drake.

For several summers before COVID, Magen donned pink tights to wrestle in *Slammin' for Shabbos*. The annual event featured a mix of local athletes alongside other performers doing wrestling shtick, but also real WWE professionals like Colt Cabana. Proceeds went to support Tomchei Shabbos, a charity that delivers free food to needy Jewish families for Shabbat.

Sitnik played the rabbi role in the promotional videos—and even took part in the action in the ring.

"At one point, the wrestlers jumped on top of me. We cracked the table. I had to carry somebody to help him kiss the rear end of a camel. It was a ton of fun."

So, his name was put forward to the "Falling Back" when Drake himself wanted a Jewish officiant—even if the generic ceremony had a floral canopy rather than a traditional Jewish chuppah.

Adam Rodness, the Toronto-based producer of Drake's video, said he started searching for someone to play the rabbi part. But all the Jewish candidates turned him down because the shoot was scheduled for a Saturday.

After a number of rejections, Rodness resorted to scanning for men who played Santa Claus—until his producing partner



Stu Stone mentioned a certain fixture of the backyard charity wrestling events. (Stone is also in the video on guitar behind Dan Finnerty, the lounge-act satirist who massacres Drake's early hit "Best I Ever Had" during the celebration. Rodness plays bass.)

"I guess whoever else they had wouldn't either be legit looking or somebody else might have been afraid," said Sitnik. "And I'm not so afraid."

What made him comfortable with the concept is that no official Jewish function would be involved.

There was no breaking of the glass, and no prayers recited. The only other slightly Jewish reference in the video was when Drake held a napkin while he danced with his brides. At one point, Drake put the napkin in his own mouth.

"That was all Drake, he wanted to do stuff that hasn't been done before," said Rodness, in reference to the post-nuptial party with laser lights that had the groom twerking on the dance floor.

While criticism from observant Jews who encounter this video is inevitable, Sitnik insists there was nothing Jewish about the gig.

"I think I made us all look good and in a positive light," he said. "And the rest is Drake's problem."

Moreover, he thinks that the decision to feature a rabbi rather than a priest or other clergy is ultimately good for the Jews.

"There wasn't anything that portrayed Judaism in a negative light," Sitnik added. "It just made it look a little nicer than what we are usually seeing in the media."

By contrast, the *Nurses* episode in which an actor playing a religious Jew refuses a bone graft because it might have come from a pig or an Arab, is something that Sitnik found offensive. (He was unaware of the script until he watched to catch his own brief appearance at the end.)

Aubrey Drake Graham was born to a Jewish mother—Sandi, who also appears in the new video—and an African-American

father, Dennis Graham. He grew up celebrating Jewish holidays and other traditions including a bar mitzvah at age 13.

The coming-of-age ceremony provided an inspiration for Drake's prior music video channelling of his Judaism: "HYFR" was filmed at a synagogue with a cast of fellow rappers throwing a raucous party.

But officials at Temple Israel of Greater Miami later distanced themselves from the project, whose acronym stands for "Hell Ya F\*\*king Right."

As for his latest turn before the cameras, Sitnik's willingness to participate meant his part in the filming was moved from Saturday to Sunday, to accommodate observance of the Jewish Sabbath. The producers even arranged for kosher catering for him alone. It involved a delivery from a North York restaurant, The Chicken Nest.

The rabbi showed up wearing his own clothes including the traditional black hat and white shirt and black suit. But the wardrobe crew didn't like his tie or shoes, so those things were replaced. ("I have one pair of Reeboks, that's it.")

They also arranged his long white beard for the filming—to make it look rounder.

Then after a quick discussion with producer Adam Rodness and director Julien "Director X" Lutz to work out how to improvise his lines, Sitnik found himself rehearsing the camera angles together with two stand-ins: one for Drake and the other for the Instagram model who would play the bride.

Or rather, the first bride on screen before 22 more are revealed after the rabbi calls out, "I now pronounce you husband and wives."

While polygamy is not illegal in the Old Testament under certain circumstances, it is throughout Israel and many other countries.

Sitnik wasn't present when the groom placed the 23 rings on his brides' fingers. Hypothetically, that could have posed a sticky problem under Jewish law if one of the brides was Jewish themselves. (They weren't).

Sitnik recalled a case where the late American scholar Rabbi Moshe Feinstein had to rule on whether a real wedding had taken place during the performance of a high school theatrical production of the play *Children of the Ghetto*, based on the book by Israel Zangwill. The actors had recited the ritual Hebrew words "Harei At Mekudeshet Li" and the actor slipped a ring on the bride's finger, which made them married accord-

ing to the religious rules.

Sitnik's first peek at the finished product came on the same day as any other Drake fan, and he watched eagerly to see himself.

"I did not listen to the lyrics," he insists, having the accurate hunch that some of the content wouldn't pass muster in his circles.

While not personally a hip-hop fan, Sitnik says he knew who Drake was through his Canadian wife—who told him about the rapper getting his start in show business on the teen series *Degrassi*. The couple's four kids also think the gig is cool—but they also only found out about it after it was released, due to a non-disclosure agreement.

Adam Rodness praises Sitnik for pulling off his global debut despite having no experience on this level, describing the rabbi's arrival on the set as "kind of like a deer in the headlights".

The producer has also not received any negative reaction from Jewish circles about the video. Nor does he expect any.

"We weren't going for an Orthodox Jewish wedding. We were just showing a Jewish man getting married." ■

Ellin Bessner is chief correspondent of *The CJN Daily*.

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## **The CJN's book columnist Hannah Srour-Zackon reports on a tribute to the Soviet Jewish poets who were murdered 70 years ago**

**T**he lives of the Yiddish writers murdered by the Soviet state 70 years ago were honoured by Montreal's Jewish Public Library (JPL)'s Yiddish Café this week through performances of poetry and music.

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“On the night of August 12, 1952, some of the most prominent Yiddish poets in the Soviet Union were executed by the state,” said Esther Frank, a recently retired lecturer in Jewish literature at McGill University who acted as the evening’s master of ceremonies. “On that night, 13 [Jewish] citizens of the Soviet Union were executed... That date is now understood to be a marker of the moment when Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union came to its tragic end.”

Known as the “Night of the Murdered Poets,” among the 13 Soviet Jews murdered were five prominent writers involved with the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee: Itsik Fefer, Dovid Hofshiteyn, Leyb Kvitko, Perets Markish, and Shmuel Halkin.

Organized by the JPL’s Yiddish Cultural Committee in partnership with the Montreal *Arbeiter Ring*—who were the first in the city to organize commemorative events of this kind—Ukrainian-Jewish Dialogue, and KlezKanada, the event on June 16 was an intimate and moving affair.

While a fierce thunderstorm raged outside, as we waited for the arrival of those delayed by the weather, Janie Respitz, Henri Oppenheim, and Bronna Levy entertained the audience with an impromptu musical performance.

Throughout the evening, poems and songs were recited in honour of the murdered writers, and in memory of other Yiddish writers from the former Soviet Union more broadly, some of whom were killed by the Soviet authorities at another date. Interspersed between performances, Frank guided the audience with the biographies of the poets and insight into their work.

Pinchas Blitt, a veteran of Montreal’s Yiddish theatre, opened the evening with a powerful recitation of an elegy by Melech Ravitch about the writer Perets Markish. (Ravitch settled in Montreal and later served as head of the JPL).

Blitt’s reading was moving and emotional, imbued with the musicality of Yiddish expression.

Also on hand were acclaimed translator Lazer Lederhendler, who recited excerpts from two poems by Perets Markish, and KlezKanada director Sebastian Schulman, who gave poignant interpretations of two harrowing poems by Shmuel Halkin.

On the musical side, Raizel Fishman Candib performed a folk song by Moyshe Kulbak (murdered in 1937), which her

father once heard performed by Kulbak himself. Janie Respitz sang works by Hofshiteyn and Kvitko in two captivating performances.

Later in the evening, Bronna Levy and Henri Oppenheim performed two poems by Itsik Fefer set to music by Eli Rubenstein (a tune written for a production of *A Khasene in Shtetl* in Montreal) and by Israeli singer-songwriter Chava Alberstein, both of which had the audience singing along.

Special tribute was paid to Solomon Mikhoels, actor and artistic director of the Moscow State Jewish Theatre, under whom the mother of Canadian Yiddish theatre, Dora Wasserman, once studied.

Mikhoels famously performed as the titular role in the Yiddish production of *King Lear* (most recently brought back to public attention through Dara Horn’s podcast *Adventures with Dead Jews*) and the audience was treated to a clip of his iconic 1935 performance. The actor Benjamin Zuskin who portrayed the Fool in the production was also killed that August evening in 1952.

Before the evening’s conclusion, Yiddish Cultural Committee co-chair Rivka Auginfeld presented a photograph from the JPL archives of a visit to Montreal of the official Soviet Jewish delegation in 1943. In the picture are Mikhoels and Feffer surrounded by admirers, being received by then-mayor Adhémar Raynault at City Hall.

Though seven decades have passed since the tragedy half a world away, the Canadian Jewish community is part of the living, breathing story to which the Night of the Murdered Poets belongs, and the pain of its aftermath remains deeply personal.

The event came to a close with the performers joining together to recite Itsik Feffer’s poem “*Ikh bin a yid*” (“I Am a Jew”). This powerful affirmation of the obstinate survival of Yiddish culture is testament to the fact that, through evenings such as these, its prime movers will never be forgotten. ■

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