

The Canadian Jewish News



**Making a bat mitzvah
in Toronto with
ADAM SANDLER
and daughters
Sunny and Sadie / page 2**

**featuring reporter extra
ALEX ROSE**

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W W W . T H E C J N . C A

The CJN's Alex Rose spills the tea on being an extra in 'You're So Not Invited to My Bat Mitzvah'

On Thursday, July 28, 2022, I woke up early and headed to the Royal York Hotel in downtown Toronto for an elaborate b'nai mitzvah party. I was fed multiple meals, snacks were always on offer, I made some new friends and, best of all, I got paid for the privilege. I stayed there for over 14 hours, and then the next day I did it all over again.

No, it wasn't because the b'nai mitzvah kept screwing up their haftarah. I, along with what seems to be half of Toronto's Jewish community, was an extra in Adam Sandler's new movie, *You Are So Not Invited to My Bat Mitzvah*, which was released Aug. 25 on Netflix. That's why I'm only writing this 13 months later, by the way—there was a publication ban until the movie came out.

I'm not sure if this is surprising, but being an extra is pretty boring. My experience consisted mostly of sitting in one of two rooms. On set in the ballroom, I would be in the movie but wasn't allowed to use my phone and had to carry on conversation in snatches of whispers between takes. Upstairs in the holding room, I could move around, chat, eat, read, use my phone, and make friends, but I wouldn't be in the movie.

I started that first day super gung-ho, all set to be in the movie as much as possible. But it turns out that sitting around in silence and being forced to repeat your actions every two or three minutes for hours on end is pretty draining. By the second day, I stayed in the holding room as often as I could, hanging out with similarly unenthused extras.

I remember one man who came into the holding room near the end of the second day, having spent the previous 10 hours trying to get on camera as much as possible, and wondering why we hadn't all done the same. At the time, I was happy with my choices. A year later though, having only made it into two blurry frames of the movie, I feel a bit of regret that I hadn't been more of a ham.

The pay was a bit over \$400 per day, but union members made more, and a lot more for each hour of overtime. They also had special privileges, most notably getting to eat first at all the meals because their collective bargaining agreement said they had to eat by a certain time.

Also, to the question you're all wondering about, the answer is yes—I did speak to Adam Sandler. It was a pretty innocuous exchange. Back in Grade 8 at United Synagogue Day School, there was a rumour that our science teacher, who hailed from New York, had taught Adam Sandler. And not only taught, but actually inspired one of his famous early sketches in which he crank calls his math teacher.

I was standing on the dance floor between takes when Sandler walked by, so I knew I had to seize my chance. I quickly caught his attention and asked him if he'd ever had a teacher

named Mr. Szpindel. He said no, but told me that he did have family members with that last name, and wondered if that's what I was thinking of. It was a brief interaction, but even so he seemed patient and kind during it.

I wasn't the only person to speak to him. One woman that I sat next to for multiple scenes noticed that all the signs and posters on set were advertising "Devin's B'nai Mitzvah." In the Hebrew, B'nai is the plural for multiple bar or bat mitzvahs, so it doesn't make sense when referring to a singular event (some of you may have noticed that apparent mistake in the opening sentence of this column).

When the woman sitting next to me noticed it, she decided to mention it to Sandler, who said he appreciated the note. However, when she shared it with me, I pointed out that they may have called it a b'nai mitzvah because they didn't want to gender it, the same way some people choose to use the pronoun "they" instead of "he" or "she".

The woman went back to check with Sandler, and he confirmed that was in fact the case. She apologized for trying to correct him, but he brushed it off by saying something like, "don't worry, I can't keep up with this stuff either." Again, a minor interaction, but he seemed to be gracious throughout.

On my last stint on set at the end of the second day, I made friends with a producer about my age. She was an American Jew, I think from California, and we spent the last few hours chatting between takes. I learned a lot about how the film industry works, but I hardly remember anything that she told me.

There is one thing I do remember, though. Sandler's Netflix movie *Hustle* had premiered about two months before filming, and it starred Spanish NBA player Juancho Hernangomez as undiscovered basketball prospect Bo Cruz.

On the first day of filming, July 28, Hernangomez signed with the Toronto Raptors, and everyone on social media and in the city was referring to him as Bo Cruz. My producer friend told me that had made Sandler very happy.

Looking back, it was a fun and educational experience, although perhaps a little more tiresome than I expected, and for that reason not something I'm looking to repeat. But I got to point to my blurry self in a frozen frame on Netflix and retell the story of my single exchange with Adam Sandler over a dozen times now, so it was definitely worth trying once. ■

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One year later: Beth Tzedec, and other synagogues, are examining if ending membership dues for people under 40 makes a difference

/ Alex Rose

Toronto's midtown Beth Tzedec Congregation recently sent emails to the inaugural group of those under age 40 who received free memberships in the summer of 2022, asking if they wanted to remain free members for another year.

And while leadership of the largest Conservative synagogue in Canada is taking an optimistic view of the early returns, other observers in Toronto's Jewish community are waiting to evaluate its success, and cautioning that the gains may be short-lived—or lead to bringing in members who feel no obligation to contribute to synagogue life.

"(It's been) outstanding. Use whatever word of extreme joy that you could possibly figure out. It's been phenomenal. Far outside of our expectations," said Beth Tzedec's senior rabbi, Steven Wernick.

"When we launched this program, we expected that we would have 30 to 40, maybe 50 new households a year... But instead, we opened the doors and there was a tsunami of interest. We now have 950 households under the age of 40, which is 500 more households than we had this time last year."

Of the 500 new households, over 350 are brand new to the shul, and a further 100 were previous members who had been unaffiliated for three or more years. (Beth Tzedec has around 5,000 members in total.)

Beth Tzedec decided to make the "Generations" offer in response to declining rates of revenue, membership and engagement, especially among younger Jews. These trends have become the norm for most North American non-Orthodox synagogues, meaning many Jewish community leaders will be keeping a close eye on Beth Tzedec in the coming years.

If their Generations Membership is successful, then Beth Tzedec could serve as a model for revitalizing shul culture.

Robert Brym, a sociology professor at the University of Toronto who co-authored the 2018 Survey of Jews in Canada, believes younger Jews are less interested in joining because they are more assimilated than their parents and grandparents were.

"People are now more integrated in Canada and have lots of opportunities for spending their lives in ways other than Jewishly. The Canadian Jewish community 50, 75 years ago was very insular and didn't have opportunities in the wider community for social engagement, political engagement, or

cultural engagement like they do now. And that's why we're a different universe," he said.

Leah Mauer, 35, is on the board of Beth Tzedec. She joined eight years ago when she married her husband, who grew up attending there. She believes financial concerns were preventing many people in her generation from joining congregations, which is why so many more households joined Beth Tzedec than expected.

"There are so many expenses that we have, and contrary to generations before, we have to make harder choices, especially when it comes to how we live Jewishly, because the cost of everything is so much higher," she said.

"So I think it was really wonderful of Beth Tzedec to say we're going to take that shul membership piece off the table, and if you want to be part of our community, we just want you to be part of our community.

"It really showed an understanding of where my peers and I are at, and the fact that we do want community, but we are making these hard choices because our financial situations are a lot different from those of our parents."

Prior to the initiative, singles paid anywhere from \$50 to \$750, while couples paid from \$500 to \$1,400. Members over 40 pay a "fair share" depending on family income.

Beth Tzedec is not the first shul to offer free dues to part or all of their membership. The results from congregations who had already undertaken similar initiatives informed their decision, as did multiple studies into both contemporary Jewish life and millennial values.

"You can't make the same assumption of membership that you did (about) their parents. It's not so much that money prevents them from joining, it's that the culture of money at synagogues is not something they aspire to. You have to demonstrate the value added first," Rabbi Wernick said.

"The previous model is, come and join the synagogue. You sit down, you fill out your application, you pay. To do that, you have to assume the value of that membership in advance. That's not what it is anymore.

"The other thing is that they want to be known. They don't want to be anonymous, and they want to participate in things that are personally relevant to their lives and the way in which they live."

Rabbi Jarrod Grover of Beth Tikvah, a Conservative synagogue in north Toronto, agrees that the old models aren't working for young Jews, and he applauded Beth Tzedec for trying something new. But he also has concerns about its strategy.

His skepticism is not whether Beth Tzedec can attract new members, but whether those members will end up being positive contributors in the long run.

"It's very easy to claim the model's a success based on how many people signed up for something free. But I think we all know that's not how we're going to judge the success of this. We're only going to find out in the end how many people pay their dues when they get the bill," he said.

That concern is not lost on Rabbi Wernick. He may be excited about the influx of new members, but he understands that only represents the beginning of this process. The ability to connect with its new members, to keep them energized and engaged, will be much more important in the long run.

He points to a number of other metrics and factors that he

believes hint at the potential for long-term success. Many events and programs for the under-40 crowd have seen boosts in attendance.

For example, around 100 people attended a family Shabbat dinner in September of last year, while recent ones are attracting upwards of 250. A Shabbat morning service for families with young children has had to introduce two new time slots. Young adult events have been drawing around 100 people on average.

Mauer, who also serves on the family engagement committee, has noticed a similar change.

“People are wanting to get involved, wanting to volunteer, whether that be on a committee, at an event, or some other way,” she said.

“Our problem is that there’s too much interest. How do we create a meaningful experience and allow everybody in who wants to be there? That’s not a problem that a lot of synagogues have these days.”

Rabbi Wernick knows that it is still too early to evaluate the full success of the program. The first real test comes now, when the shul finds out how many under-40 members renew their membership, and especially how many graduating out of the initiative decide to stay on as dues-paying members.

However, he says the effects are already reverberating throughout the building.

“The place is vibrant,” Rabbi Wernick said. “The initiative sparked a more mature element of the congregation to come forward with program ideas. Next year, we’re going to see more programming for people in their mid 40s to late 50s. I just had a call last week from a woman in her late 70s or early 80s who said, ‘Can we do a Shabbat dinner program for seniors?’ There’s a renewed energy in every aspect of the synagogue right now.”

For Rabbi Grover, no current metrics dispel his concerns. He is aware of the Generations Membership’s early indicators of success. But he still doubts this is a sound long-term strategy—and he worries that inviting members who, in his words, do not value membership, can lead to unintended consequences.

“I’m not going to have the metrics on the pitfalls that I’m worried about—one of which is the moral implications of a community that’s conveying the message to an entire generation that they are unaccountable for the debts and the services that they are getting,” he said.

“The idea of sacrifice is really at the heart of this. Sacrifice is a way of building moral character. That’s why Jews believe so strongly in the importance of sacrificing for the things that you believe in. And we’ve now said, ‘you don’t have to sacrifice anything,’ and I worry about the long-term moral consequences of that kind of culture.”

In the Jewish tradition, that sacrifice is grounded in a covenant. It must impose obligations on both parties to contribute to the relationship, Rabbi Grover said.

A covenant does not have to be paid in money. Anything that’s valuable would suffice. For many young people today, who may feel overstressed, overworked, and overburdened, spending a few hundred bucks (perhaps to appease their parents) may be annoying, but no great sacrifice.

What’s more, dues from young people make up a small fraction of the overall revenue of most synagogues. In Beth Tze-

dec’s case, less than five percent of its dues revenue came from under-40 members, which amounted to around \$120,000. So the congregations don’t necessarily need their money either.

“What we need is their time, their energy, their commitment. Will you come to minyan? Will you come on Shabbat? Will you volunteer to lead a shiva?” Rabbi Grover said.

“There are a thousand things that shuls could do a lot better if they had volunteers to take on the task. If that was the exchange (Beth Tzedec) was giving, ‘we’ll give it to you for free, but this is what we expect of you,’ to me, that would be phenomenal.”

Rabbi Wernick agrees that the relationships between synagogues and their members should be characterized by covenant. However, he believes these institutions need to recognize that the covenant has to be re-established from the ground up.

“I think that the covenant gets established through the building of relationship, and part of what we’re saying with this program is that we understand that... as you experience that value added, as that relationship grows, the covenant will grow with it and everything else will follow.”

Part of the reason the traditional covenant was destabilized, according to Rabbi Wernick, is that the world outside of congregational life has changed so much in the last few decades. As noted by Robert Brym, people today are more assimilated. And society on the whole is becoming increasingly less religious.

“In the past, you assumed people were living meaningful Jewish lives, and the synagogue became a gathering place by which they would share in that together. Now, I think we have to do a lot more work in order to inspire people to live meaningful Jewish lives,” Rabbi Wernick said.

Rabbi Sid Schwarz, the founding rabbi of Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Bethesda, Md., and an expert on North American synagogues, also believes the old, transactional model of membership is on the way out. In fact, he goes as far as saying that it has already failed, and the onus is on shuls to recognize that.

“So what’s going to replace it? I use the term covenantal community, which I define as a group of people who share a common vision and mission of creating a community where there’s a sense of mutual obligation both towards the mission of the institution and to the people who are in it,” said Rabbi Schwarz, who writes and consults on North American synagogues and spiritual community.

He agrees with Beth Tzedec’s assessment of the issues and its increased emphasis on engagement and connection but, like Rabbi Grover, he also has concerns about offering membership for free.

“If you are either a synagogue president or a rabbi and you think that by eliminating dues that overnight you’re going to turn the synagogue around, you got another think coming,” he said. “People are looking for a panacea... But if it’s done without the needed prep and homework, you’re essentially courting disaster in terms of fiscal insolvency. And so I really caution people to say, don’t jump into this so quickly.”

However, he believes it’s possible for dues-free operations to survive, and even thrive. It all depends on the ability and willingness to go the extra mile to engage members on a personal level.

Rabbi Schwarz mentioned Beth Chaim Congregation in Danville, Calif., as an example of what that means in practice. Beth Chaim was hit hard by the economic downturn in 2007. One-third of members needed subsidized dues, but many more had to leave entirely.

The environment went from joyous to morose, and the leadership wasn't sure how to fix it. Eventually, after consulting with the community and conducting research, Beth Chaim decided to waive its membership dues, and put more focus on shared passion and connection.

The announcement immediately led to an influx of new members.

"Rather than coming to Beth Chaim to take advantage of the lack of mandatory dues, they were eager to identify their passions and commit to being engaged in ways that were meaningful to them and to the community," Dan Goldblatt, the rabbi at Beth Chaim, wrote in a blog post about the transition.

The shul invited its members, new and old, to declare the ways in which community participation would be genuinely meaningful for them. This process resulted in a personal document for each member, which Beth Chaim calls an "Engagement Commitment."

"While this has represented an enormous commitment of time on my part it is impossible to overstate the value the meetings have had. I emerge with a better understanding of the interests and needs of my congregants and, in turn, they emerge having had private time with their rabbi and feeling that the congregation is really here to meet their needs," wrote Rabbi Goldblatt.

For Rabbi Schwarz, the experience of Beth Chaim shows the power of covenantal community. Asking a person for money is easy and impersonal. Asking a person for their very self takes time, energy, and intention. But the extra effort is worth it.

Beth Tzedec is employing a similar strategy of meeting with all new members. They ask about their reason for joining, their Jewish interests, the activities they were hoping for, and more.

However, in part because many more members joined than they expected, conversations have only taken place with about one-third of the cohort. To help expand this outreach, they hired a director of family and young adult engagement, and a family engagement program specialist.

In a few months, Beth Tzedec will have a better idea about the early success of its initiative, depending on how many under-40 members renew—and how many graduating members are willing to pay their dues.

In the meantime, Rabbi Wernick is optimistic that his operation is on the path to building a strong, sustainable covenantal community.

"People have to experience the value of what the synagogue community can do, and what makes a synagogue community different from other communities," he said. "If you do it well, then people feel welcomed, they feel recognised, they feel connected to other like-minded people, and they find the Judaism that's being offered to be authentic, uplifting, and joyful.

"It's through those shared experiences that the covenantal relationship is solidified." ■

TanenbaumCHAT is adding 14 new classrooms to accommodate a Jewish day school enrolment boom in Toronto

/ Alex Rose

Fourteen new classrooms are coming to the Anne and Max Tanenbaum Community Hebrew Academy of Toronto, as part of an overdue building expansion for a school set to operate at maximum capacity for the upcoming academic year—with approximately 1,300 students enrolled.

The school will be able to take on an additional 250 students following construction, which is expected to be complete by September 2024.

The announcement comes six years after TanenbaumCHAT cut tuition and closed its northern campus in an effort to increase affordability for families. When the school year started in September of 2017, there were only 874 students enrolled.

As that number increased, the need for space was temporarily accommodated by moving some elements of its operations—such as business and recruitment offices—out of the school building on Wilmington Avenue. Storage space was also cleared to create new classrooms.

"We have had fantastic growth over the last number of years in terms of student population and enrolment. We are blessed to be successful and thriving," said Jonathan Levy, head of school for TanenbaumCHAT.

"We need to expand our physical footprint, and we are doing that to enhance the student experience, to accommodate our staff, and to be able to continue to serve the Jewish community into the future."

The new wing will be constructed in the northwest corner of the property, which is currently the edge of the field. Preparation for construction has already begun, and it will continue throughout the school year. However, beyond reducing the size of the field, impact on students is expected to be minimal.

The expansion will cost about \$11 million, said Levy. The school has a lead gift in place, although Levy could not yet disclose who it came from.

For Daniel Held, chief program officer at UJA Federation of Greater Toronto, this announcement is evidence for the success of a recent initiative to increase accessibility for Jewish day schools in Toronto, as part of making them a cornerstone of the community.

"We also know that the cost of Jewish day school is prohibitive for many," he said, "and our work at Federation has real-

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ly focused on making day school more affordable for families with a goal of increasing enrolment.”

Held cited two main initiatives that contributed to TanenbaumCHAT’s success. The first was the aforementioned 2017 affordability initiative in 2017, which merged the school’s two campuses and cut tuition.

The second is the Generation’s Trust, which is an endowment designed to provide scholarships for children to attend Jewish elementary schools. Enrolment had been decreasing for 17 years, Held said, but the trend reversed course four years ago.

Jewish elementary schools are the primary feeder schools for TanenbaumCHAT, so increasing their student population has also contributed to the high school’s boom. In 2017, there were 175 students entering Grade 9; this year, there are 375.

For the head of school, the flow of students is not just evidence of the success of the affordability initiatives, but also of the academic accolades.

“I think that lowering the cost a few years ago was certainly beneficial to many families, but I think that families and students are drawn to what is an exceptional academic program as well as an exceptional extracurricular program,” said Levy.

“Students want to be part of what this is. Families want to be part of what the school is. And without excellence, I don’t think the cost would simply do it for people. People still want a great experience, and that’s what TanenbaumCHAT provides.” ■

A new curriculum at Reform synagogue supplementary schools in Canada aims to teach students more about Israel than ‘flags and falafel’

/ Alex Rose

Reform synagogues in Canada are introducing a new Israel curriculum to their supplementary schools this year that intends to teach students to engage with and understand Israel rather than telling them how they are expected to feel about it.

In its inaugural year, the curriculum will be aimed at students in grades 4, 5 and 6, and the theme will be “shared spaces.” The team behind the curriculum designed six sessions this year, and hope to make 12 for next year.

Israel education needs a drastic redesign because the current strategies end up alienating young Jewish people, said Lesley Litman, project manager for the new curriculum, and

the director of Hebrew Union College’s executive master’s in Jewish Education.

“What attracted me to it is the fact that it was for younger kids. We tend to focus on middle school and high school. It’s too late. If you look at the research... kids are ready at a much younger age to engage deeply with Israel.”

Younger kids are typically given a superficial introduction to Israel, which she calls “flags and falafel” because it focuses on simple cultural touchstones without addressing any of the more difficult or complicated aspects of Israel’s existence. The research shows that not only are younger kids ready to engage more deeply with Israel, but also that failing to meet this need actually undermines their future relationship with Israel.

“People say ‘They can’t know anything bad about Israel, first they have to love Israel. And then we’ll teach ’em the hard stuff.’ And that’s backfired,” said Litman. “Because kids know about the hard stuff, but we don’t make space and create frameworks for kids to know what Israel is in a deep and real way.

“That doesn’t mean that eight-year-olds are going to talk about the conflict, but they know something’s going on, so they’re going to have questions, they’re going to be curious. So the question was how to create a curriculum that would make space for kids to get a broader and deeper understanding and insight into Israel as a place, and not just a political entity, and not just flags and falafel.”

The new curriculum project was conceived by Rabbi Lawrence Englander, rabbi emeritus at Solel Congregation of Mississauga, Ont., which he founded in 1973, and an adjunct rabbi at Temple Sinai in Toronto. He has also served as the chair of Arzenu, the political voice for reform, progressive and liberal Zionism at the World Zionist Congress.

Rabbi Englander began to worry that young Canadian Jews were distancing themselves from a relationship with Israel, and he thought that the educational practices may have been part of the problem. He began reaching out to Jewish educators, and found they shared his concerns.

He contacted Lee Weisser, president of Arza Canada, the Canadian arm of Arzenu, and they began by identifying the main flaws in current Israel education and designing a new curriculum to address them. To that end, they assembled a team of educators from across the country and hired Litman to run the project.

In its first year, the new curriculum has already attracted 32 participants. Each participant will receive a handbook and access to a Google Classroom with information on the six sessions, all of which can be modified at the discretion of the educator, depending on age, context, and other factors.

Keren Kayemet L’Israel provided \$40,000 for the first year of the initiative, which covered almost all of the costs. However, the project is looking for more funding next year, with expected costs coming in at \$100,000 as Rabbi Englander and his team hope to double the output from six sessions to 12. They also hope to eventually expand it to cover all age groups, and even create programs for adults. A conference in Toronto, scheduled from Aug. 27-29, will introduce it to participants.

So how did Rabbi Englander and the rest of the team cre-

ate a curriculum that satisfied their educational goals? Litman identified three principles that guided the creation of the new curriculum.

The first is meeting the students where they are. For grades 4, 5 and 6, that means asking about the spaces they interact with in their lives, what it means to share those spaces with others, and what kind of issues can arise when different people need to share space.

The next principle is introducing the students to a more robust vision of Israel, instead of the “watered-down” version they usually get. That means looking at the different groups of people who share the space of Israel, what their day-to-day life is like, and what their interactions with each other might be like.

The final principle is establishing the relationship between Israel and the young Jewish students in Canada. The kids won’t be taught that they’re expected to love Israel—because that has backfired in the past—but they will be taught that Israel is a space all Jews share and are connected to.

Rabbi Englander knows that some people may be skeptical of the new curriculum, because they feel that it is not concerned with promoting love for Israel. However, he says that the research shows the best way to promote a sustainable, loving relationship starts with open and honest education.

“I’m not excluding love. I’m saying that the love will come through engagement. You don’t start with a love and you say, ‘here’s a country, you got to love it,’ because that’s proven to be non-productive,” he said.

“Unfortunately, I think that’s where a lot of Jewish education institutions are stuck. They’re still saying, ‘we have to love Israel no matter what, that’s who we are as Jews.’ And that message isn’t going over, it’s not working. So that’s why I’m saying we start with engagement. And if we start with engagement, if you want people to engage with anything, they have to learn about it.” ■

OneTable, a program that encourages (and pays) young adults to host Shabbat dinners, is coming to Toronto in the fall of 2023

/ Alex Rose

An organization that encourages young American adults to host Shabbat dinners is opening its first Canadian office this fall.

OneTable was created by Aliza Kline in 2014 to address the twin concerns of declining religious engagement among

young Jewish people and increasing levels of loneliness in the population overall. It provides support and funding for people to host Shabbat dinners, with funding from the UJA Federation of Greater Toronto.

Would-be hosts apply on OneTable’s website and include a description of the dinner they’re planning—not just the menu, but also details like the setting, how many people they’re hosting, if it’s in-person or virtual, if it’s by invitation only or open to other guests, and more.

“Essentially, it’s what we call an Airbnb for Shabbat, if you will, where every week there are do it yourself, home-based curated opportunities for young adults to celebrate Shabbat in whatever way they want,” said Irit Gross, OneTable’s chief advancement officer.

“It can be as traditional as maybe some of us grew up, which was around a dinner table and a roasted chicken all the way to perhaps a sunset on the beach vegan meal.”

Once the dinner is accepted by a OneTable staff member, the host is in the system and it becomes easier for them to host more dinners in the future. They just have to post their dinner information by 11:59 p.m. Tuesday to be approved.

Hosts are eligible for \$10 per person attending their Shabbat dinner, with a maximum of \$100 for invite-only dinners and \$300 for open or host approval dinners. They receive the money as a gift card or code for vendors that partner with OneTable and can use it for resources like grocery stores, prepared food delivery, decor, and more.

So far, OneTable has had 215,000 people attend its dinners, and about 10 per cent have been hosts. Gross says about 60-70 per cent of both hosts and guests are repeat OneTable attendees.

“The reason that we like that is because we are in the business of changing behaviours. We don’t want people to come for a Shabbat dinner or host a Shabbat dinner only once and never come back every Friday night. There’s an opportunity to intentionally set aside this really special time.”

OneTable provides resources other than just the website and funding. They also offer online Shabbat guides and access to staff members for information, support and coaching.

“(They) help build confidence for those that maybe are on the fence for hosting or on the fence for guesting. And really just making sure everyone, if they send an email or pick up the phone, has someone to be in touch with to understand how they can do Shabbat in their way.”

Jenna Durney has used OneTable to host a variety of Shabbats in Seattle, and says the program has helped bring Shabbat into the lives of both herself and her friends.

“If we didn’t have OneTable, I’m not quite sure how often we would be coordinating something together, let alone do Shabbat as often as we do. Shabbat has become very important to me, and I love the resources that OneTable offers. I think the guides are amazing at helping people host something more intentional with their Shabbats,” she said in an email to The CJN.

“I honestly started simple, with lighting candles and doing a game night. I then realized I had a lot of interfaith couple friends and decided to use the Shabbat manual to set the tone of what Shabbat is and why we do it. I had a number of friends who were struggling with mental and emotional stuff, so I hosted a Shabbat to build space for healing... Right now, I am

hoping to get a simple bring-your-own-picnic Shabbat at the lake before summer ends.”

Gross’s research into Toronto and communication with people in its Jewish community showed her that OneTable would be a good fit for the city’s needs. OneTable also does not generally launch in cities without a source of funding secured for three years, which UJA committed to upfront. They are currently hiring for the role of community field manager.

Partnering with OneTable was an easy call for UJA, said chief program officer Daniel Held, because it aligns with the two goals of their strategic plan: reach the greatest number of Jews in Toronto with compelling Jewish experiences, and empower them to lead their own Jewish lives and make their own Jewish decisions.

“We think hosting Shabbat dinner is a core example of what it means to be empowered because the host makes decisions about what ritual they will do, what ritual they will not do, who will be invited, who sits around a table, what kinds of foods they will serve, and how that symbolizes Shabbat for them. And I think that’s a really important piece of being empowered. It takes knowledge and courage and passion to host others around the table.” ■

Ontario court agrees that a case about funding for religious schools should proceed

/Lila Sarick

A Jewish group advocating for government funding for religious schools in Ontario cleared a major legal hurdle on its path to a court hearing.

A decision by the Ontario Superior Court issued this week ruled that the lawsuit launched by Grassroots for Affordable Jewish Education can proceed, over the Ontario government’s objections.

The 46-page decision from Justice Eugenia Papageorgiou issued Aug. 21 stated the Jewish volunteer advocacy group had a reasonable case which should be heard in court.

In an April 20 hearing, GAJE argued that the 1996 Supreme Court of Canada decision called Adler, which allowed Ontario to continue funding Catholic schools but not other private or denominational schools, is outdated and needs to be reopened. The group’s attempts to take the case to court had been opposed by the federal and Ontario governments.

The recent decision allows the case against the provincial government to proceed, but halted the suit concerning the Canadian government.

“There is a reasonable chance that an application judge may find that the Grassroots Applicants have raised: i) new circumstances or evidence which have fundamentally shifted the pa-

rameters of the debate; and/or ii) new legal issues as a result of significant developments in the law which support the revisitation of binding precedent,” Justice Papageorgiou wrote.

“My finding in this regard is not based upon one single argument raised by the Grassroots Applicants; it is based upon the combined effect and totality of the new circumstances (social, political and legislative) and developments in the law they have raised.”

The decision was welcomed by GAJE, which can now move to scheduling a date to have the case heard in Ontario Superior Court, said Mordechai Ben-Dat, a co-founder of the group.

“We said things have changed and it’s now time to re-examine whether Adler should still stand as law and she agreed. She not only agreed, but she wrote 46 pages,” Ben-Dat said in an interview with The CJN.

“It’s not simply a slam dunk for people who said ‘no, no, Adler closes the door.’ The judge not only put her foot in the door, she kind of threw it open for people to have this legal debate.”

Religious schools in other provinces receive partial government funding. Ontario remains the only hold out in refusing to fund only public and Roman Catholic schools.

“The founding agreement of 1867 protected the minority rights in Upper Canada and Lower Canada,” Ben-Dat said. “Now 100-some odd years later, the province of Ontario refuses to act on the same basis of that founding agreement, namely to protect minorities. It’s just ironic.”

GAJE expects that other independent schools will join as the case proceeds to a hearing on its merits. Still a final resolution is “months if not years away,” Ben-Dat said. Even if the group is successful in court, Ontario would almost certainly appeal the decision, he said. ■

Ya’ara Saks says both compassion and science are needed as the York Centre MP takes on a new cabinet post

/Lila Sarick

The portfolio handed to Ya’ara Saks on July 26 was already packed with challenges when it was created during a peak time of COVID.

But those challenges have only grown more acute since then.

Prior to her new posting as Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, the Liberal MP for Toronto’s York Centre riding was Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development.

Saks, who was first elected in a 2020 byelection, takes over a position that was initiated in October 2021—and previously held by Carolyn Bennett, who is now winding down her lengthy

career as Liberal MP for the St. Paul's riding of Toronto.

But even as the pandemic has waned, mental health has not rebounded to pre-COVID levels.

Overdose deaths have continued to increase. A total of 7,328 "apparent opioid toxicity deaths" occurred in 2022, an average of 20 deaths per day, according to the Public Health Agency of Canada. In 2019, prior to the pandemic, the average number of deaths per day was 10, which increased to a peak of 22 in 2021, the agency reported.

Meanwhile, regular surveys by Mental Health Research Canada find that levels of high anxiety and depression haven't changed since the summer of 2022.

The overdose crisis is her first priority, Saks said. She is traveling to British Columbia this week where a pilot project decriminalizing possession of small amounts of drugs is underway.

In January, the federal government exempted B.C. residents from criminal charges for possessing up to 2.5 grams of illegal drugs as part of a three-year pilot project. A number of other municipalities, including Toronto, have also requested permission to decriminalize simple possession.

The government has also invested in safer supply programs, increased opioid treatment and supervised consumption sites, according to a statement announcing the decriminalization initiative.

The approach has generated criticism from Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre, who says it has made Vancouver "hell on earth."

"We're told that giving out and decriminalizing hard drugs would reduce drug overdoses," Poilievre told the House of Commons in May. "These so-called experts are typically pie in the sky theorists with no experience getting people off drugs, or they're members of the misery industry—those paid activists and public health bureaucrats whose jobs depend on the crisis continuing."

Saks disputes the claims, saying Canada has studied similar initiatives in other jurisdictions, such as Portugal, and is monitoring the experience in B.C. closely.

"The war on drugs was shown not to be an effective way to handle addiction and substance use for those who are suffering through the opioid crisis," she said in an interview with The CJN.

"The difference between what the government is doing with regards to harm reduction and safe supply and what the Conservatives have been putting out into the world is the difference between evidence and science-based approaches and false narratives."

Saks will also be overseeing a massive project first announced in 2021, the launch of a national, bilingual, suicide-prevention hotline. The service is slated to come online in November.

The 24-hour line will be administered by Toronto's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. Critics, including the Canadian Mental Health Association, say that without additional funding, the crisis line will result in increasing already long waiting lists for help.

Saks confirmed that the hotline, 988, is "on target" to launch in November, as planned. The federal government has earmarked \$156 million for the program roll out, but providing mental health services is a shared financial responsibility.

"The 988 is meant to be a crisis line, it's not a preventative measure," Saks said. "We also recognize that mental health and the

ongoing supports that are needed, beyond that moment of crisis, really lies with the provinces to work with us in partnership, to ensure that once the crisis has abated, that they are directed to the services that are local and available to them."

Saks, who owned a yoga studio and was the director of a charity that focused on mental health before she was elected, says her experiences have prepared her for the challenges of the portfolio.

"We're in a moment when we look at the mental health of Canadians, we have to understand that this is a top-of-mind issue and that we have to approach it with science, but also with a lot of compassion." ■

Quebec government to open a representative office in Israel—its first in the Middle East

/Janice Arnould

Quebec plans to open a representative office in Israel, an initiative that the Jewish community and the Israeli consulate have long promoted.

The Coalition Avenir Québec government, first elected in 2018, announced on Aug. 3 that it will establish the office in Tel Aviv, within the Canadian embassy, this fall.

Its realization is being viewed as a testament to the enduring bond between the province and Israel, despite the political turmoil it is now facing.

This will be the 35th such overseas office maintained by the province, and its first official full-time presence in the Middle East, according to the announcement.

International Relations Minister Martine Biron said the office will strengthen bilateral economic relations, as well as promote institutional collaboration in the areas of research and innovation.

Trade between Quebec and Israel is valued at \$525 million annually.

"Israel's dynamic economy offers business opportunities," particularly in information technology and life sciences, Biron posted on social media, noting that numerous multinational corporations have research and development centres in the country.

"This office will bring economic spinoffs and will highlight Quebec's expertise in the sectors of the future."

Quebec is especially interested in tapping into Israel's know-how in cybersecurity and artificial intelligence.

Biron, who is also the minister for the Francophonie, observed that more than 500,000 Israelis speak French.

In March 2022, Pierre Fitzgibbon, minister of economy, innovation and energy, led a week-long mission of business people and university officials to Israel.

The announcement speaks of Quebec and Israel having had

ties for over six decades, and of the numerous agreements on co-operation in research and development in a variety of areas signed by the two governments in 2007 and 2017. That latter year, Liberal Philippe Couillard became the first Quebec premier to lead an official mission to Israel.

In addition, there are myriad areas of collaboration in the academic and cultural fields.

Israeli Consul General Paul Hirschson made persuading the government to set up an official Quebec presence in Israel a priority when he took up his Montreal post two years ago.

However, he gave credit for laying the groundwork to his four immediate predecessors, going back to Yoram Elron, now ambassador to Bulgaria, who was consul general in Montreal from 2007-2011.

“It has been a privilege to work with Minister Biron and the Legault government to realize the establishment of a Quebec representative bureau,” he said. “With a presence in Israel, Quebec will be able to better represent itself in one of the world’s most exciting technology innovation hubs.”

Hirschson shared the protocol letter sent by the Quebec government to the government of Israel. It describes the mandate of the office as “developing and consolidating” political, as well as economic and multi-sectorial, relations between the two governments. Its staff, who have yet to be named, will be responsible for assisting any Quebec project in Israel.

Federation CJA and its advocacy agency, the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA), commended the government, saying that the creation of the government bureau follows “years of discussion.”

“CIJA has encouraged successive Quebec governments to open a formal diplomatic mission in Israel for several years,” the organizations said in a joint statement.

“The Quebec-Israel relationship has grown remarkably since its beginnings in the days of (Parti Québécois leader) René Lévesque, who noted the similarities between the two people’s struggles for self-determination. More recently, representatives of the Quebec government have made official visits to Israel.”

Through its consulate in Montreal, Israel has had an official presence in Quebec for over half a century, they added.

Eta Yudin, Quebec vice-president, said, “We congratulate Minister Biron for expanding Quebec’s international presence to Israel...Quebec and Israel both have much to gain through the opening of this mission.

“As Quebec’s first mission in the Middle East, the selection of Israel is a testament to the Abraham Accords’ success in ushering in a new regional trade and economic reality. We are confident the bureau, as a valuable resource for partnerships, will bolster existing links and generate significant opportunities for international collaboration.”

Yudin also said an official delegation will enhance connections between Quebec and Israel’s French speakers and the larger francophone world.

Federation CEO Yair Szlak said, “Through two governments, a pandemic, and an ever-evolving geopolitical landscape, the bureau’s creation reflects the non-partisan and robust bond between Quebec and Israel. There is much to celebrate on this occasion.” ■

Jewish refugees from Ukraine have been slowly rebuilding their lives in Montreal

/ Janice Arnoold

Coming home from her shift at a dollar store, physically exhausted, Vlada Bronz wondered whether she had made the right decision in settling in Montreal and not staying in Romania where she had fled soon after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Trained as a lawyer and an experienced teacher of English as a second language, Bronz and her then 8-year-old daughter made the perilous drive from Odesa to Romania 10 days after the war started on Feb. 24, 2022. The vital Black Sea port was the target of a deadly airstrike on that first day, and would be attacked repeatedly.

While it provided sanctuary, Romania was not an easy place to live. Bronz did not know the language and her professional qualifications were not recognized. Besides, she said, “I never dreamed of emigrating from Ukraine” where her husband remains to this day.

A best friend from school had settled in Montreal 16 years earlier, so Bronz undertook the lengthy process of obtaining a Canadian visa, although she recalls she had “zero money in my pocket.” In July 2022, she and her daughter arrived in Montreal, having bought their tickets with money borrowed from her friend.

Bronz went to a shopping mall and handed out her resume to every store. The dollar store was the first to respond. “It was exceptionally difficult,” she said. “I had to get up at 5 in the morning. I walked my daughter 20 minutes to school and back, then went to work... I would return home with my legs aching and cry.”

Bronz was so discouraged she bought two tickets back to Romania that autumn, then changed her mind when she heard the situation was not good there, forfeiting the thousand dollars she could ill afford to waste.

She gave Montreal another chance, went on welfare and racked up debt. Growing more desperate, she acted on a suggestion to turn to the Jewish community.

“I Googled ‘Jewish community’ and ‘Montreal’ and the first thing that came up was (Agence) Ometz,” a Jewish human services agency that offers social, employment and immigration assistance.

“I immediately liked the atmosphere there; I felt secure, the people were nice and open,” Bronz said.

While taking integration classes, she volunteered at Café Zera, a food-services program based at the federation that trains and employs young adults with intellectual challenges.

“It was the first time I had ever worked with people with special needs, and it was a very good experience,” she said. “I have always loved working with children as I did in Ukraine teaching them.”

At her caseworker’s suggestion, Bronz trained and was certified as an aide to disabled children.

This summer, she was hired by the Sylvan Adams YM-YWHA to work at a day camp for children with special needs, thrilling enough, but all the more so because she was assigned to shadow David, a nine-year-old with Down syndrome, who had just settled in Montreal with his family from Ukraine.

“Vlada was the best gift from Ometz to us,” said David’s mother, Victoria Gavasheli, who arrived this March, with her husband and their daughter. They, like Bronz, are Ometz clients.

“With her professionalism, she gave us time to arrange our lives and to go to French courses,” said Gavasheli. “From the moment that we gave her David until the time when we picked him up we were absolutely sure that David was in reliable hands and we could devote those hours to solving our problems. We knew that David was absolutely happy in the camp and everything was under control with Vlada. David developed in many ways.”

Rachel Morgenstern-Clarren, Ometz’s senior communications and stewardship officer, commented, “Going from being a client to being able to give back to other clients through her new profession was a beautiful full circle moment for Vlada.”

Before the war, Gavasheli and her Georgian husband never imagined they would leave Ukraine. She had a good career in the hospitality industry, and he ran several food-services businesses.

“We were not rich, but we were OK. We had property, we travelled,” said Gavasheli, who fled from Kyiv to Poland soon after the war began. Caring for David, who also has diabetes and other health issues, made that three-day journey all the more harrowing.

In Poland, they lived in a monastery, always thinking they would return home soon. As the months dragged on, they thought of looking in Germany or Scandinavia for a haven.

But a friend of hers living in Israel suggested they inquire with the president of Federation’s Russian division about their chances in Montreal.

That president, Mikhael Goldshtein, told the couple, “You will not be alone here. Montreal has a strong Jewish community.” The Gavashelis were assisted by Ometz from their arrival.

Victoria is especially grateful to the community for enrolling her kids in Jewish camps. “They were like a psychological retreat for both children after all the stress they went through. They were running to the camp in the morning...Eliso (her daughter) made many new friends and studied many English words. Every day was a new page in their lives.”

The couple express their appreciation to all in the community who have donated to Ukrainian refugee relief, and “to everyone who helped us by their actions or encourage or good pieces of advice,” she said.

It is not known how many of the estimated 10,000 Ukrainian refugees who have come to Quebec since the war are Jewish. However, Ometz has helped over 250 Ukrainian Jewish refugees since the war began, said Morgenstern-Clarren.

Although they are rebuilding their lives, Bronz and Gavasheli are uncertain about their future here and are living one day at a time. But Bronz, now that her summer job at the camp is finished, is eagerly awaiting the outcome of an interview with a school board and hopes for permanent employment.

In addition to finding a meaningful career path, Bronz no longer feels alone. She has found a friend in Victoria.

Before that she says, “I avoided contact with other Ukrainian refugees; it was too painful talking about what happened, it would give me anxiety.” ■

Kelowna’s Jewish community had a close call—but the synagogue wasn’t damaged by wildfires

/ Janice Arnold

There were a tense couple of days for the Okanagan Jewish Community (OJC) after its synagogue was suddenly declared within the evacuation zone on Friday, Aug. 18, as wildfires burned out of control around Kelowna.

On Sunday, Aug. 20, past-president Steven Finkleman was on the scene trying to persuade police to let him enter Beth Shalom Congregation to retrieve its two Torah scrolls, emphasizing to them the spiritual value of these religious texts.

But the law enforcement officers would not let him through even though the building is only about 100 yards from the edge of the evacuation zone. Finkleman decided not to argue with the directive, given the magnitude of the crisis.

Meanwhile, the congregation’s nervousness has eased considerably with the receding of the fire’s front line overnight from Saturday to Sunday, Finkleman told The CJN. “The risk (to the *sifrei Torah*) is extremely low at this point,” he said on Sunday afternoon.

“Our secretary who lives fairly close (to the synagogue) said it was the first night she didn’t see any fire nearby,” Finkleman added.

Finkleman is aware of two couples who are congregation members who had to evacuate their homes in West Kelowna, the town of about 33,000 adjacent to Kelowna itself (population about 150,000), where the fire started on Thursday.

They are safe, he said, and have accommodation with family or friends in Kelowna, and their houses are undamaged. Finkleman has no confirmed information of any member’s home being hit by the blaze.

At the outset of the inferno, Beth Shalom sent out a bulletin to its approximately 85 members offering assistance to any who needed it. By Sunday, 10,700 area residents remained under an evacuation order, and another 9,500 were put on alert to be prepared to leave at any time.

“We had a good response to our request for accommodation. Eight or 10 members offered to put people up in their homes, but no one has contacted us (saying they need a place to go),” he said.

The Chabad Centre in Kelowna also sprang into action. Rabbi Shmuly Hecht said some evacuees are being sheltered and fed at its centre, and several families offered to take others in.

As soon as the crisis arose, he and his wife Fraidy began calling “round the clock” to everyone in their community to see if they were all right and urging any who could to help those in need. The couple is there to offer practical and moral support to anyone who wants it, he said.

On Sunday morning, B.C. Wildfire Service and local fire department officials said at a news conference that conditions had been favourable the previous night to combat the fire, which covered about 11,000 hectares, due to calm winds and cooler temperatures. Almost 500 firefighters from around the province were on the ground, they reported.

Finkleman, a Winnipeg native and retired pediatrician who has lived in Kelowna for 40 years, said from his south-facing home he never saw any flames, just heavy smoke that blankets a wide area, including Summerland, about one hour south where this reporter is located.

He thinks this conflagration is worse than the one that devastated Kelowna exactly 20 years ago. "That was huge but it was in one area south of the city... This started on the west side and went across the lake (to the main city.)"

On Sunday, the congregation was making plans to organize a collection of food, clothing or whatever is needed for evacuees staying in the main shelter the city has set up in an arena.

Finkleman said Beth Shalom has received numerous emails of concern and offers of support from Jewish communities across Canada, which it appreciates, but at the moment there is nothing it needs from the outside.

"There was even a woman, a stranger, in West Vancouver who offered a room in her place to us," he said.

Founded in 1980, the congregation built its synagogue more than 35 years ago at 102 Snowsell St. N. The congregation is not affiliated with any denomination, and describes itself as pluralistic. A lot of emphasis is put on cultural and educational activities, said Finkleman, chair of programming and membership.

Beth Shalom currently has no clergy since not renewing the contract of Rabbi Tom Samuels, a Toronto native, who served the congregation for two years. He was the congregation's first full-time spiritual leader.

Finkleman said the congregation has decided not to engage another permanent rabbi for the next couple of years, only partly for financial reasons. Instead, it will be engaging a visiting rabbi or cantor for monthly Shabbatons.

The first visiting rabbi, who came Aug. 11-13, was Rabbi Jonathan Infeld of Vancouver's Congregation Beth Israel. The next is Rabbi Russell Jayne of Congregation Beth Tzedec in Calgary scheduled for Sept. 1-2.

Although more than two years of COVID restrictions negatively affected Beth Shalom, which like other synagogues tried to keep members engaged remotely through Zoom, the membership numbers have actually grown slightly from pre-pandemic times, said Finkleman.

In addition to Kelowna, members come from throughout the Okanagan, from Vernon in the north to Osoyoos at the U.S. border.

The congregation is anticipating even greater expansion in the years ahead as Kelowna and the entire Okanagan's population booms. The previous decade's Canadian census identified about 2,000 Jews in the area, half living in Kelowna. Finkleman thinks the latest 2021 data will show the number has increased considerably. ■

A fund to help victims of domestic violence expands across Canada with Hadassah-WIZO's help

/ Alex Rose

A charity for survivors of domestic violence that started in Calgary is setting up centres across Canada, with the help of Canadian Hadassah-WIZO.

Rebecca Snukal, a criminal defence lawyer, started Franny's Fund in 2021 to help victims of child abuse gain access to counselling services.

"What the statistics show is that the more meaningful approach to dealing with harm, particularly with children, is an urgent response. And so, the sooner you can get a child into counselling, the better it is," Snukal said.

"But if there's no resources, and if you're a working parent, and let's say you now find yourself in a situation where you're a single parent because of a no-contact condition, it's very hard to take time off of work and things like that. And so I wanted to be able to create a fund (for) some of these families that are protecting their kids but aren't eligible for other services."

Snukal created Franny's Fund, named after her mother, because the current system can disincentivize reporting domestic violence, which makes it impossible to change patterns of violence.

"If you don't report domestic violence or child abuse, then there's no mechanism to stop the cycle of abuse. A lot of this stuff comes from intergenerational forms of parenting," she said. "So let's say you were hit as a child and then you start hitting as a parent, if you're given the opportunity to learn more sophisticated ways of parenting or being in the world, then you can stop that cycle."

"Of course, there's cases where intervention and family reunification is not safe and not possible, but there's many cases where... you can get help and you can change, and families can be reunited in safer ways, parents can become better. And so we want to offer this as an opportunity for that to happen."

Parents who report their partners for child abuse can be ineligible for public counselling services. Paradoxically, if a parent fails to report their abusive partner, then child welfare would intervene and more public programming and counselling would become available for families.

In Alberta, if parents share custody of a child, then they both need to sign off on the child receiving counselling. However, when a parent has been charged, they may withhold consent for counselling because they worry it could weaken their legal

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position.

It's possible to get a court order that the child should receive counselling without the second parent signing off, but it is quite expensive to obtain. So Franny's Fund also provides funding for that process.

When the fund first started, it focussed on ensuring counselling for children who were abused. But as the charity expanded, it was also able to provide support for siblings and parents of the children. Franny's Fund then grew to support a broader set of services, including ones that can help people leave unhealthy or dangerous relationships.

Last year, Canadian Hadassah-WIZO (CHW) learned about Franny's Fund, and quickly identified the charity as a natural partner, said Lisa Colt-Kotler, CEO of CHW. One of CHW's goals is to support victims of domestic violence in both Canada and Israel.

"I was so impressed with what Rebecca had done and accomplished, and the impact that could be made to help support victims of domestic violence this way, that I said to her, "would you like us to take you national?" Colt-Kotler said. "And that's what we did."

In 2022-2023, CHW committed \$100,000 to Franny's Fund. That money helped open centres in Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa, and Montreal, with each local centre, including Calgary, receiving \$20,000. For the next year, CHW has committed \$150,000 with each city receiving \$30,000.

The eventual plan is to introduce Franny's Fund to smaller cities as well, Colt-Kotler said.

In Israel, CHW works with an organization called Safety Net that gives a fresh start to women who are leaving shelters. CHW also supports the Michal Sela Forum to provide highly trained protective dogs to families who are deemed to be at an extreme risk of domestic violence.

CHW began a fundraising campaign this month called Starting Over Safely (SOS) for its projects that support victims of domestic violence. ■

A DNA test reunited long-lost cousins who were separated by the Holocaust

/ Samantha Goodman

For 80 years, Raymonde (Ray) Fiol believed that her mother and all her mother's family had been murdered in the Holocaust. That all changed when a Montreal woman contacted her after their DNA matched on an online genealogy platform.

Fiol was born in Paris, France, and is a Jewish child survivor of the Holocaust. She was hidden during the war by a Christian family. Her parents, David Nathansohn and Esther Bendet, were murdered in Auschwitz when Ray was just seven years old.



She was taken in by an uncle, her father's brother. She later met, and married, an American soldier, Phil Fiol, in Paris. They moved to New York, then Florida, and ended up in Las Vegas.

Fiol has researched her family history extensively. She has been reunited with the beloved Christian family that saved her life, but there were still gaps.

In Canada, meanwhile, Montreal resident Brenda Fayerman had been researching her family. Her father was a Holocaust survivor who lost most of his family. In 2022, she received a match from her DNA test on MyHeritage and contacted Fiol.

"I spoke to Ray and she said 'I don't remember my mother. I can't find a single document about her.' But when she told me where her mother came from in Poland, I said her mother had to be related to my father's family because that's right next to where they came from," said Fayerman.

Fayerman had access to an abundance of research from this part of her family thanks to her New York relatives, Howard Lewin and William Lipschutz. They hold extensive records of the families' history.

"I searched the PDF document of the family tree for Esther Bendet. The only Bendet I found was a Sura Bendet Zelcer who had two daughters, one of them named Esther Zelcer," said Fayerman.

Fayerman suggested to Fiol that her mother's name was actually Esther Zelcer and she was using her mother's maiden name in order to hide at the time but still be recognized by family later.

"I was told by an aunt on my father's side that my mother had changed her name in Poland because she was an activist and the authorities were after her, but I never made the connection," said Fiol.

Fiol spoke to Lewin who confirmed this hypothesis about her mother. He said Esther Zelcer had two brothers who survived the Holocaust and lived in Lakewood, New Jersey until they died in 1966 and 1999.

"I couldn't believe it was possible that two of my mother's brothers were living just an hour away from me in New York for many years," said Fiol.

One of their daughters, Sarah Zelcer Orenstein, was living in Queens, New York.

"I called Sarah, and I said I think we are cousins. She had never done a DNA test, so she started the process," said Fiol.

In the meantime, Orenstein found a document from her fa-

ther indicating that he had a sister named Esther who married David Nathansohn in Paris.

“Three weeks later, I get a call from Sarah saying, ‘hi cousin.’ Her DNA test showed that we are first cousins,” said Fiol.

For decades, Fiol thought she had no one from her mother’s side. Now, not only does she have a first cousin, but many other close relatives living in New York.

“After a long reflection, I said to my husband that I’d like to go to New York and meet the family,” she said.

She contacted Orenstein who organized a family reunion with relatives flying in from Florida and Israel. Fayerman, who is actually a fairly distant fourth cousin, was also there.

On July 18, Fiol, Fayerman, and their spouses walked up to Orenstein’s door in New York. They were met by over 50 family members.

“It was overwhelming. I have no words. It was something that I dreamt of for so long. It was just wonderful,” said Fiol.

Fiol and Fayerman were able to meet Orenstein and her family in person including Sarah’s brother from Florida, another first cousin.

“Sometimes you see reunions in the airport with balloons and people hugging and screaming. It wasn’t like that, it felt very natural. We felt like we were part of the family,” said Fayerman.

Fiol said she even saw a resemblance between her daughter and Orenstein. Together, they looked at family photos and caught up on the many years they missed together.

“When I was at Sarah’s house with all of these family members, all I could think about was that Hitler didn’t win,” said Fiol. “I will remember that moment until the end of my days.”

Fiol and Fayerman continue to keep in touch with their new-found family members, and are talking about planning the next reunion in Fiol’s hometown of Las Vegas. ■

Yvonne Singer, a Toronto artist who was saved by Wallenberg as an infant, is still on a voyage of self-discovery

/ Ron Csillag

As an artist herself, Yvonne Singer can well appreciate the aesthetic merits of the open-air monument to Swedish Second World War hero Raoul Wallenberg that was unveiled over the summer at Churchill Park in Hamilton, Ont.

Though she had not, as of this writing, personally viewed the installation, dubbed “Be:longings,” Singer spoke admiringly of the 10 bronze-cast suitcases dispersed along a gravel path adjacent to the Hamilton aviary. She knows Simon Frank, one of the project’s three creators, and is aware that suitcases have been a potent symbol of the Holocaust.



“I like the fact that the suitcases are scattered,” Singer, a well-established visual artist and teacher in Toronto, said in an interview over lemon tea in her sun-drenched kitchen. “I think the imagery and symbolism are very effective in conveying the idea of displacement and emigration.” The old-timey valises evoke not just Wallenberg, Singer noted, but all victims and survivors of that terror-stricken era.

The outdoor project is also “minimal, which I like. I don’t like public sculptures that scream at you or are clichéd.”

Singer connects to the installation on a whole other level. The 78-year-old resident of Toronto’s Cabbagetown neighbourhood is Wallenberg’s goddaughter. She was born on his bed.

It’s a Hollywood-worthy tale that evolved over time, in a series of eye-popping twists, turns and coincidences—all amid Singer’s own personal voyage of self-discovery.

The backstory is its own blockbuster: The non-Jewish scion of a wealthy Swedish industrial and banking family, Wallenberg, then just 32, was recruited by the U.S. War Refugee Board and dispatched to Budapest to assist and rescue as many Jews in the Nazi-occupied Hungarian capital as possible. He arrived in July 1944, just as the Nazis had shipped some 440,000 Jews from the countryside to Auschwitz. They now set their sights on the Jews of Budapest.

Accorded diplomatic status, Wallenberg famously set off on a frenetic pace. He designed, printed and distributed thousands of the famous “Schutzpass”—an official-looking document that placed the holder under the protection of the neutral Swedish Crown. He also scoured the city for buildings to rent, finding 32, and crammed in as many souls as possible. The “safe houses” flew the yellow-and-blue Swedish flag and were declared protected by diplomatic immunity.

Known for his bluster and bravado, his greatest coup came when he persuaded Nazi commanders to call off the liquidation of Budapest’s Jewish ghetto, with its 70,000 inhabitants. The number of Jews Wallenberg is said to have rescued peaks at 100,000. In any event, he is credited with saving more Jewish lives during the war than any single government.

By January 1945, the Red Army was laying siege to Buda-

pest, and Wallenberg was taken into custody, supposedly on suspicion of being a U.S. spy. He promptly vanished into the gulag. A Soviet report in 1956 stated he had died in July 1947 of a heart attack in Moscow's notorious Lubyanka prison, but supposed eyewitness sightings and stories of contact with him from former inmates continued well into the 1970s.

In 2012, the diaries of a former head of the KGB, discovered in the walls of his Moscow home, stated there was "no doubt" that Wallenberg was "liquidated" in 1947.

But back to Singer.

On the night of Nov. 3, 1944, a desperate Tibor Vandor, who worked for Wallenberg as a courier and liaison to the underground, needed help for his wife, Agnes. She was in labour and had been turned away from Budapest's hospitals, which barred Jews. Wallenberg allowed the couple to use his own room, while he slept in the corridor.

The next morning, he was called in to see a newborn girl. Asked by the grateful parents to name her, Wallenberg chose Nina Maria Ava (Nina was his half-sister's name, Maria his mother's). The couple changed the first name to Yvonne, and Wallenberg agreed to be the child's godfather.

Singer knew nothing of this until she was 34 years old.

It was October 1979 when she read an article, reprinted from a U.S. newspaper, in the *Toronto Star* about Wallenberg's plight. The story included a reference to Singer's unusual birth taken from a Hungarian book on the Swedish hero written after the war. The baby with the Toronto connection, the parents, the godfather—were all there, mentioned by name.

When she read the piece, "I burst out crying," she told the *Star* after contacting the paper. Her story spilled forth a week later in a large Saturday *Star* article headlined "Swedish hero saved my life: Metro woman."

Singer is still struck by "the incredible coincidence of it all. Here I am in Toronto in 1979, reading the paper... it boggles the mind. I could have easily gone through life not knowing the story. Suddenly, I had a connection to this man, who sounds like he was fascinating."

Her parents had not told her the story. And there was another missing piece of the puzzle: their Jewishness.

At war's end, the Vandors went to Switzerland and Holland before settling in Montreal in 1949, where the parents shed their Jewish identities, doubtless seeking to forget. Tibor Vandor even became an elder in the United Church.

"I always pressed them for more information, and they always refused," even following the revelations in the *Toronto Star*, Singer recalled. "They told me very, very little." Her parents never revealed being Jews. Their silence encompassed "anything to do with the war. They were just not forthcoming."

Singer graduated from McGill University and went on to teach English and French at local high schools. She converted to Judaism to marry her husband, Ron Singer, a theatre director and educator, in 1966. A few years later, a cousin in England recalled being a flower-girl at Yvonne's parents' wedding, which she said took place in a synagogue. The parents denied it but their daughter believed it.

Singer's feelings of alienation as an immigrant child would evaporate on discovering that she had been born Jewish, whether the knowledge came from a cousin or the *Toronto Star*. "I felt like I'd come home, part of a history that goes back

thousands of years. I no longer felt rootless."

The Singers moved to Toronto in 1971, where Yvonne later began a prolific art career in various media and teaching visual arts at York University. Raising three daughters and a busy life meant there was little time to get involved in the Wallenberg file (though she was pleased when he became Canada's first Honorary Citizen in 1985 and when Canada Post issued a stamp commemorating Wallenberg a decade ago).

It's little surprise that Singer's art has explored themes of identity, history and memory. The outsider status she felt in her early life "is what made me think about ways of expressing that, either through language or visual imagery. So you go to what you know when you're an artist."

In 2016, the Swedish government declared Wallenberg officially dead, but to Singer, that offered no finality. "From what I learned, the Swedish government is not exempt from blame for trying to get Wallenberg out. I cannot reconcile the fact that [Wallenberg's family] could not exert any kind of leverage over the Russians to find out what happened to him."

She considers the godfather connection to Wallenberg an honour, "but I'm also very sad that I never met him. I think he would have been a fascinating person to talk to. The story is just very, very tragic."

The grandmother of nine sighed. Over the decades, the story for her was obviously very personal, "and I was still processing it. Maybe I'm still processing it, for a long, long time." ■

Obituary: Reuben Sinclair, 112, Canada's oldest veteran, remembered for his service and his zest for life

/ Sam Margolis

Reuben Sinclair, a Second World War veteran and a fixture at Remembrance Day school ceremonies in Vancouver, frequently addressing students more than a century his junior, died on Aug. 27. He was 112. Until his passing, Sinclair was the oldest living Canadian veteran, the country's oldest man and, reportedly, the third oldest man in the world.

To all who knew him, Sinclair, born in Lipton, Sask., on a Jewish farming enclave in 1911, was a remarkable man aside from his longevity.

"He was a man of character and a man of honour. He was always positive and always showed his appreciation. Anyone who ever met Dad always called him amazing," his daughter Karen Sinclair said.

This sentiment was repeated in numerous tributes to the nota-



ble centenarian in Vancouver and around the country following the news of his death.

"I'll always remember his zest for life and how much he loved being around people. He used to say, 'I'm amazing! I'm still here!' And I couldn't agree more—he really was amazing. I'm just fortunate that I got to know him over the last couple of years, because he touched so many people's lives," said Ezra S. Shanken, the CEO of Jewish Federation of Greater Vancouver.

"Mr. Sinclair proudly served with the Royal Canadian Air Force as a wireless operator during the Second World War, providing crucial information to Allied forces and saving many lives with his actions. His service and dedication to his country remains an inspiration to all Canadians. While we mourn his passing, we should celebrate his life and service to Canada," Minister of Veterans Affairs Ginette Petitpas Taylor said in a statement to The CJN.

Sinclair's father, Yitzok traveled from Ukraine and, in 1905, made his way to the Prairies where he was given land by Baron Maurice de Hirsch's Jewish Colonization Association. As a child, Sinclair worked on the farm, but during the Depression the family had to sell the land and move to Regina.

Sinclair was working in the Saskatchewan provincial treasury when the war started, and decided to join the Royal Canadian Air Force in 1942 at age 31. Though he was not obligated to do so—and technically not allowed at the time because he did not have a high school diploma—he felt it was his duty, as a Canadian and a Jew, to sign up for the armed forces.

"He walked away from his government treasury job with a life-long pension, where he would have been set up, because he was compelled to join the war. He could not sit back and watch what was happening in Europe from afar and had to do something about it," Sinclair's grandson, David Lipetz, said.

Diagnosed with flat feet and unable to serve overseas, he belonged to the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan and served Canada on the home front. Sinclair worked in the control tower at the Saskatoon BCATP base, teaching pilots how to manoeuvre take-offs and landings in the dark, a skill they would need in wartime Europe. This training is credited with saving countless lives by allowing Canadian forces to report to European allies unbeknownst to the Germans.

After spending most of his military service in Saskatchewan, he was redeployed to British Columbia at the end of the war.

With his youngest brother Joe, also a veteran, he opened Sinclair Bros. Garage and Auto Wrecking in Richmond, across from the since-demolished Fraser Street Bridge to Vancouver. The brothers collected old cars to salvage and refurbish and sold surplus military vehicles.

In 1964, Sinclair and his wife Ida moved to southern California, where he worked in a family furniture business. There the couple engaged in philanthropic endeavours, including, among other things, raising more than a million dollars for a cancer hospital and research facility. When Ida died in 1996, he returned to Canada.

"On a scale of one to ten, their marriage was a 12," members of his family said.

In recent years, he was frequently asked during interviews about the key to a long life, to which he would reply, "That's easy. I always say, if you have a problem, don't worry; you'll lose your hair. Fix it. If you have a problem, fix it. Don't sit back and worry. Worry is not going to help."

Not only did Sinclair boast a full head of hair into his 12th decade of life, he also lived at home and, according to reports, did not take any medications.

Always willing to discuss his story with youth, Sinclair, who received his first COVID vaccination at age 109, had, during the pandemic, taken to Zoom to talk to elementary school children across Canada about his life and experiences.

In these forums, students would ask questions ranging from life as a Jew in rural 1920s Saskatchewan to what kids would do for fun in an age without mobile phones, computers and television. Each of his answers was peppered with his ever-present laugh. As pandemic restrictions lifted, he would return to schools each year on Nov. 11, adorned with his military medals.

Sinclair's fondness for telling jokes and continually trying to lift the spirits of others was retold this past week by family members. Not long ago, after receiving a small increase to his military pension from Veterans Affairs, he called friends and relatives, singing "I'm in the money."

"The silver lining of this difficult day is that if you knew him, he definitely had an impact on you," grandson Daniel Lipetz said at his funeral, noting that Sinclair was constantly receiving fan mail from people around the country and letters of appreciation from prime ministers, ambassadors and royalty.

"His loss will be felt by so many in our community, but he has left us a legacy of kindness and resilience from which we can all draw inspiration. Canada is lucky to have had Reuben in her service and we are all better off having had him as a role model and example. He was a hero in the truest sense. May his memory be a blessing," said Taleeb Noormohamed, member of Parliament for Vancouver Granville.

In addition to family and friends, members of the Vancouver Police Pipe Band and the Royal Canadian Legion attended his funeral on Aug. 29.

Though his birth certificate was registered on Dec. 5, 1911, according to his family, Sinclair was actually born in July that year.

An honorary lifetime member of Vancouver's Congregation Schara Tzedeck, he is survived by three children, six grandchildren, 16 great-grandchildren and two great-great-grandchildren. ■