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Pioneer synagogue to be moved to a Calgary park

By RHONDA SPIVAK, Special to The CJN

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Calgary's Heritage Park is soon to be the only historical park in Canada that will have a restored pioneer synagogue on display.

"The only other synagogue I know of that exists in a historic park in North America is in San Diego," says Irena Karshenbaum, right, who proposed the idea to the board of directors of Heritage Park.

"The proposal was to build a replica of a synagogue that we knew had existed in the Montefiore colony of Jewish immigrants who had settled in Alberta in 1910. We had a photo of the Montefiore synagogue, but assumed the building itself no longer actually existed," says Karshenbaum, who is the president of a volunteer group she founded, The Little Synagogue on the Prairie Project Society.

"After the project was approved by Heritage Park, one of our board members, Emanuel Cohen, who was born on a ranch in eastern Alberta, did a lot of research and actually found the Montefiore synagogue that we were proposing to replicate," says Karshenbaum.

The Montefiore synagogue, which is approximately 800 square feet, was built in 1913 by Jewish immigrants from Russia and eastern Europe. It served about 30 Jewish families, not only as a synagogue but also as a school and community centre, and was built near the present-day village of Sibbald, just west of the Alberta-Saskatchewan border.



Due to harsh farming conditions, most of the Jewish settlers abandoned the Montefiore colony by the 1920s. Some settlers moved to Calgary and Edmonton, but most of them went to southern California, where they became chicken farmers.

"The synagogue was abandoned, and during the Great Depression, the government sold it around 1937 to a family for \$200," Karshenbaum says. "It was moved to a small town in eastern Alberta and lived in as a house and kept in the same family for almost 70 years. It remained there until Emanuel Cohen tracked it down last year.

"Our society bought it for \$55,000. The non-Jewish family living in it didn't know it had once been a synagogue."

Cohen, a 77-year-old real estate appraiser, says that in order to find the synagogue he searched through local school maps, museums, provincial archives and spoke to many local residents.

"I had been on the trail of that synagogue for the last 15 years, ever since I wrote my first paper on the Montefiore colony for the Jewish Historical

Society of Southern Alberta,” he says.

Karshenbaum says there “were lots of little synagogues on the prairies similar to this one, but they have been lost.

“Calgary is a city of a million people and has only about 8,000 Jews. Heritage Park has approximately half a million visitors a year. Most of the people who will go inside this synagogue will be non-Jewish, and for many it will be their first time ever setting foot inside a synagogue.”

The Little Synagogue on the Prairie Project Society, which Karshenbaum founded has launched a fundraising campaign, with the goal of raising a million dollars to move restore and equip the Montefiore synagogue. About \$400,000 has already been raised.

“We are hoping that the Jewish community in Canada will support this unique project, which is such a positive way to educate people about the beauty of Judaism,” Karshenbaum says.

Trudy Cowan, a heritage and museum consultant, will oversee the synagogue’s restoration.

“The building has an impressive amount of original historical content intact,” she says. “We have been able to access the original ceiling behind the drop ceiling that was added. The tops of the original windows are still there. We can even see they had a separate little library, and we have two books stamped ‘Montefiore Hebrew Free Public Library.’”

Cohen says that the “front of the synagogue had a Magen David, which is gone, but the amazing thing is that the nail holes for it are still there.”

The restored synagogue will have the capacity to host small weddings and bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies. Tour guides in costume will explain Jewish religion and culture to visitors to the synagogue.

The synagogue opens in the spring of 2009, the 120th anniversary of the first Jewish family, headed by Rachel and Jacob Diamond, settling in Calgary. Their great grandson, Bobby Libin is chair of the prairie synagogue society’s fundraising committee.

For more information, e-mail [littlesynagogue@shaw.ca](mailto: littlesynagogue@shaw.ca) or visit www.littlesynagogue.ca.

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