

preserving the past

With the restoration of a historic Alberta synagogue, U of C alumni are bringing a lost story to life.

By Beth Frank

Principal photography by George Webber

The story of the little synagogue that travelled across the Alberta prairie to its final home in Calgary's Heritage Park Historical Village is a tale of synchronicity, community pride and the type of dedication that can only come from a true labour of love.

It's also a story of a group of Calgarians—many of whom are University of Calgary alumni—who saw an opportunity to pass on the largely unrecognized history of the province's early Jewish settlers, and in doing so, bridge a cultural divide.

When The Little Synagogue on the Prairie opens in June, it will be the first synagogue in Canada moved to an historical village museum and interpreted for the public.

It started in the summer of 2005, when an intense young woman was sitting on her boyfriend's couch writing a list of all the things she wanted to do with her life. A friend of Irena Karshenbaum's had told her that putting her dreams on paper would ensure that the universe would conspire to make them come true.

Karshenbaum, BA'94, BComm'98, wanted to write a novel and publish children's books, among other things. One of the items on her list was to get a synagogue built at Heritage Park. Hardly a typical goal for the then 35-year-old mutual funds analyst and aspiring writer.

"I loved Heritage Park when I was little," she explains. Although the park is devoted to telling the story of southern Alberta from 1860 to 1914, it had no artifacts from the early Jewish community. "I always thought that there should be a synagogue there and I just felt that this was something I should do."

Karshenbaum's first step was to track down Trudy Cowan, LLD'03, a family friend and award-winning heritage expert, who led the successful restoration of the Lougheed House in Calgary.

"I hunted her down at the Jewish Film Festival and walked right up to her at intermission," says Karshenbaum. "When I told her of my idea, her face lit up and she said 'we have to talk.'"

Says Cowan: "I felt that the synagogue project really had to be done. And I felt that we could do it."

The pair began assembling a team and writing a proposal. Among the other U of C alumni who came on board were Jack Switzer, BEd'64, DipEd'72, Shel Bercovich, BEd'72, and Leslie Levant, BEd'69, DipEd'93.

Switzer is known as Calgary's unofficial Jewish historian. After retiring from a 30-year career as a business instructor at SAIT, he became involved with the Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta.



Provincial Archives of Alberta, #77.25873.

The Montefiore Institute in 1937; by then the building had been abandoned for nearly a decade.

"There's not much documented about the early Jewish settlers and some of the families are still a mystery to us," he says. "All the writing I do, I try to put that time in context; I try to draw some conclusions."

Levant's connections to that time were deep—and personal. Her husband's family began farming in Alberta in 1903; her own had settled on land in Saskatchewan. "It was a familiar story," she says. "For many Jewish families at the time it was a chance to escape the oppression in Eastern Europe and they were able to buy tracts of land in Canada for modest amounts."

In September 2006, the Little Synagogue on the Prairie committee took its proposal to build a replica of a typical prairie synagogue to the board of Heritage Park. The park's president and CEO Alida Visbach couldn't believe the serendipity. "We had been talking with some of our donors about having something as part of our village that reflected the Jewish culture," she says. "I couldn't believe the coincidence."

The project got unanimous board approval with a few conditions. The committee would be required to raise 90 percent of the \$1-million budget before ground could be broken.

"Before that, the most money I had ever raised was \$5,000 for WordFest," says Karshenbaum with a laugh. "Who was I? I was just a schmo sitting on a couch writing a list."

She was undeterred. The committee brought in more experts from the worlds of government and fundraising and sent letters to family, friends and anyone else they could think of.

In the meantime, the project's historians were exploring the



Irena Karshenbaum is leading the project to relocate and restore a historic Alberta synagogue.

status of synagogues built in Alberta in the late 1880s and early 1990s. The Montefiore Institute was one of them—a small wood-frame structure, built in 1916 on one of the Jewish farms near Sibbald. Named after Sir Moses Montefiore, a Jewish philanthropist from Britain, it served as a house of worship, study and community gathering until years of drought forced most of the small farming colony to more fertile ground.

Switzer had written an article about the synagogue in the Jewish Historical Society's publication *Discovery* in June 2002, dubbing it *The Little Synagogue on the Prairie*—a name that would stick.

Bercovich's grandfather was one of the settlers who was a prime mover in getting the Montefiore Institute built. "My father had his Bar Mitzvah there, and he told me about studying Hebrew there, and of social times, as well."

A retired teacher, Bercovich has spent hundreds of hours unearthing details of that time—stories, photos and oral histories—and is working on a video of the synagogue project.



(l-r) U of C alumni Leslie Levant, Shel Bercovich, Irena Karshenbaum, Jack Switzer and Trudy Cowan are among the principals helping to open a restored historic Alberta synagogue at Calgary's Heritage Park this summer.

As research progressed, the group learned that the abandoned Montefiore Institute had been moved to Hanna where it had been a private home ever since. When they approached the owner, they learned that the building was in surprisingly good condition and, best of all, for sale.

A new vision was then born—instead of just a replica, there would be an actual, fully restored prairie synagogue at Heritage Park, the first original restoration at the park in 23 years.

In just over two years, that vision was realized. The required 90 percent of the money was raised; individual donations ranged from \$10 to \$50,000, and included two Alberta government grants totaling \$314,000. In October 2008, ground was broken on the site at Heritage Park, concrete poured for the foundation, and in late November, the structure placed in its new home.

More restoration work will be done, overseen by architect Lorne Simpson, one of the city's foremost restoration architects, and educational programs developed about the contributions of Alberta's Jewish settlers.

"This bitty little building can tell so many stories," says Cowan. "And I think these stories will surprise—and touch—a lot of people who didn't realize there were Jewish farmers in Alberta. Jewish history is 120 years old in this province; it's another entry point to the story of the West."

The other story the little synagogue will tell, of course, is of how a group of U of C alumni with a passion to share their culture have helped unite a community.

"What I have learned is that ordinary people can do extraordinary things if they are determined enough," says Karshenbaum, who is now teaching volunteerism at Jewish Family Service Calgary.

Cowan agrees: "It seemed that every step of it fell together and it worked. It was bashert (destiny)."

Fundraising to complete The Little Synagogue on the Prairie project is ongoing. Please visit www.littlesynagogue.ca for more information.