

City's Jewish community worried about the future

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Audrey Lampert's grandfather Louis Attis (centre) came to Canada with his two sisters Bella and Hene from Dorbyan, Lithuania in 1905. The picture was taken circa 1912 in Moncton. Photo: Contributed/Audrey Lampert

Moncton's Jewish community has a rich history dating back to the late 19th century, but some worry the future is bleak.

Nicole Druckman, an immigration lawyer in Moncton and a member of the Tiferes Israel Synagogue, says the community is shrinking.

"If it continues to go the way it's going, unfortunately as sad as it is, I don't think we'll have a community. It's that bad," says Druckman.

Druckman is also a member of the synagogue's immigration committee. She says the synagogue started a program with the provincial government in the early 2000s which allowed them to sponsor Jewish immigrants to come to Moncton to settle. But she says the program ended within the last year or two.

"We no longer have the ability to bring in Jewish immigrants like we did," says Druckman.

Audrey Lampert is a member of Moncton's Jewish community. She says the numbers have been declining for years.

"Well it shrunk, just like New Brunswick, it's a microcosm of the province. The province's population is shrinking, and the Jewish community is shrinking."

The Past

The first Jewish settler to come to Moncton was Jake Baig in 1898. Lampert's grandfather Louis Attis and his two siblings came in 1905.

Like the Attis family, most Jewish settlers who immigrated to Moncton in the early 20th century were from Lithuania. They came for a better life and to escape antisemitism in Europe.

"The Jews were just not wanted so when they could, they left," says Lampert.

Most settled in the area of Lewis and Steadman streets, not far from where the synagogue is today.

Anne Jochelman is a retired school teacher who taught in Moncton for 34 years. Her grandfather Morris Gorber moved into his home on Lewis Street in the 1920s. Her uncle Herb still lives there.

"They were Orthodox Jews, they didn't drive on Jewish holidays, so they came and lived as close to the synagogue as they could," she recalls.

Some of the first Jewish immigrants in Moncton were peddlers who went door to door selling goods. Others opened grocery stores, meat markets or got into the clothing business.

"When the Jewish people came here, they had to start their own businesses because no one would hire them," says Jochelman.

Most agree that the peak of the Jewish community's population in Moncton was the 1950s, 60s and early 70s when about 150 families lived in the area.

"When I was growing up, you'd go to synagogue and there wasn't an empty seat. Everybody knew everybody," says Jochelman about the 60s and 70s.

Most of Jochelman's childhood friends went to university with many leaving for Montreal or Toronto after graduation.

"We're not as close knit as we were," says Jochelman. "The family unit isn't as close as it used to be."

The synagogue

Construction of the Tiferes Israel Synagogue on Steadman Street began in 1926 and was completed in 1932.

Jochelman says people didn't want a synagogue in the city – they didn't want Jews in the area.



Morris Gorber with his grandchildren in his kitchen at the Gorber family home on Lewis Street in Moncton circa 1961.
Photo: Contributed/Anne Jochelman

"They had somebody else purchase the land for them and they started the synagogue there, and it has been there ever since," she says.

Francis Weil is the president of the synagogue and estimates there are about 60 Jewish families in Metro Moncton, with less than 200 Jews in total. Weil says the building is rarely full on Saturday mornings.

"If we are 20 all together that's good," says Weil.

But he says things are different during bar and bat mitzvahs, the high holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and the annual Holocaust memorial service.

"Usually it's the big events. It's about the only time the synagogue is filled," says Weil.

Nancy Cohen joined the synagogue in the 1980s when she moved from Hamilton, Ont. to Sackville with her family. She still remembers her first trip to Moncton.

"We came to see the synagogue and a little kid came up to us and said, 'Is it true the devil lives there?' That was our first introduction to Moncton."

Antisemitism

Jochelman and her uncle Herb Gorber say they have dealt with antisemitism in Moncton all of their lives.

"Many a time I came home with a bloody nose. I came home being sworn at. We all went through it," says Gorber.

Fifteen years ago, Jochelman says her daughter came home from school one day with a slushie thrown on her. Furious, she took her daughter back to report it.

"We were leaving the school and the bus was in front of us and she said to me, 'Mom, there he is.' He was in the back of the bus and he gave the Heil Hitler sign," says Jochelman.

Audrey Lampert says antisemitism has always been 'quietly rampant' in New Brunswick. Her mother grew up in Saint John and faced prejudice there.

"My mother told me that some of the beaches [in Saint John] had signs right on them [saying] 'No dogs or Jews allowed,'" says Lampert.

Carole Savage is the synagogue's treasurer and has seen the building vandalized.

"They had scratched a swastika in the door, but they hadn't even made it right, I figure it was kids," she says.

Savage, Jochelman, Cohen, Weil and Lampert all stress that antisemitism is not rampant today.

"I've always felt very comfortable in Moncton," says Weil.

"It's not horrible here. It's not bad," says Savage. "We're lucky here."

The Future

Some families have just one member remaining in Moncton. Most have children living elsewhere.

Druckman, who only has one childhood friend still living in Moncton, says one of the ways to help save the community is through immigration and having a support group for Jewish immigrants when they arrive in Moncton.

"I think a solution is not so much getting the people here, but it's to have the proper infrastructure in the community so we can assist them when they arrive. People want to be part of a greater community, but they also want to ensure that they can be part of the local community," says Druckman.

Savage is worried about the future of the community and the synagogue.

"During the high holidays you were squeezed in, you just squished into the seats. And now, there's row after row, empty. It's sad."