Little Synagogue on the Prairie board members Dr. Ralph Gurevitch, left, Shauna Switzer, Irena Karshenbaum, Emanuel Cohen and Trudy Cowan in front of the restored Montefiore Institute, which was built in 1916 near Sibbald in southeastern Alberta.

**Little Synagogue begins new life**
It's the coming out party for the Little Synagogue on the Prairie.

Tonight at 6 p.m., Calgary's Jewish community will celebrate the grand opening and dedication of the Montefiore Institute. A Torah procession involving city rabbis and hundreds of supporters will wind its way through Heritage Park to the extensively restored, 93-year-old house of worship.

It's the crowning moment of more than three years of planning, fundraising and meticulous restoration and 15 years of sleuthing to determine its whereabouts.

Opened in August 1916, the synagogue served a small colony of Jewish farmers, many from eastern Europe, who first settled near the hamlet of Sibbald in southeastern Alberta about 1910. Sited on the Chetner farm within the arid Palliser Triangle, the building served as a Jewish house of worship and community hall for all area pioneers until a decade of relentless drought took its toll on bodies and souls. By the mid-1920s, most Montefiore settlers had pulled up stakes for greener pastures or for an easier life in cities in Canada and the U.S.

The abandoned synagogue was used for grain storage, then moved to Hanna and converted into a private, two-bedroom home in the early 1940s, a role it filled for more than 60 years.

Emanuel Cohen and Jack Switzer played key roles in successfully tracking the synagogue's movements. "Recently, we had a service where Cantor (Alex) Stein sang prayers inside the synagogue. It was pretty emotional for me, because according to our best research, that was the first time Jewish prayers were offered inside these walls since 1925," said Cohen.

For Switzer, a quiet moment inside the synagogue causes him to ponder the pride that Jewish pioneers must have had in the building, which is about the size of the iconic, prairie one-room school.

"These were Jews coming from a background of oppression to a land where, despite the obvious challenges of farming, they had the chance to worship freely and to own their own land," said Switzer.

Synagogue supporters were able to buy the former synagogue from Hanna's Fano family three years ago. On-site inspections confirmed its authenticity and that it was in sturdy enough condition to be first moved, then restored. It made the trek from Hanna to a farm site east of Calgary last June, where it underwent the majority of its rebirth under the hands of skilled craftsmen from Historic Preservation Services. In late November, it was trucked to its permanent site at Heritage Park, where interior work and the creation of furnishings and fixtures continued through the winter and spring.

Irena Karshenbaum, president of the Little Synagogue project society, said she was always confident the project, with a budget of about $1 million, would come to fruition.

"That the synagogue is here and safe brings me a huge sense of relief," she says, noting fundraising continues to create an endowment for ongoing maintenance and programming.

Trudy Cowan, the synagogue project's heritage adviser, claims with a smile the building has "talked" to her and restoration workers during the entire process.

"Every restoration of a building of this vintage which is open to the public has to take modern building and safety codes into account, so there needs to be some compromises," Cowan notes. "But I really sense that this building seems ... well, happy."

Cowan says it's been an intriguing bit of architectural detective work to confirm the original synagogue's yellow, white and green colour scheme as well as structural features like window frames.

"As we went alone, we just had to pay attention to the walls and the floors and what they were telling us."

While the synagogue will teach thousands of park visitors about western Canadian Jewish history, supporters hope it will also be used for important, life cycle events such as smaller weddings and bar/bat mitzvahs.

"This is a new era in the history of Alberta Judaism," says Temple B'naï Tikvah Rabbi Howard Voss-Altman. "Our community needs to use this building, to make sure it's alive."

A number of descendants of original colony members are coming from as far away as Los Angeles and New York for tonight's event.

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