Little Synagogue opens in Calgary’s Heritage Park

By RACHEL BARSKY
Special to The CJN

CALGARY — The Little Synagogue, the latest addition to Heritage Park Historical Village in Calgary, opened recently.

About 2,000 people celebrating the June 28 opening gathered at Switzer’s Grocery and Confectionery in Heritage Town Square to begin a lively Torah procession through the gates of the park and into the Montefiore Institute, or, as it is known, the Little Synagogue.

The synagogue’s opening and dedication is a dream come true for Irena Karshenbaum. Karshenbaum and the project’s team of volunteers relocated and restored the tiny institute, which was built in 1916 on the Joseph Chetner farm near Sibbald, Alta., and served as a school, synagogue and community centre for about 30 Jewish families.

Harsh farming conditions caused the Jewish colonists to abandon the Montefiore Institute in the 1930s. In 1937, the government sold the building to a non-Jewish family, who moved it to Hanna, Alta., and turned it into a two-bedroom home.

Emanuel Cohen, a board member of the Little Synagogue on the Prairie Project Society, on the Prairie Project Society, tracked down the institute. The society purchased the shul for $55,000 and transported it to Calgary. Volunteers worked tirelessly to raise funds – the project cost approximately $1 million – develop interpretative materials, gather and build furniture, and collect books to replicate the synagogue’s library.

The society’s efforts paid off. As Calgary businessman and philanthropist Sam Switzer installed the Montefiore Institute’s Torah with the lieutenant-governor of Alberta, Norman Kwong, the pride and sheer happiness among the evening’s participants was palpable.

These feelings continued throughout the ceremony, which was MCed by board member Daryl Fridhandler and included speeches by Calgary Mayor Dave Bronconnier; Kwong; Calgary Jewish Community Council president Gerry Barron; Calgary Centre MP Lee Richardson; Heritage Park president and CEO, Alida Vishach; Karshenbaum, and Culture and Community Spirit Minister Lindsay Blackett.

The speakers said that the Little Synagogue symbolizes the Canadian values of diversity, inclusion and freedom of religion, and that the Jewish community has contributed to Alberta since the province’s first Jewish pioneers arrived in 1889, and to Canada as a whole. The speakers also said that the Little Synagogue will expose many non-Jewish visitors to Heritage Park to the province’s Jewish history.

When people visit the Montefiore Institute, they will come away not only with a deeper sense of Jewish culture and religion, said Kwong, but also with a deeper sense of the things that unite us all, regardless of our backgrounds.

Cutting the ribbon to open the Little Synagogue are, from left, Little Synagogue on the Prairie Project Society president Irena Karshenbaum; Mary Kwong, wife of Alberta’s lieutenant-governor, and Lt.-Gov. Norman Kwong. [Rachel Barsky photos]

Little Synagogue on the Prairie Project Society president Karshenbaum’s speech was especially touching. It is the 120th anniversary of Jewish life in Calgary, she said.

Thirty years ago, Karshenbaum and her parents immigrated to Canada from the former Soviet Union.

“Where I come from, we had to hide being Jewish,” she recalled, in tears. “With the Montefiore Institute, the Jewish community is not hiding – we are celebrating who we are.”

Karshenbaum told the crowd about her father, Ilya, who died shortly before she began the project. She said that after her family had immigrated, her father received a letter from a non-Jewish woman in Moscow who needed a wheelchair. Her father raised the money for the wheelchair, purchased it on his next visit to Moscow and gave it to the woman. “What is your wheelchair project, your Little Synagogue project, your tikkun olam?” Karshenbaum asked the crowd.

After prayers and the blowing of a shofar by Darryl Gurevitch, Karshenbaum and Kwong cut the ribbon.

Members of the community spoke about the significance of the Montefiore Institute at the event.

Fridhandler said: “Remembering history is so important. We’re bringing Jewish culture and the community into the public space, so others can learn about our religious traditions.”

Becky Rabinovitch, 23, said: “The fact that you have so many people who haven’t come out to events in years come to this event is a testimonial to how important it is. It’s just really cool.”

Calgary realtor Gary Fayerman said: “I think it’s really important that the Jewish community gets behind anything that’s important to Jewish heritage and culture in Calgary. It’s nice to see young kids performing, and that so many people came out.”

Cantor Alex Stein led the choirs of Akiva Academy, the Calgary Jewish Academy and Voices Jewish Senior’s Choir in singing Hatikvah and Shehecheyanu. The reception included music and dancing with singer Florence Shustack and the “Take the OY Train” Klezmer Ensemble.

For more information about the Little Synagogue on the Prairie Project, visit www.littlesynagogue.ca.