Little Synagogue on the Prairie – the next big thing?

By Richard Bronstein

Organizers of the Little Synagogue on the Prairie project have taken the wraps off and are appealing to the Jewish community to support this innovative project to showcase early Jewish life in Alberta.

The Little Synagogue refers to the Montefiore Institute, a 1913 historic prairie synagogue that was built near the Alberta-Saskatchewan border for early Jewish settlers to the area. It is intended to purchase and restore the original building and locate it at Calgary’s Heritage Park, where it will be visited by tens of thousands of tourists and students each year.

The not-for-profit society points out that it is more than the restoration of a quaint old building that is involved, but an opportunity to dramatize, in a colourful and educational way, the lifestyle and traditions of those hardy Jewish pioneers who came to Alberta 120 years ago and whose progeny are still making a valuable contribution to Canadian life.

This is Jewish outreach that spans three generations and that can create a lasting contribution to the understanding of Jewish culture and religion for many years in the future.

The timing of the Little Synagogue on the Prairie project could not be better, as the venerable Heritage Park itself is undergoing a $5.5 million expansion that will see the park open year-round and that is expected to attract increase visitors from 400,000 a year to well over 500,000 a year.

Up to now the Little Synagogue on the Prairie Project Society has been working the back rooms to continue on page 2

Calgary’s leading Imam to speak at Temple B’nai Tikvah

The leader of Calgary’s largest Sunni congregation, Dr. Reda Bedeir, will speak June 15 at Temple B’nai Tikvah at the invitation of Rabbi Howard Voss-Altman.

Dr. Bedeir was trained at Cairo’s famed Al-Azhar University, one of the oldest and largest universities in the world, and in 2005 served as acting head of the English department at that institution. He is a frequent commentator on Islamic affairs throughout the world and is featured on many educational Islamic websites.

In addition to his duties as spiritual head of the Calgary Islamic Centre, Dr. Bedeir serves on the faculty of both Mount Royal College and the University of Calgary.

The connection between Dr. Bedeir and Rabbi Howard Voss-Altman was established several months ago because of their participation as members of the Board of the Calgary chapter of Friends of Neve Shalom Wathat Al Salam. This Hebrew/Arabic phrase means “Oasis for Peace,” and is taken from a unique community of Israeli and Palestinian families who live and work together to show that peaceful coexistence is possible between the two people.

Several months ago Rabbi Voss-Altman and Imam Bedeir shared a platform together at the Hillside Community Church in Calgary, along with Rev. Paul verHoef, Christian chaplain at the University of Calgary.

Rabbi Voss-Altman says that inviting Dr. Bedeir to Temple B’nai Tikvah was a natural outgrowth of these connections. But he was also fulfilling a promise he made during last October’s Kol Nidre service.

As the Rabbi writes in the current synagogue newsletter, his sermon last year was a reflection on the parallels of early Jewish immigration to Canada and current Muslim immigration to this country.

As he stated then, “... I can’t get over this nagging feeling that most Canadians probably felt about the early 20 century Jewish immigrants – that we feel about our current Muslim neighbours. That our way of life is under siege, that they do not understand our values, that they are loyal to political Islam and not Canada, that we should close our borders as quickly as possible, and that they are a nation within a nation.”

“You see, we’ve heard these arguments before – about our people – and they could not have been more wrong.”

Rabbi Voss-Altman says today that from that time on, he knew that the Jewish community had to invite the so-called “stranger” into our home and listen to what he has to say.

Last year’s sermon was motivated by the shocking news than an alleged terrorist cell had been uncovered in the Toronto area. This was highly disturbing to many Canadians and brought to the fore considerable anxiety, mistrust, and that can create a lasting contribution to the understanding of Jewish culture and religion for many years in the future.

Now, the first stage of that pledge is being carried out by inviting a leading Calgary Imam to talk to the Temple B’nai Tikvah congregation.

“I have met Dr. Bedeir on several occasions and he is very articulate and very informed. I think many people will be interested in what he has to say,” said Rabbi Voss-Altman.

“The entire community is welcome to Temple B’nai Tikvah for this occasion and I hope we become that “oasis for peace.”
A Joyful Harvest redux

A Joyful Harvest, the exhibit, first opened in the fall of 2005 at Beth Tzedec and venues in Alberta. Now — June 11 at the Calgary JCC — the public is invited to launch the book, “A Joyful Harvest.”

Editor of this colourful history of the Jewish community of southeastern Alberta is Maxine Fishbein. It is published by the Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta.

The official book launch, on June 11 at 7:30 pm at the Calgary JCC, will feature Harry Sanders (CBC’s “Harry the Historian” with a local history quiz, and Professor Donald Smith of the University of Calgary. Refreshments will be served and everyone is invited to attend.

Little Synagogue — from page 4

When Bobby Libin got the call “from the friend of a friend,” he immedi- ately seized on the Little Synagogue project. “Although it is about restoring an important piece of our history, I really see this as reclaiming Jewish pride as well,” he says. “By understanding our own his- tory, we can see how each generation has contributed to the next.”

“When the Little Synagogue is completed in Heritage Park it can become a venue for Jewish events, such as small weddings and bar mitzvahs. It can involve BBYO and USY volunteers to staff it,” says Libin.

“Like Bobby Libin, Trudy Cowan says this is the most exciting museum project she has ever been involved with and that spans quite a few for this veteran personality of Canadian culture.”

She describes visiting the property some time ago and “yearning clues about what the original Montefiore Institute looked like when it was synagogue, social hall and school for the Jewish farm- ing community at Sibbald.” Although there are some photos and more and more people are finding personal memories, a lot about the original building is still a mystery.

“In the oral history there is talk about a library that contained a thousand books. But of course, there is no such library today. But when we visited one day, we stuck our heads through the false ceiling and above it we could see the old outlines of the original painted ceiling, suggesting where the original rooms were. It’s very excit- ing,” she says.

Society President Irena Karnsbaum says the bud- get includes not only restora- tion, but an ongoing interpretative program and an endowment fund to prop- erly maintain the building for future generations.

“There were other ideas in the past for doing some- thing at Heritage Park, including building a replica of the original House of Jacob. But for one reason and another, none of these ideas ever came to fruition,” Karnsbaum says.

“We explored various options with the board of Heritage Park and when we settled on restoring the origi- nal Montefiore Institute, they were extremely enthusiastic. I think we are the first all- volunteer organization that has formed a partnership with Heritage Park to under- take such a large project.”

For Karnsbaum, a young energetic member of the Jewish community, it is not only important to pre- serve history, but to educate the next generation. “These Jewish pioneers at Sibbald were the builders of Canadian society. When school children visit Heritage Park they will learn that Jews had a long and successful history in Alberta. They will also learn to appreciate Jewish culture and tradition more and we can all benefit from that.”

She says the interpreta- tive program will involve a large number of volunteers and docents. And the Little Synagogue on the Prairie will not just be a static sym- bol of the past but a living museum in which Jewish food, dress, life cycle events and traditions will be on dis- play to thousands of visitors each year.

Karnsbaum is encour- aged by the enthusiasm of the volunteer board and the expertise that board mem- bers bring to the project. The Society has already received a significant grant from the provincial government, from foundations and private indi- viduals. The board also has some non-Jewish members who are equally enthusiastic about the project.

For more information about the Little Synagogue on the Prairie Project, please consult the Society’s website at www.littlesynagogue.ca. The website con- tains the original proposal as approved by the Heritage Park Board of Directors, as well as a detailed break- down of the proposed bud- get. There are historical photos to view as well.  

DEENA CRAMER (nee Caplan), cherished mother, grandmother and friend, passed away on April 7, 2007 at the age of eighty-three following a brief illness. Born on May 30, 1923, and raised in Calgary, she attended L.S. Perele and Western Canada High School before marrying David and moving to Lethbridge in 1946. Her home was always filled with good friends and family, joyous times and delicious baking. With a love and devotion, Deena cared for her husband David during his lengthy illness until his passing in 2002. In addition to her commitment to her family, Deena participated in her community by volunteering with Canadian Hadassah-Wise, the National Council of Jewish Women, and the Engineers’ Wives Society. Deena is survived and will be missed by her son Jack (Lesley) of Ottawa and their children Michael and Robyn, and her daughter Sandi (Brian) Sander of Calgary and their children Ryan, Tamara and Noah.

The family would like to express their gratitude to Drs. Julian Raphael and Laura Heemskerk, and to all of the staff of the 4th Floor and ICU at the Chinook Regional Hospital for their care and compassion. Special thanks as well to the staff and to Deena’s many friends at Martha’s House where she was a happy and active resident since the facility opened in 2005.

A graveside service was held in the Jewish Section at the Mountain View Cemetery on April 8, 2007 led by Cantor Alex Stein of Calgary. Those wishing to make a memorial donation may do so to the Canadian Diabetes Association.