

# Moncton Jews still remember the community's roots

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The Jewish community in Moncton, N.B., was founded around 1900 by a group of 22 Jewish families that arrived from the town of Darbenai, Lithuania. All of the families settled on a single street in town. They built the synagogue in 1926 and founded the Jewish cemetery in 1930.

Such are the memorable roots of the city's present Jewish community, which numbers about 150 people, down from a peak of about 250 in decades past. Distinguished Jewish citizens have included former Moncton mayor Michael Baig, who served in the late 1950s, and Reuben Cohen, the recently deceased lawyer and multi-billion-dollar financier who was chancellor of Dalhousie University and a recipient of the Order of Canada.

As in other Jewish communities in the Maritimes, a group of about five or six Jewish families from Israel has helped bolster Moncton's Jewish population in recent years.

"It's a good thing that the Israeli families have come, because most of them have young children," said Dr. Francis Weil, former president and current vice-presi-



Children attend a menorah lighting at the Moncton Hospital.

dent of Moncton's Jewish community. Weil was born in France in 1938 and came as a young man to Moncton, where he taught physics and statistics at the French-language Université de Moncton.

Tiferes Israel, the original synagogue of 1926, was enlarged with an addition that included a mikvah around 1983. The cost of roughly \$600,000 was funded largely through a lottery.

"We sold quite a number of tickets to people outside the community," Weil said, an indicator of the general support Moncton Jews receive from the rest of the city. Their annual Holocaust Remembrance event on Yom Hashoah usually attracts

100 to 120 people, mostly non-Jews.

Moncton has the second-largest Jewish community in Atlantic Canada, yet the community is a small minority of the town's population. More than 100,000 people, one-third of whom are francophone, live in the metropolitan area. Anti-Semitic incidents are rare.

Halifax, located 2-1/2 hours away by car, has the largest Jewish community in Atlantic Canada with about 1,500 Jews. Small Jewish communities are also located in Fredericton and Saint John, N.B. The closest, very large Jewish community is in Montreal, some 10 hours away by car.

Rabbi Yitzhak Yagod, the part-time spiritual leader of Tiferes Israel, visits for one weekend a month. His wife is in town more often and provides Jewish education for young people. "We now have about 20 or 25 kids, so the rebbeztzin organizes a whole range of activities with them besides the cheder."

Keeping kosher in Moncton can be a challenge. "The main problem is the meat," Weil said. "We can get frozen meat, but we can't get meat otherwise. Sometimes two or three families get together to have one big order and have it shipped in." Passover foods may likewise be ordered in

advance from a store in Fredericton.

The congregation hosts an annual Chanukah dinner, a Purim event and a late-August barbecue along the shore in nearby Shediac. It also presents several speakers on Jewish topics each year.

There is no question that the community is dwindling. Although some young doctors and lawyers have returned and started families in recent years, young people who leave to attend university elsewhere typically don't come back.

Thirty years ago, the synagogue maintained a system of reserved seats on the High Holidays to ensure that everyone had a seat. "Now, at Yom Kippur, only half the synagogue is occupied," Weil observed.

However, according to Weil, many people live to a ripe old age in Moncton. "At one time, in our population of about 150 Jews, we had nine people over the age of 90," he said. "If you had called me a year ago, there would have been four more people over the age of 90 than today."

"I use this to try to convince people to come to Moncton," he continued. "You can live to a good old age here." ■

*This is the third in a series on Jewish life in various small towns across Canada.*