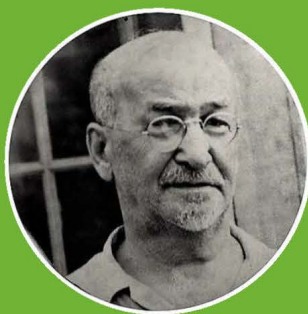


Hirsch Zvi Wolofsky

1876-1949



Joseph Graham

A short introduction to the life of

Hirsch Zvi Wolofsky

prepared by your Grandpa Joe

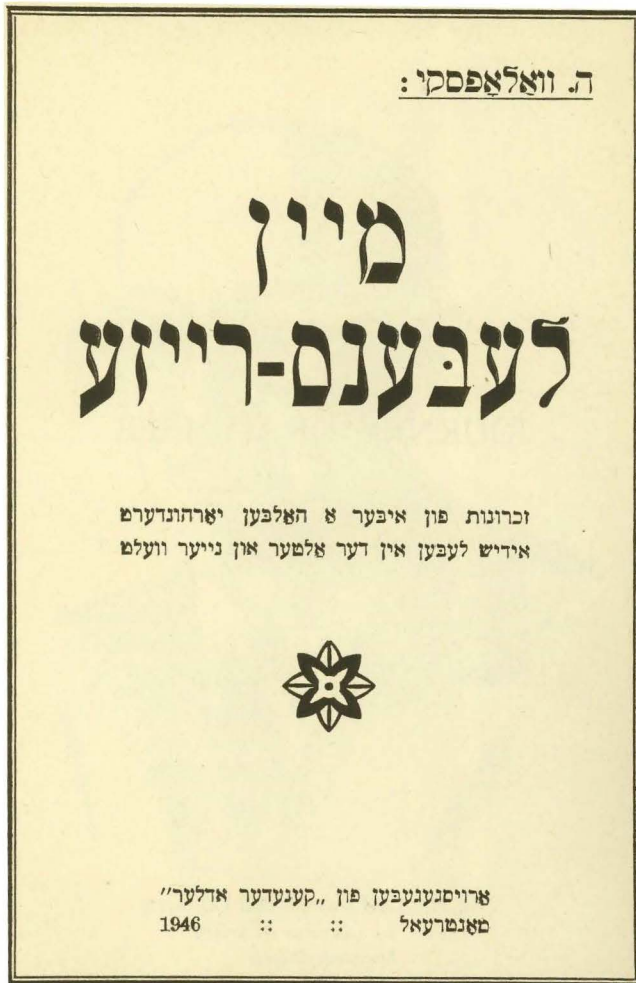
in consultation with your great grand uncle

Jack (Jacob) Wolofsky

on the occasion of the thirteenth birthday of

Jacob Antonio Miranda Graham

**The title page of
My Life's Journey
Hirsch Wolofsky's memoirs**



Translation

top right: H. Wolofsky

Title: My Life's Journey

Text: Memories now 50 years of Jewish Life in the old and new
world

Bottom: Published by Keneder Adler, month of Tammuz 1946

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Dear Jacob,

In the continuing series of stories about your ancestors, it seemed appropriate to share with you the story of Hirsch Wolofsky, your grandmother's great-grandfather.

You will find a lot of discussion of religion in this story. This is a realistic representation of how people thought — everywhere in the Judeo-Christian world. We are living in a time and place where religion has mostly taken a back seat. I fear, though, that religion is returning, with all its intolerances and infighting.

There is nothing for you to believe or not believe here, but one thing to keep in mind is that Dr. Louis Paré was not typical of his times. His own family found his agnosticism to be something that detracted from the man. Even his own son, my grandfather, was much more religious than he was. His brother Théophile became a priest in his retirement and his niece was a nun.

Hirsch Wolofsky was dedicated to community building, and his community was religious. In those days, the role of religious people was looking after their congregations, feeding them when necessary, keeping a register of their major life events and creating the hospitals and schools they needed, if the community was large enough.

When the governments took over those tasks after World War II, using the money from the wartime high tax rates, people simply stopped going to their churches and at least one of the Jewish reformist movements, the Reconstructionists, felt that God was

Poland in 1900



Central and Eastern Europe in 1900 showing the extent of the three empires that partitioned the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The various provincial regions featured at this website are delineated here with the fifteen gubernia of the Pale of Settlement distinct from Congress Poland as well as the German and Austrian Empires where large numbers of Jews resided. Courtesy easteurotopo.org/ Creative Commons

not an essential element of being a good Jew.

It is important to know the background to your world to better understand why some things happen, so we hope you enjoy the read.

Love and Happy Birthday,
Grandpa and Grandma

Shifrele's Dream

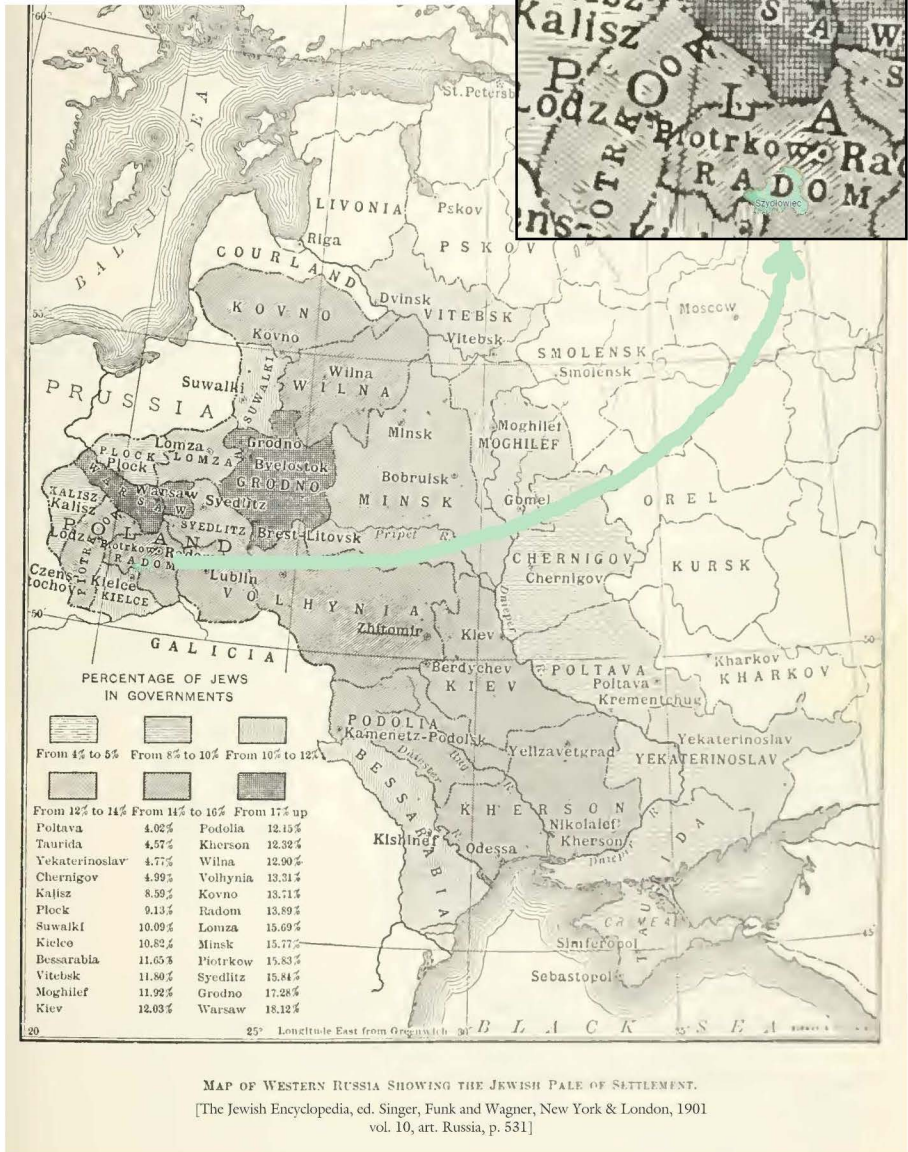
It would appear, according to family reminiscence, that I was born dead. My parents were both over fifty years of age at the time; my entry into the world was characterized by no extraordinary signs of life; I was taken for dead. Unceremoniously my little body was put aside, a parcel awaiting the undertaker.

My mother — may she rest in peace! — was wont to recount the miracle of my birth in this manner. It seems that on the historic day she dreamed a dream. In the dream she beheld her father, who thus addressed her: "Shifrele, my daughter, what has come over you? The child is alive; you will yet derive from him great pleasure and pride. Send for a doctor." Waking, my mother obeyed; the doctor barely anticipated the gravedigger.

These words are quoted from Hirsh Wolofsky's autobiography as translated into English by A.M. Klein. He was born in the Radom district, south of Warsaw and east of Lodz, in a shtetl called Shidlovtse (in Szydlowiec County), Poland, in 1876. If you look on Google Maps, you will find the Polish county or town, but if you search for the Yiddish shtetl, you will be redirected to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.

Hirsch was your grandmother's great-grandfather. He was the founder of not just a newspaper in Montreal,

Map showing, in green, Radom and Szydlowiec County where the shtetl Shidloltse was once situated.



but also a publishing company. What was unusual about his newspaper and publishing company was they operated and published almost uniquely in Yiddish. As a result of his work, Yiddish became the third-largest body of published literature

in Canada, after English and French.

Your father's grandmother, Goldie, practically grew up in the newspaper offices of the Keneder Adler, (Canadian Eagle). Hirsch also founded and published The Canadian Jewish Chronicle, in English. Just saying who her own grandfather was could open doors for her.

Hirsch came from Poland where, as described above, he was born dead on September 15, 1876, and he died in 1949, the year your grandfather was born. The place where he was born was a Jewish hamlet (shtetl) in an area called the Pale of Settlement. The word Pale used to mean stake, as in a fence. The word impale comes from it, as in the sentence, *he was killed, impaled on a stake*. Perhaps the most common usage today is the phrase *beyond the pale*, someone or something that is beyond acceptance in 'good' society.

The Pale of Settlement refers to a staked-off area where certain people were obliged to live because of their ethnicity. It was a kind of prison where their movements were restricted. If you interpret the expression *beyond the pale* to mean that someone who lives inside the borders of the Pale is beyond the border where the Pale of Settlement begins, and therefore segregated, *beyond the pale* makes sense.

In Poland, where the English concept of the Pale of Settlement still survives in our memory, the area was called simply the Jewish Settlement Zone, and in Hebrew, the Jewish district. It would take a special permit to leave it, if you were a Jew.

2

Safe Lands for non-Christians

For seven centuries, Poland was one of the safest places for Jews to live. So many came that the language of those Jews developed into a dialect of German, written in the Hebrew script and called Yiddish. They are the Jews of Eastern Europe, also known as Ashkenazim.

There are a few subsets of Jews, the two largest being Ashkenazim and Sephardim. You are descended from both of these, since your grandmother's father came from Istanbul, while her mother's family came from Poland and Ukraine. To add to the general confusion, your ancestors from Istanbul, the Sephardim, fled Spain and Portugal when the Catholics took possession of the Muslim districts and began killing everyone who wasn't Catholic. Many fled to a safe Muslim city, then known as Constantinople, but now known as Istanbul. Even before they arrived there, though, a very small group of Ashkenazim had already arrived from Bavaria.

Over time, they were completely absorbed into the Sephardi immigrant community, and some of them ended up with the family name Eskenazi, the Sephardi word for Ashkenazi. The Sephardi language and culture was not Yiddish, but Ladino, and that language can be easily understood by Spanish speakers.

The Ashkenazim lived peacefully in Poland for seven centuries, and the Sephardim lived peacefully in Istanbul for five centuries.

3

The Schism

You may be wondering why the Jews of both places had to flee in the first place, and to explain that, I will pass on a good summary explanation I learned from Rabbi Leigh Lerner, the man who oversaw your uncle David's Bar Mitzvah when David turned thirteen. I attended a history conference he gave, but his part needs a bit of background.

About 1700 years ago, when the Roman Empire was falling apart, the people who had been governed by it were seeking a new way to live. There was a story back then, three hundred years old, about a Jew who had been sent by his father — who was God — to bring a message of salvation to the Jews. Before this

man was born, the Roman Empire had captured Judea, the Jewish homeland. This man, this Son of God, of course, was Jesus Christ.

During Jesus' lifetime, there was a segment of the Jews who tried to break away from the Roman Empire and re-establish their rights to their own homeland and to their own laws. Jesus was probably a member of this group. The Romans felt the Jews were too independent, and destroyed their major temple in Jerusalem, scattering the Jews from their homeland.

The story of this man, Jesus Christ, sent by his father, God, became popular, and for three hundred years many different people in the Roman Empire began to follow practices inspired by his teachings, setting up community support groups that celebrated his life and values as each group imagined them.

Meanwhile, scattered across the empire over those three centuries, the Jews were eventually seen as just another of the groups inspired by Jesus, and all the groups were considered to be rebelling against the empire and were often punished. The Jews, though, said that while this man was a great prophet and they had a lot of great prophets in their history, describing him as the Son of God was only figurative. God, to the Jews, was not a man who could father a

child. Their god was their protector, and they believed their god was always right in his decisions. Yes, they also saw their god as male — but not as one who would father a son through a woman and send this son into the world to save it.

There were some unique things about the Jewish god. Jews believed there was no other god. They also believed that if things went badly for the Jews, they had somehow offended their god and they had to examine themselves and change their ways.

Most other people then believed that each people had their own god, and if things went badly for them, their god had failed them. That is how it had been for thousands of years. You accepted that the conqueror's god was more powerful, and you could change gods or include both in your group of gods. Also, since most of the people in the Roman Empire had lost in a war with the Romans and therefore had gods who had failed them, they also often had no community support groups, because that was what churches and priests did. With their god defeated, that god's priests lost support too.

The Romans refused to let the people they conquered become citizens, and that also meant that the Roman gods' priests did not care for them. The Jewish idea that their God was the only god, and that their God would abandon them if they failed him, was an idea

that meant that as long as they looked after each other and prayed to God, their god would look after them. If there was only one God, and you worshipped Him properly, then you had something that even the Romans didn't have, the only real god. Everyone else was mistaken and their gods did not exist.

By the early fourth century, the empire was a mess, and strong men were looking to take control of it. One of them was Constantine, who realized that all of these new believers in the one true god formed a strong group, probably the best organized one in the empire. By this point, most were calling themselves Christians, and were even on the verge of fighting among themselves over who was the most real Christian. Constantine became a Christian and offered that the empire would recognize them and help them unite if he succeeded in becoming the emperor. Many Christians became soldiers for him, and he became the Roman Emperor, and would have carried the title Caesar if he had been in Rome. But his capital of choice was Byzantium, which he renamed Constantinople.

Once he was emperor, Constantine convoked the First Ecumenical Council, at Nicaea, a town located in modern-day Turkey. Ecumenical referred to the inhabited world, to the Christian world. This caused a schism.

The intention of ecumenicism is to be universal. It worked for them, because they were all Christians, that is, believers that Jesus Christ was God.

The Jews, who felt that Jesus was simply a prophet, did not fit in the definition. This is where Rabbi Lerner comes in. He observed that by then, the Jews and others who the rabbi called “fellow travellers” had grown to almost 10% of the total adherents to monotheism (the concept of a single god) in the empire, and with that many of them they could not easily be ignored. Not only that, but the Jews saw themselves, with some historic justification, as being their god’s chosen people, and they refused to accept that Jesus could be God. That made no sense to them.

Some of the smaller Christian sects could be hammered and bullied into a single Christian Church, but what to do with the Jews?

St. Augustine, one of the important bishops at the meeting, saw the solution to the problem: power. Constantine was Christian, and Christianity would be the official church of the Roman Empire. God, the only god, had chosen the Christians. Therefore, he proposed, let the Jews be left out as an example of the people that God had abandoned. While the Christian Church continued to force everyone to join them, they also forbade the Jews from accepting new members. It was that simple. The Jews were not a

part of the Universal Christian Church. They were simply outcasts, there to remind good Christians to be good Christians and worship God the Father and Son.

People were not obsessed with God or gods, but the churches and their leaders and employees had assumed the task of looking after and teaching the needy, mostly those people who had no real place in the Roman Empire — and that was most of those who did not have Roman citizenship. In the course of doing their good work, they earned the loyalty of the people they helped, and under Constantine were able to guarantee that they could control the people.

The Jews would often be forbidden from owning land, from travelling freely and were deprived of other rights. Also, if things went wrong, the Jews were blamed and punished, even if they had nothing to do with the problem. St. Augustine was a highly intelligent man, even if he wasn't a good one. The proposal created what you could call a reference point. Everyone else could become Christian together, because they had the Jews to show what it was like to not be Christian, to be the stand-in enemy.

That is why the Jews have repeatedly had to save themselves from the Christians. That is why the Jews went to Poland, and to Turkey at the end of the 1800s, that is why Hirsch Wolofsky and his family left for Canada.

4

Back to Poland The Educated Minority

The Pale of Settlement was created by the Russian Empire when they partitioned Poland and absorbed much of the other Eastern European kingdoms in the 1790s. It extended throughout these territories, comprising almost all of modern-day Ukraine, western Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and Belarus. Inside it, Jews had restricted rights.

Of course, this was true throughout the Christian lands. For instance, from the earliest post-Roman days in Spain, the farmers depended upon slave labour, people captured in war, who would be owned and made to work. The early Christian Visigoths, who were the majority there, could not compete with the Jewish farmers because the Jews had a mandatory day of rest each week and their own religious law meant that it was a holiday even for their slaves. The slaves were more motivated to work for the Jews because of the better treatment, and so their farms outproduced those of the Visigoths. The Visigoths, instead of doing the same for their slaves, passed a law that the Jews could not farm.

Jewish boys were taught to read Hebrew from their earliest years, and so they became educated to

reading and knowledgeable of their history and their laws. Most Christian education avoided teaching such things, because knowledge is power, and they kept the power among the priests, religious brothers and the children of the nobles and royalty. The Jews, forced to trust each other, living outside of the main society, often found ways of servicing the financial needs of the powerful because they knew, through their own networks, where to find something a king or noble might need. Having no right to property, to farms, and such basic necessities, they learned to trade over long distances. They had the means of finding money to lend, of course at interest, to the nobles or royals who might have mismanaged their own inheritance. Sometimes, though, instead of respecting the contracts of loan, Christian nobles and royals would persecute the Jews.

Poland and other parts of Eastern and Central Europe saw regular pogroms (pronounced poGRUMS) where people would simply come and take what they wanted. The Jews were not safe from armed Christians, especially soldiers, except in times of peace in places where they were the majority. The Pale of Settlement was one of those areas.

This was the world Hirsch was growing up in, but in the safety of the shtetl he managed to study, being brought to the religious teachers at three-and-a-half

years old. He proved to be an excellent student, but all of his studies had to do with being a good religious Jew. His father was the rabbi responsible for the local Jewish records for the civic Polish/Russian authority, so Hirsch also learned record-keeping. As his father aged, he did his father's work for him to make sure his father kept his position as the government's rabbi.

5

Warsaw and Lodz

When Hirsch was fifteen, his father died, and it was time for Hirsch to go out on his own. He left his mother in the care of his older brother and moved to Warsaw. He had no useful trade, but he learned all about wine, so he slowly built up a wine emporium, selling wine and learning to judge its quality. That business lasted until he was 18 but then collapsed. He left Warsaw and moved to Lodz where he managed to set up again.

Hirsch's records, his memoir, deal mostly with what he was thinking and what impressed him. It is the only window we have to look through, the only way we can try to know him. He had no interest in the modern life of Warsaw. In his time there, between 1891 and 1894, he looked for other young people wishing to learn the religious teachings instead of partying and having other adventures. In Lodz, he followed the same



Hirsch Wolofsky in Warsaw
in the 1890s

interests and described the synagogue where they were learning together. When the civic authorities came too close, they closed their books and opened the psalms, singing together. He observed that for the Catholic authorities, it was fine to sing and praise God, but studying the books was not allowed.

One story from Lodz that impressed him was of a company that decided to build a tramway. A wealthy Jew named Posnanski offered to support the project

by buying shares, but he was refused because he was a Jew. As the tramway company would find out, it was not good business to refuse the largest community in Lodz. When the tramway opened for business, it rode almost empty. Infuriated, the civil authorities sent the chief of police to the head rabbi who told him that it was illegal to boycott anything in Lodz, so he must rescind the religious ruling against riding the tramway. The rabbi patiently explained that he should therefore go to the tramway company, which had boycotted the Jewish investor and assured the police chief that there was no religious ruling against riding the tramway. The chief obliged the rabbi to ride on the tram so everyone could see him there to prove that there was no religious ruling. The rabbi accepted to go, telling the police chief it would make no difference.

After some time, the tramway company came to Posnanski asking him to invest, which he did, and everyone began taking the tram.

Hirsch told other similar stories about the community sticking together during his time there in the late 1890s. In another story, a German brewer named Anstadt said that the Jews liked his beer so much that they drank the glasses too. He was overheard, and the insinuation was that the Jews stole his drinking

glasses. Suddenly, Jewish businesses stopped carrying Anstadt's beer. The man changed the name of the beer, but that made no difference. Soon, other people who wanted to keep their Jewish clients also stopped offering that beer. The owner of the company had the chief of police go to the head rabbi that time, too. After a lot of negotiations, Anstadt accepted to pay for the rebuilding of an old synagogue and make a donation to a Jewish charity. Everyone resumed carrying his beer after that.

Hirsch would eventually become a very influential man in Canada, but he still rarely talked about the personal side of his own life and seemed to see his children and grandchildren as not terribly relevant, although Addison would be happy to know that he did have a favourite. His grandson Jack describes a postcard Hirsch sent to his son and daughter-in-law from Carlsbad when he learned about the birth of your own great-grandmother, his grand-daughter Goldie. Hirsch was a hypochondriac and his postcard talked mostly about his minor ills. Goldie was his favourite although he rarely expressed such feelings.

Strike Three, I'm Out

The Russian Empire drafted all young men for military service, but for a shtetl Jew it was almost a death sentence. Young men did their best to avoid it, and Hirsch had three older brothers who succeeded by fleeing Poland. For Hirsch, who was much shorter than the ideal height of a soldier, it was a serious problem because the military wanted to hold him in custody so he, too, would not leave the country.

Hirsch loved his Polish life. He spent a lot of time in religious study and participated in the religious ceremonies. He also had a girlfriend he wanted to marry. He found a way of bribing an officer to allow him to remain free until the date of his hearing for military service came up, and he subsequently succeeded in getting it postponed for two consecutive years.

One day, the man he hoped would be his father-in-law secured for him a reading of the Torah at his synagogue. This was a great honour, and he presented himself well, as a very good reader. Afterward, the rabbi addressed Hirsch's future father-in-law:

"Pinchas, the kid is an outstanding Torah reader. You can't catch him in a mistake because by the time you're able to stop him, he's already onto the next

one. Nu, go try to catch him! But no matter, Pinchas. You've got a fine son-in-law there and that's why I'm telling you to have the wedding and not wait another year."

"Of course." My future father-in-law spoke for both of us. "If the rebbe says so, that's what we'll do. The wedding will take place next month."

Hirsch did not name his wife (Sarah Bercovitch) in the course of recounting this story, but she was with child (carrying Felix, called Philip in Canada, your grandmother's grandfather) when his next hearing for



Felix (Philip), your mother's grandfather with
Hirsch's favourite granddaughter, Goldie

military service came up. Soon to be a father, he may have garnered some sympathy, but it also took some more large bribes to have his military service obligation cancelled. It was a difficult, costly confrontation for him.

When Hirsch had finished solving that problem, he was almost immediately confronted with the next. The government took away the right to sell wine and gave new permits — to Christians only.

Around the same time, he learned about one of his acquaintances who was also a Jewish wine seller. This man, on his way down the street, saw a group of people watching something happening. The police were arresting an old Jewish woman for selling bagels without a permit. As soon as he understood what was happening, he discovered that he, and the rest of the watchers were surrounded by police and arrested for watching. There was nothing illegal about what they were doing, but the poor man was sentenced to a month in jail. Some time later, he was brought before a judge to identify his clothes. The judge asked him what crime he had been arrested for and he said he did not know. The judge accused him of arrogance and sentenced him to six more months.

For Hirsch, that was strike three. He called it the last straw. Convinced that Poland was changing for the worse, this story was one too many and he determined right then to take his wife and child out of Poland.

7

Putting Poland Behind

He managed to liquidate his assets and get out to Hungary on wine business. Then he went to Birmingham, in England, to visit his brother Haim who was already there. In Birmingham, his first task was to learn English.

The little family spent only a matter of months in Birmingham where Hirsch learned that a good third of the Jews had married Christians as a way of integrating into the society. Even if he was not among the most religious Jews of Poland, this way of integrating was something that could not have sat comfortably with him. When he received an invitation to come to Montreal, along with prepaid tickets, from his brother Aaron, he determined to go, even if it was just for a visit. Hirsch and Sarah both had siblings who had gone to Canada. He first made sure that he had the means to return to Birmingham. In his own words, when he arrived in Montreal in 1900, he felt immediately at home.

He stayed.



Hirsch, standing on the right, with his brothers
Haim, Aaron and Sruldovid

8

A Dream Comes True

Hirsch had dreamed of working in journalism but this

dream had to be forgotten because his English would never be up to it, and the Jews of Montreal were not Yiddish speaking. He also discovered his health would not stand up to factory work, a good way for a new immigrant to find security. He did not know the local clientele that would allow him to go back into wine, so he established himself in a small fruit and vegetable store on St. Lawrence Boulevard between St. Catherine and Ontario streets. He resigned himself to the life of a merchant with a small shop.

At the beginning of the 1900s the Jewish population of Montreal was 7,000. They were generally of British, German, or Western European stock and were integrated into Montreal English society, even though they did not intermarry. They did not choose English over French; the choice was made for them. New France had been a Catholic state that refused entry to non-Catholics, and under the British regime which followed, Jews and Protestants could not educate their children in French schools without converting to Catholicism. The Church controlled the French-language schools and even refused approaches that would offer separate classes on religion. There were some English Catholic schools, but they also did not allow entry of other religious denominations, just like it had been in Eastern Europe.

There were few Yiddish-speaking Jews, and so it was

not possible to set up schools in Yiddish. That all began to change rapidly, though, when the pogroms in Eastern Europe, not just in Poland, became much more commonplace. From 1902 on, Jews flooded out of the Eastern European neighbourhoods where their ancestors had lived for centuries. They looked for refuge and new lives in many places and a lot of them found their way to Montreal.

One busy day in 1907, Hirsch and Sarah's oldest child, Felix (or Phil), who was born in Poland just before they had left, was playing in the back of the fruit and vegetable store. There was too much going on upfront, and, unattended, he found some matches. While playing with them, he started a fire. It was fortunate that he wasn't hurt, but the store was destroyed.

Over the previous seven years, Hirsch had come to know many people, probably more of them through his attendance at the synagogue than at the store. When the fire destroyed his business, he had friends to console him. He also had had the foresight to buy insurance against such a mishap, and in the course of considering what he should do next, he realized that, if he could convince a few of his new acquaintances and friends to add some more money, he could use the insurance funds not to rebuild the store but to start a new business.

Felix was your grandmother's grandfather, and in the family stories, he is credited, at just seven years of age, with accidentally setting his parents off in a whole new direction, fulfilling Hirsch's dream of becoming a journalist. Hirsch and the investors who joined him realized that the pogroms had brought enough people from a lot of different Eastern-European countries to Montreal. Even though they came from different countries that all had different languages, most of them had been schooled only in the synagogues, where they learned the whole history of the Jews — in the same language: They all spoke Yiddish.

And they needed a newspaper.

That was how Hirsch Wolofsky began the Keneder Adler, the Yiddish newspaper of Montreal.

Hirsch was 31 years old, a young man with a young family who owed his life to Shifrele's dream that saved him from the undertaker the day he was born, and in 1907 he began the career he always dreamed of because his oldest child had caused an accidental fire.

Yiddish and the Aleph-Bet

The Jewish communities of Eastern Europe valued a good education for their sons, and so, even though it was illegal to go to school, the boys were educated, almost secretly. They learned how to read the sounds of the scriptures, and to hear the stories in the ancient Hebrew language. The language of the scriptures, at that time, was used only in the scriptures. There were no longer people who spoke it as their first language.

Yiddish, the German-related language spoken among Eastern-European Jews, was their community language. To deal with the Christians, they had to also speak the Christian language spoken where they lived. Since they were not allowed to go to school and learn to read and write in the written scripts of the Christian countries, they took the letters of their own scriptures, written in an ancient script, and used them to create the sounds of Yiddish. In that way, they took their modern language and created a written form for it.

The writing we learn in French and English in Canada uses the Roman alphabet. By contrast, the Jewish scriptures were written in one of the earliest phonetic scripts, called the Aleph-Bet. Both systems of writing are phonetic. Each of a fixed number of letters is associated with a sound, and sounding them out

replicates a spoken word. The Aleph-Bet is a script that is almost identical to the very first script that was created thousands of years ago. This early phonetic script was developed by the Canaanites, called the Phoenicians by the ancient Greeks and the Puni by the Romans. They were a seafaring and trading people that carried the idea of their script to Greece and Rome where it was adapted to the local languages in a similar way, but each place that adopted this system slowly changed its alphabet to suit its needs. The Aleph-Bet is read from right to left, but the Romans created theirs to be read from left to right. They also changed symbols, or letters, and used distinct letters for vowel sounds, which were not written down as unique letters in earlier language development.

Other, older, written records had not been written phonetically. Their symbols could be associated with whole ideas. There were many other writing systems including hieroglyphs, cuneiform and runes. Chinese writing is another example. It is also very old and has not changed for thousands of years. While the people who learned that writing system slowly developed different languages and soon could not talk to each other, they could all write to each other because they all shared the same writing system. Many Chinese who know the writing system consider someone who speaks another language but does not know the writing system to be ignorant, even illiterate.

The places that learned the phonetic method of writing do not have such a universal system for keeping the records, but the Yiddish-speaking Jews write their language in their ancient religious script. The Ladino-speaking Sephardim in Istanbul did the same thing, with a different spoken language, and a reader of Ladino, using the same Aleph-Bet, cannot read a text written in Yiddish. In fact, even a modern Israeli, where the Hebrew language was re-established for everyday use, will not be able to read Yiddish if they do not speak it.

10

Yiddish in Montreal

Most Montreal Jews did not speak Yiddish prior to the influx caused by the pogroms, and the older well-established community had no reason to learn it, but as the immigrant population increased, Jews coming from the Baltic states, Russia, Poland and Ukraine had Yiddish in common. Even your grandmother's grandmother, Riva, whose photo you can see as the character Snow Fox or Isno Fawkes, in Benjamin's story about the woman in the pine tree, spoke Russian as her first language. Her family came from Ukraine, far away from the shtetl where Hirsch came from. After arriving in Montreal in 1913 as a teenager, she started her education in Yiddish because Jewish schools and many other community resources had been created by then.

Things were changing fast, largely because of this common language that is a part of your own heritage. For Riva, English came third, and French never came — she wasn't Catholic! Who would have imagined back then that she would meet and marry Felix, the boy who started the fire?

The exodus from Eastern Europe that followed the departure of Hirsch, Sarah and Felix from Poland would bring thousands of Jews to America, and the Montreal community grew from 7,000 in 1900 to 58,000 by 1930. That immigration changed the Jewish community, and Hirsch's, newspaper and his deep implication in promoting and protecting this new community led also to the creation of a publishing house. His work meant that, in Canada, Yiddish became a documented written language as well as a spoken one, and even though the Yiddish communities were the victims of the Holocaust and the language is dying away today, he contributed to Yiddish becoming the third largest body of literature in Canada, after English and French.

11

Conclusion

Dreams, Fires and Opportunities

Without Shifrele's dream of her father telling her that the baby awaiting the undertaker was alive and hungry, their eleventh child may have become nothing but a minor statistic, a stillborn baby, in a small, almost forgotten shtetl in the Pale of Settlement of rural Poland.

What strange unforeseen opportunities await each of us in our lives? What small events can change the direction of a child, of a family? If Felix had not played with matches, if your own parents had not arrived at the same time in the same place, both stuck for a place to live? Throughout your life you will see these opportunities as Hirsch did, through dreams perhaps, but also through a happy disposition and a conviction that they are right there before you, waiting for you to see them.



Sarah Bercovitch Wolofsky, your grandmother's great-grandmother, with her sisters in Florida in 1933.

Photo sources in this book include family archives, Wikipedia and the Museum of Jewish Montreal (imjm.ca) but the information comes thanks to your grandmother's uncle Jack Wolofsky and his grandfather's memoirs written in Yiddish and translated to English first by A.M. Klein and published by The Eagle Publishing Company in Montreal in 1945-46. It was subsequently translated to French by Pierre Anctil and to English, again, by Michael Wex.

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