

Saskatchewan Memories Or How to Start a Jewish Cemetery

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Of course, the real experts on this subject are not necessarily Jews. But how do you start a Jewish cemetery if you are a Jew, and the warden of the Prince Albert Jail phones to say that a Jewish prisoner has just died, begging with his final breath to be buried in a Jewish cemetery!

"Well," says my father in his heavy Latvian accent, "there is no Jewish cemetery in Prince Albert yet. Otherwise I would be glad to help you out."

"It's not me but him you have to help out," says the warden.

"Well," says my father, "the closest Jewish cemetery I know about is in Saskatoon. But the trains are not running there this week. They haven't cleared the tracks from the last blizzard yet."

"Do you think," asks the warden, "we could get him through by horse and sleigh?"

"I'll phone the livery stables," says my father.

The livery stables say yes, they will do it for \$50 plus the driver's hotel expenses, providing a relative accompanies the body to Saskatoon. So the warden contacts the widow, a Swedish lady, and she sets off with the driver, the body, and the horse and sleigh. They finally get to Saskatoon, 120 miles later, where the widow and the driver spend the night together at the Barry Hotel, a contingency occasioned no doubt by the shortage of rooms resulting from the general breakdown in railway and other communications. And the next day the prisoner was buried, as he had requested, in a Jewish cemetery.

The winter was hardly over when my brother Sammy caught diphtheria. I knew he must be very sick, for he lay in my parents' bed in that big corner bedroom overlooking the Saskatchewan River Valley. They wouldn't let me into the room, so I stood at the door and waved

to him and he to me until one morning, he didn't wave back. My father picked him up and carried him around and around the room, while my mother stood wringing her hands and crying.

Then the doctor came and gave my mother a needle and threatened to give me one too if I didn't stop screaming. Then a man came with some boards, nails, a hammer and a saw. Then the Jewish people came to sit with my parents, and some English neighbors too. My mother rocked back and forth on the black leather couch, saying "Vey eez meer! Vey eez meer!" to the Jewish people, and "Poor soul!" "Poor soul!" to the English people.

"What's a soul?" I asked the English people, since it was obviously an English word. But they didn't seem to know quite what it was either. So I went upstairs to Sammy's room to see what all the banging and sawing was about. Sammy was still asleep, but the man who was banging and sawing straightened up, and looked a little ashamed as if I had caught him doing something wrong. "Hello there," he said. But at that moment someone whisked me away, and the next time I saw the carpenter he was carrying the wooden box down the stairs through the hall, and into a waiting car. Yes, they buried Sammy too in the Saskatoon cemetery, sending him by rail, for by this time the trains were running again.

After that my father called a meeting of the whole Jewish community—grandfathers, grandmothers, fathers, mothers, but no kids. And he said they had to organize a *chevra kadishe* [burial society]. So who objected? The two grandmothers. They said that the younger congregants were merely trying to rid themselves of the old and that the cemetery was just an open invitation to death. The majority prevailed, however, in favor of a *chevra kadishe*, for my father was very democratic, as long as he was running a meeting. So they elected their first president, a man called Phil the Auctioneer. And who was the first man to be buried in the Prince Albert Jewish Cemetery? You guessed it; Phil the Auctioneer. He died of a heart attack—the aftermath of a heavy cold.

The next president really elected himself, because nobody else wanted the job. He didn't want it either, but he was an awfully good sport, the life of every party. But within three months even he, Weiner the Cattlebuyer, was dead—of a ruptured appendix, I believe.

After that there was no way anyone would take the presidency. So my father called a secret meeting—just the eighteen men of the com-

munity, no women, and no kids again. And he swore these men to a vow of silence, saying that he himself would be president on condition that no man would divulge to wife, sister, mother, or mother-in-law, who the new president of the *chevra kadishe* really was. And they kept that secret for five years, until my father himself took ill. Then the nurses couldn't get the Jewish men of the community out of the hospital corridors. So my father called them all into his room and warned them that if they did not clear the corridors he might never get a linoleum contract with the Holy Family Hospital again. Besides, he said, the time had come for him himself to reveal the secret of the presidency since the jinx had already been broken by five or six burials in the intervening years.

One of these was the burial of my grandfather which took place, with the whole community present, at midnight, because we had to wait for the 10:30 p.m. train bringing my Uncle Arthur from Churchbridge, Sask. I always considered the timing of that burial somewhat macabre, if not barbaric, until I learned, some years later, that Sir Francis Walsingham, the father-in-law of Sir Philip Sidney, had been buried also at midnight but secretly, so that creditors would not snatch the body. Then I didn't feel so badly about my grandfather. At least he left no creditors, not even the *chevra kadishe*, of which he was a paid-up member.

I realize now that I have told you more why you start a Jewish cemetery rather than how. How is really quite simple. You go to the city hall, and they give you free a grant of land next to the Christian cemetery on the top of the highest hill. Then you phone the chief rabbi of Winnipeg [about] what to do next. But he is away officiating at a ceremony in some inaccessible Manitoba hamlet. So then you phone the rabbi of the nearest Ontario town which has a rabbi, and he tells you to kill a rooster and bury it in the cemetery, in order to cleanse the ground of evil spirits, the body of the rooster becoming thus the sole habitation of the Evil One Himself. If you do not like this answer—and my father certainly did not—you phone the rabbi of the next Ontario town which has a rabbi and he tells you to bury a *tallis* [prayer shawl], *tephelim* [phylacteries], and a prayerbook first—before you bury anything or anyone else. And if that answer sounds more reasonable to you, that's how you start a Jewish cemetery.