

A Jewish Community That Was— Ansonville, Ontario, Canada

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Oh, it was lovely, lonely, lighted with snow in the wintertime, sun and wildflowers in the summertime, people there all the time, the same people, like people in one's family always there, they would always be there, so it seemed, sharing the joys and sorrows of their lives with one another, feuding, loving—a small community. . . . And then suddenly, so it seemed, they were gone from there, the Jewish community no longer there, an epoch in time come and gone with hardly a landmark, hardly a vestige left of what had been.

But no—there is something in the town that marks that time and, like a name on a tombstone now foreign to the region, conjures up thoughts of a way of life long since gone. Synagogue Street. And, crossing it, a street since given a name thought more befitting to the present time, but which in that other time went by a name which attested that it was a town to be reckoned with, a town not totally cut off from the outside world. Railway Street. On one side of it tracks that gradually curve to the railway station across the field in Iroquois Falls, near the paper mill that still sustains three adjoining towns; on the other side of it the stores that serve the townspeople, mostly owned by the members of the small Jewish community.

The Memory Remains Sweet

Ansonville. How did Jews find their way to this papermill town

in one of the most northerly regions of northeastern Ontario, thriving there as a community from the early 1920's until the Second World War came and began plucking up their sons and broke their homogeneity and spirit? . . .

Railway and Synagogue Streets. The two streets intersect as if by design in symbolic symmetry: their businesses on the one street looking out on the railroad tracks that not only brought them to this town but which they helped build and was the reason the government helped bring them to Canada; and on the other street the synagogue built to tie them to their roots.

Ansonville was founded in 1912, but other than the exceptional few like my uncle who made his way there in 1913, a few months after his arrival in Canada, the Jews who came to live in the town and in all the surrounding mining towns first settled in the wilds of Krugerdorf seventy miles to the southeast and in the pioneering railway and farming center Englehart a few miles further south. These were areas in which the Canadian government was granting tracts of land to those who were willing to clear and farm it. Before these brave Jews from Russia would settle down to such comforts of town dwelling as indoor plumbing and electricity, they first had to endure the rugged, primitive, and sometimes hazardous life of the wild, untamed bush.

It is the life of the Jewish community in the papermill town, Ansonville, where I came to live as a child late in 1929, that I am about to recount. But better to understand and appreciate these people with whose lives mine interacted, I must go back to the place and time of their original settlement (the last of the Jewish pioneering efforts in Canada), in the wilds of northern Ontario, the first Jewish settlement in that region of Canada. As a child, I, who had come upon the scene when the pioneering days were long since over, knew of Krugerdorf only by name, the place where the North's Jews were buried. The place of their arrival had become the place of their departure. The land they had cleared and tilled and harvested would be their burial ground even when they were long gone from there. How Krugerdorf came to be the North's Jewish burial ground is a tragic tale that poignantly tells what kind of people these pioneers were and in what spirit they endured their travails.

June 26, 1906. It is two years since the first of the Jewish im-

migrants have settled on this land, some at Krugerdorf, some a few miles down the river in Englehart where a village has grown around the railway station. They have cleared their plots of land, put up shacks, planted and harvested what they could in the North's short growing season, gotten to know the \$1-a-day life working for the Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railway. In these two settlements there are the Abramson brothers, Nathan and Louis, and their uncle Louis Shankman. (Their women and Alex, the youngest of the Abramson brothers, and other members of the family will arrive three years later.) And there are the Feldmans, the Shubs, the Martins, the Levys, Rabbi Vertlieb (a synagogue has been built in Englehart), the Kormans, Kideckels, Bukavetskys, Crotins, Gurenitches, Solomons, and Morris Breland. There are Ben Perkus and his son Morris.

June 26, 1906. Ben Perkus and his son Morris leave their farm near Krugerdorf, in Picard Township, and travel down the second crossing of the river as far as the falls in a canoe. Here they disembark and walk the rest of the way to the Englehart station, where they are to meet John Kussner and Joe Perkus, who are arriving from Russia, on the Muskeg train.

There is the joyous reunion of father and son, of brother and brother, and of friends. They have lunch together. Then they start back to the river for the return trip to the farm.

A young Jewish man who has recently arrived from England and works on the construction gang at the bridge happens to be down at the river at this time and asks if he may accompany them to the farm. He is through work for the day and would like to see what the place looks like. The five happy-go-lucky men get into the canoe. When they have pushed away from shore and are nearing the center of the river, a strong current grips the canoe. They try in vain to get back to the shore, but the raging current carries them down the river and over the falls. John Kussner and Joe Perkus, the two who have just arrived from Russia, are thrown clear, but the other three crash to their death on the rocks below. When the three badly decomposed bodies are found twelve days later in the hot July sun three miles below the falls, Simon Hanarousky, who owns a farm in that area, offers a piece of his land to use as a burial ground. The first Jewish settlement in northern Ontario has thus tragically been marked as the place where,

in years to come, the Jews who take up their abode in all the nearby towns will be buried.

A postscript to the tragic story just recounted that equally illuminates the spirit of these pioneering people: In 1907, a year after Ben Perkus and his son Morris were killed, his wife Betty and their two daughters, Fanny, 19 and Bessie, 17, arrived from Russia. Betty's son Joe, and John Kussner, whose arrival had been marked by such tragic consequences, and Morris Breland built a home for them in Englehart that summer, and on November 22nd John Kussner married the older daughter, Fanny, and two days later Morris Breland married the younger daughter, Bessie. Life continued.

How I wish that as a child in Ansonville I had kept my ears more sensitively tuned to the sweet-sad music of these pioneers' reminiscences! As children, we are still so new to ourselves that we are almost completely absorbed in our own lives and perceive adults as people who are there primarily to serve our needs. The Abramsons, the Crotins, the Kormans, the Kideckels, in Ansonville, were of those families that had originally settled in Krugerdorf and Englehart. They had an air about them of belonging that my parents, who arrived on an already established scene, were never able to achieve; that not even my uncle, Jake Perlmutter, who came to Ansonville before they did but was not one of the Krugerdorf-Englehart pioneers, did not have. They were of one clan, we of another. They were of the land; my uncle and father, who had both studied in Yeshivas, were of the scholarly world.

I bring this up because I feel that a schism existed between that clan and us that left my mother and her sister, Clara Perlmutter, always outside the pale, and that their defensive haughtiness left us—their children—somewhere in the middle: by natural inclination drawn to these homey, warm people, and by example holding back a little, adopting our mothers' standard. How much we missed consequently! How much more fulfilled our youthful lives might have been had we allowed ourselves, or had been allowed, to draw close to them without reservation! These good people, who certainly made no distinction between the children in the community and held nothing back from us, are not to be faulted for what we missed. Their doors were wide open to everyone. But because we knew that our mothers felt excluded and, perhaps in

self-defense, drew up divisive lines also, we held ourselves a little back.

Because of that and of childhood limitations I absorbed only the music of their lives, the words releasing themselves only now as the music is fading with the extinction of those who lived it. The mothers who fed me their bagels and shtrudel are not here any more to reminisce about their pioneer days. It is to their daughters that I have turned for the words to the ballad that came through to me only dimly, in their sweet-smelling kitchens.

“My mother, as you know,” Esther Mooshe’s wrote to me recently, “was midwife” (in Krugerdorf and Englehart) “to over fifty women. The main concern amongst the women was that ‘Mooshe’ would be in labour at the same time as they. I remember my mother saying that weeks before each birth” (her own) “she would prepare dried bread, baking sweet bread and drying it in the oven and then putting it in sacks so the children would have food.” Mooshe and Louis Abramson had thirteen children. They had come to Krugerdorf in 1904, moving to Englehart a few miles away after the first war and there set up a grocery and supplemented their income by selling milk and taking in boarders. “We always had cows and horses,” Esther wrote, “even in Ansonville where we must have moved about 1925 or 26.”

My uncle Jake Perlmutter, who left Russo-Poland in 1913 and after arriving in Montreal worked there in the Canadian Pacific Railway yards for several months, settled in Ansonville that same year after a brief visit in one of the neighboring towns with an aunt and uncle, the Rices, who had emigrated a few years previously. For a brief time he was in partnership with a Mr. Nathenson in a store in Porquis Junction seven miles west of Ansonville, then he and Mr. Nathenson moved their store to Ansonville. They were among the first Jews to settle in Ansonville, which grew up across the tracks from Iroquois Falls, the Abitibi Paper Company-owned model town that had failed in its plans to provide for growth beyond the townsite’s limits. Iroquois Falls had been staked for timber rights, because of its potential power for a paper mill, on the Abitibi River, only four years earlier. The Abitibi Pulp and Paper Company was incorporated in December, 1912, and in 1913, the year my uncle and Mr. Nathenson came to Ansonville, the Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railway was just com-

pleting a spur line to Porquis Junction, and a dam was being built to harness the power of the Abitibi River. It wasn't until 1914 that the Company built its town and called it Iroquois Falls. People like my uncle, who chose to fend for themselves rather than work in the mill, built their community across the field of wild grasses, on the west side of the railroad tracks, and named it Ansonville after the Montreal flour salesman, F. H. Anson, who had backed the exploration into northern Ontario, in search of silver and gold, which resulted instead in the discovery of the power site on the Abitibi River. On July 29, 1916, three years after my uncle settled there, a brush fire spread through the region, destroying six towns, Ansonville and Iroquois Falls among them, and 1,000 square miles of farmland and brush. Two hundred and twenty-three men, women, and children lost their lives. While his wife and child were suffering the ravages of war-torn Europe, my uncle, who had come to the new world to build a better life for them, was struggling with and overcoming the pioneer's battles.

We ourselves, my mother, my sisters Rebecca and Rita, and a cousin, Zalmen Grayevsky, who helped care for us on the journey, arrived in Ansonville on the evening of October 29, 1929, the day of the Wall Street crash. We were met at Porquis Junction by my uncle and father. Two years earlier, my uncle had brought my father over and set him up in a little store in Nellie Lake, in the bush country seven miles north of Ansonville, to furnish the "lumberjacks" with staples. When our arrival drew near, my uncle took my father into the store in Ansonville. (My uncle's and Mr. Nathenson's partnership had since dissolved, and Mr. Nathenson was living elsewhere.) My aunt, my mother's sister, and her children, Betty and Bill, were living during the school year in Toronto, so for a time we had our uncle and the comfortable rooms behind his store to ourselves. For two years my sisters and I had been without a father. Suddenly we had two!

The Mind's Eye Does Not Dim

Of that first night I remember only the sense of coming in from the dark and confusion into the light. There was a marvelous white room with a toilet in it, and a tub and sink that filled with water simply by turning on a faucet. In the dining room there was a blue



Courtesy of Canadian Jewish Congress Central Regional Archives, Toronto
Ansonville Jewry (ca. 1919-1920)

crystal bowl filled with wax fruit that looked real in the center of a large, shining table. It couldn't have been all that late because two girls of about the same ages as my older sister and myself appeared on the scene to greet us: Esther Polly's (a daughter of Alex Abramson) and her cousin, Dora Levos, whose family, like several of the other Jewish families, left town soon after we arrived to try their fortunes elsewhere. Esther and Dora were all set to teach us English right there and then, on a little blackboard that they found somewhere. Shyly, Rebecca and I—the little one, Rita, aged 3, was too bewildered by everything to pay heed to these guests—showed off the few words we had come equipped with (“thank you . . . please sit down . . .”). It was agreed that they would return in the morning and show us the way to school.

The Jewish children those first weeks and months were our interpreters and, as it turned out, it was they, primarily, who became Rebecca's and my companions. Just as the Jewish adults' social activities were mostly with their own—those who spoke their language and came from a similar background—so we Jewish children and young people tended to stick together. True, there were non-Jews who entered the fold, so to speak, and who made no distinction between their Jewish friends and those of their own faith. Annette Richer played the piano at the synagogue for our religious plays and festivities. The Bélangers invited the Young Judeans to use their farmhouse several miles out of town for summertime picnics and sleighride outings in the wintertime. A club that existed, to which I used to wish I was old enough to belong, was comprised of the young Jewish women in town and their non-Jewish (female) friends. They called themselves the Old Maids. Margaret Wall, one of the members, wasn't only non-Jewish, but was married, and had several children. My uncle was a Mason, and there was a companionable friendship between him and other lodge members. And as a highly respected member of the community at large, my uncle enjoyed friendly relationships with all the people in town. One of my close friends was Pearl Dawson, whose father, for a time, was the Grandmaster of the Orange Lodge. And as it happened, my younger sister Rita, then my Canadian-born sister Shirley, who both had few companions of their own ages in the Jewish community, found their friends among our Ukrainian and other Gentile neighbors. And at

Hadassah parties, non-Jewish friends of members were highly honored. So we did not live a life cut off from the rest of the community. But, primarily, our lives were most intimately interwoven with the dozen or so families of the Jewish community. Most came at about the same time and from the same part of the world. They were of similar backgrounds, were acquainted with the same traditions and the same travails. Even Dr. Themes and Mr. Fine, the Jewish doctor and lawyer, and their families, who came from Toronto and spoke English without an accent and had the polish and refined air of the "heiche Fentster" (high windows), were "of ours;" people we could relate to because we knew that their roots were the same as ours. Besides the Themeses and the Fines, one other Jewish family, the Kussners, held themselves a little aloof from the rest, or perhaps we only perceived them as such because the mother was city-bred; and they spent their summers with family in the Laurentian Mountains, near Montreal. Though Karl Kussner prospered in business, he himself had a humble air about him. A relation of John Kussner and Joe Perkus, whose arrival in Krugerdorf was marked by such a tragic happening, for all his prosperity he had the look of the underdog about him. Smiling easily, of pleasant demeanor, he walked with bowed head and was often of introverted countenance. His store, Perkus Ltd., like my uncle's and most of the Jewish and other stores in town, was on Railway Street, facing the tracks and the field beyond that leads to the mill and Iroquois Falls, and to another settlement, Montrock, which was also known as Little Canada.

Walking down Railway Street, from one end to the other, you pass practically every Jewish place of business as it was in that time. There are a few exceptions. The Kideckels' married daughter, Anny Ludwig, runs a little candy store near the Public School. The Harry Crotins, who are known as the Greenh (Green) Crotins to distinguish them from his brother Max's family, the Gelleh (Yellow) Crotins who preceded them and brought them over from the Old Country (Max was one of the original Krugerdorf-Englehart settlers), earn their livelihood from the sale of coal, milk, and cheese and the transporting of freight to and from the Iroquois Falls railway station. The Greenh and the Gelleh Crotins are not friends because of a misunderstanding between the brothers that involved (as it was told us) the loan of a horse. The Greenh Crotins' livelihood depends almost entirely on



Courtesy of Bella Briansky Kalter

The author, at age 8, standing on Railway Street

the services of a strong horse, and the horse they use, when we arrive on the scene, is no longer the horse that was in dispute and the cause of the families' rupture. Soon after our arrival the sons and daughters of the original Crotin family, by now grown young men and women, move to Kirkland Lake, a mining town fifty miles away. The father, an ailing man, is retired and spends some of the time in his Ansonville home with his wife, and some in Kirkland Lake near his children. For a time, there is also another retired older couple with grown children, the Friedmans.

On the other side of the tracks, in Montrock, live two sisters of the Crotin brothers. Alte, who keeps an immaculately spotless house, is the wife of Boris Kushner, the eccentric intellectual in town who prides himself on being an atheist and talks philosophy. Boris works in the mill. Lilly, the other sister, is the wife of Joe Abramson, eldest son of Dvora, widow of Nathan, and he runs a grocery store in Montrock. The two sisters' flats join one another behind and above the grocery store, and while Lilly's home is as shiny and immaculate as Alte's and she, too, is always waxing and polishing, another of her pleasures is baking delectable treats—her specialty is cream puffs—and laying out a table of goodies not only for visiting adults, but also for us young ones, who come to visit often. Alex Gleiberman, whose wife Edith is one of Mooshe and Louis Abramson's older daughters, also works in the mill, and they live in one of the pretty, tree-lined company streets in Iroquois Falls.

Railway and Synagogue Streets. Here is where, up the street, the businesses begin, though in the opposite direction, toward the river, along with other relics of better days such as a boarded up movie house and Widow Dvora's dwelling which also boasted a business, when her husband was alive, there is a poor little jewelry store run by a fragile-looking wisp of a man, not Jewish. And Sonia Korman and her husband, in whose house we briefly rent a room when my aunt and cousins returned from Toronto during the summer and it becomes too crowded in my uncle's house, live in that decaying block also and in better times made a living, like a brother in Timmins, from the sale of dairy products. Their children are grown and have gone to live in the more prospering towns, and a few years after our arrival they, too, leave Ansonville.

When crossing the field on the way from Iroquois Falls to An-

sonville, as one approaches the tracks that run alongside Railway Street, the eye meets the sign that expresses an indomitable trust in the town—Alex Abramson and Son—above the door of the two-story building at the corner of Railway and Synagogue Streets. Upstairs several sisters operate the town's telephone switchboard and have their living quarters. Tiptoeing to get a peek into the store, a little girl sees a narrow passageway with counters and shelves of men's clothing to the right and left, and in the back a little wood stove around which the father, Alex, or his son Albert stands talking to a customer. The eldest son, Milton, has married dairyman Korman's eldest daughter in Timmins and gone to live there. Alex's short, plump, always good-humored wife, Polly, is probably home baking bagels. Their daughter Esther, who is a few years older than I and is my sister Rebecca's friend, is called Big Esther or Esther Polly's to distinguish her from her cousin Esther Mooshe's, who, though she is a year or two older, is known as Little Esther because she is smaller. There are also the younger children, Dorothy and Yankie. And a year or two after our arrival, a new baby, Enid, is born about the same time as brother Milton's baby.

My uncle's store, a few buildings further up the street, is called the Economy Store and is situated between the Chinese restaurant and the Chinese laundry, so that their backyards join behind the buildings and I become acquainted with music from a Chinese mandolin and with the taste of fresh snow peas, which I steal from the laundryman's garden. From the window of the bedroom that I share with my sisters Rebecca and Rita, I see the Chinese men who run the restaurant seated in their kitchen around a long table eating with chopsticks. In the summertime we can hear their singsong voices and plaintive music through the open windows. My uncle's store, unlike Alex Abramson's, has women's clothing as well as men's. A Sephardic Jew, Joe Pesach, works in the store when we first arrive; but soon times are bad, the mill is open only part time, and Mr. Pesach, who filled the place with laughter and took us children sleigh riding, is laid off and disappears from our lives.* We worry that my father, too, will soon be a hand too

* Forty-five years later, my father and Mr. Pesach find themselves reunited by chance. Having moved from one neighborhood in Montreal to another where the closest synagogue within walking distance is a Sephardic one, my father is invited to lead the little group of

many in the store. My cousin Zalmen, who for a time also helped out in the store, is now peddling clothing in the villages around Montreal.

Wedged between my uncle's store and the Chinese laundry, in a tiny haberdashery, a younger brother of Max and Harry Crotin's sits behind his counter reading a newspaper. It is usually very quiet there. A few years after our arrival he marries Sorrel Korman from Rouyn, Quebec, a robust, good-natured woman of the pioneering stock that were of the first settlers in Krugerdorf, and they make their home in a cubbyhole of a room behind the neat little establishment. Continuing up the street, on the corner, is Perkus Ltd., a fabulous store (in our eyes), owned by Karl Kussner. There you can buy not only clothing, but hardware, furniture, and all kinds of household appliances and utensils. Aside from the Company Store in Iroquois Falls, it is the only one where you can buy just about anything, excluding groceries.

At the other corner is Mr. Buttery's (our name for the Syrian proprietor's candy store because of the sweet, buttery smell of his homemade confections). A few buildings beyond is Aboud's, another clothing store, a quiet, nonassuming establishment owned by a childless, middle-aged Syrian couple. Then comes Kideckel's grocery, run not so much by the aging parents as by their strapping sons and daughters. But we don't often stop there. For some reason, perhaps because the prices are a little cheaper at the Nosovs and because they don't mind selling on credit, we go a block further up the street, past a candy store run by a Ukrainian woman, and buy our groceries from them. Tillie Nosov is the eldest of Widow Dvora's daughters, and it is she, more than her husband, who runs the place, serving customers, loading boxes with groceries all with lightning speed.

A block still further up, almost where Railway Street ends, is a large frame building, the Union Hotel, run by Louis and Mooshe Abramson, who, used to the hard life in Krugerdorf and Englehart, make it do both for living quarters for their large family and as a business establishment where refreshment and lodging can be obtained. Little Minnie (Minnie Mooshe's to distinguish

Ashkenazis in prayer each day. Mr. Pesach, he soon discovers, is the Shames in the synagogue.

her from her cousin Widow Dvora's Minnie), the eldest of the unmarried daughters, bakes a dozen pies at a time to feed the family and lodgers.

There Is a Depression in the Air

. . . . Oh it was lovely, lonely, lighted with snow in the winter-time, sun and wildflowers in the summertime, people there all the time, the same people, like people in one's family always there. . . .

It was lovely to get up in the morning and know that though there might be disquiet in one's own home, a breakfast served that did not quite satisfy, a tender word from an adult not forthcoming that day, one could seek a comfort elsewhere. On the way to school, one could stop off at the Greenh Crotin's and be sure to be invited to pull up a chair at the kitchen table and be served a cup of hot chocolate, Sonia Crotin's pleasure being not only to feed her own family but whoever entered her sparkling home. In the backyard there was the stable with the cows that gave enough milk to supply many of the townspeople with milk and delicious cheese, and the horses that her good man, Harry, or her blond, handsome eldest son, Walter, drove to and from the railway station; and the scent from the men's clothing that permeated the house mingling with the good smells of soap and wax and fresh-baked cakes gave this home, above all others in the community, an air of stability, an aura of female and male cooperation and activity to which we were drawn. It was at the Crotins' that I most often chose to do my homework. The daughter Mary was my excuse for coming with my books almost every evening, but the presence of her twin brothers, Louis and Arthur, who were my age (I favored the athletic Arthur), and of her handsome eldest brother, Walter, was an added incentive to stay on after the lessons were completed.

It was lovely to be as of one family, the doors always open without invitation, a celebration of one family become the celebration of every other, the holidays celebrated not only in the homes but as a community in the synagogue. On holidays such as Purim and Hanukah we children provided the major entertainment for the community with plays and musicals that Big Minnie, the Young Judean leader, had cast, directed, and produced almost entirely on her own. The music of operettas and operas like the

Mikado and *Samson and Delilah*, that would otherwise never have entered our lives in those years, was assimilated by us with substituted words that would bring out the flavor and spirit of the holiday being celebrated. “. . . If you should ever find yourself, needful of advice, come to Mrs. Grease, as oily as you please” “. . . Oh-oh-oh my heart it palpitates, oh woe is me, my latkes oh my latkes, have all gone up in smo-oke” Coupled with the traditional holiday songs, our lives were replete with a joyous music that many Jewish children in the city may not have known in those years of depression.

No, we none of us suffered from a total want, for what was lacking in one home was found in another. And this sharing was not limited to those within the community. Meshulachim (special fund collectors) came from every charitable organization in Toronto and Montreal, making their rounds several times a year, from one community in the North to another, my aunt's and uncle's home and subsequently ours, the ones where they ate (being the most strictly kosher), and when there was a bed to spare slept gratis. This was the time of the terrible depression and everyone in the community was pulling together as they had all the days of their lives in this good land that had delivered them from the anti-Semitic oppressive life in the old country. It had never been easy for them, and so they were hardly aware that there was a crisis in the land. The mill now worked only part time. Business was slack. My uncle was always running sales, my father painstakingly (grateful to be given something useful to do) painting the signs to announce the bargains.

In back of the store, my mother (while we were still living with the Perlmutter) and my aunt (whom my uncle can no longer afford to have living in the city) periodically look anxiously into the store to see how business is going. If there are more than one or two customers, my aunt will drop her apron and don a smile and help out in the store.

The depression goes from bad to worse. After a while my uncle can no longer support my father. There has been a Hebrew teacher and *Shochet* (ritual slaughterer) off and on in town, and it is suggested that my father now take these positions. But he must first learn *Shechitah* (ritual slaughtering), so the community will at least be spared having to order their chickens from Toronto. Beef, they

don't mind so much, it isn't so perishable. But with chickens, especially in the summertime, even with dry-ice, they're not all that fresh sometimes.

There is another mouth to feed now. My mother has given birth to another girl, who becomes a doll for me and Rebecca and usurps little Rita's place on my uncle's knee before long.

My father goes away to the city to study. He is also away for a time working as a *Moshgiach* (supervisor of Kosher ritual) in Pittsburgh, where we have relatives who are trying to ease our difficult situation. My mother is sick at heart to think that her husband will have to do this thing—kill animals. but when Rabbi Linder comes to visit from Timmins and we see what a personable, charming man he is though he kills chickens, even cattle, we feel a little better, a little less as though a calamity were about to befall us.

Now we are moving from one shack in town to another, until we find a little house across the street from where Dr. Themes and Mr. Fine and their families lived before they moved back to the city. This little house is next door to the Dawsons, and now I have a friend whose mother invites me to help decorate their Christmas tree and whose brother Edward (who lights our stove on the Sabbath and on the Holy Days) is in my eyes the counterpart of Lawrence in Louisa M. Alcott's novels. I also have a crush on Rabbi Linder's son Cecil. (The Jewish youngsters exchange visits with others in neighboring communities, and Rabbi Linder's daughter Vita and I have become close friends.)

Traveling salesmen and the occasional insurance agent, most of them Jewish, also come to town, and these visitors are our link with the outside world. How else would we have met a grown person who wrote poetry? And heard of a one such as his nephew, a young man on a scholarship in Italy studying music! Of course, all the travelers who come to sell goods to my uncle weren't like Mr. Massey, who became like a member of the family and ate and visited with us whenever he turned up with his tie samples. Still, there was an air of excitement when these men arrived: people in our midst with the poise of the city dweller, with a turn of phrase not familiar to us. Toronto, Montreal...these names breathed of every possibility. When would the likes of us get to see the outside world? . . .

My father in the synagogue, alone up front, facing the con-

gregation, nervously giving a *droshe* (sermon). My father in the quietest corner of the house, giving a lesson to the boys who are approaching their Bar Mitzvahs. Yom Tov coming—life moved always from one Yom Tov to another—and my mother cleaning and cooking and baking. Time passing, marked by the seasons and the holidays.

When Passover is drawing near, my father goes from one house to another, writes out their orders for Passover foods, and adds and itemizes the separate products and sends to Toronto for them. Barney Nosov has agreed to let my father take care of the Passover orders because he realizes how hard-pressed we are for a dollar and that the small profit my father makes from these sales will make little difference to his store's profit and will help us pay for our own order.

On Shavuoth my uncle and father are rounding up men for a minyan. Everyone may not be willing to close their stores if a holiday happens to fall at an inauspicious time, say on a payday.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur all the stores close, no matter what. And all day the men and women are in the synagogue, as are most of the young men. The children and the young women come and go, see some of the fathers with talithim over their heads prostrate on the floor, see some of the women weeping. For the blowing of the shofar we all rush to the synagogue. Mostly it is my father who is straining to make the right sounds come out of the ram's horn.

On Succoth a succah is built on the grounds of the synagogue. And a lulach and ethrog have arrived in a long, narrow box from the city and my father has us stand around him as he holds the yellow citrus fruit in one hand and with the other shakes the branch of palm leaves, simultaneously reciting a prayer over us.

Simchas Torah is the holiday that the men enjoy even more than the children. In the synagogue adults and children all dance and sing together in a circle as the Torah is passed, to be touched and kissed, from one to the other; and the children wave their little white and blue flags in joyous merriment. But the men get to do something unique, something that causes us children great amusement. They meet at the synagogue and after prayers go in a body from house to house for a l'ehaim. By the time they reach the last house or two, some of them are very, very merry.

At Hanukah time we need all the little lights, all the little songs, to keep us going through the long winter. For weeks before Hanukah arrives, Big Minnie is working with us every spare moment of the day and evening on the concert that will take place at the synagogue; and for weeks after, the songs and the excitement remain with us. So that even when our Young Judean leader has arranged a sleigh ride for us and we are all packed together in Kideckel's or Crotin's sleigh, pulled by a team of horses over the snow-high roads through the frozen white world to Bélanger's farm, we are still singing the praises of Hanukah to operatic tunes.

And just in time to save us from despair at winter's unrelenting deep freeze,* there is Purim just around the corner. And again we are spending every possible minute we can spare from our school work, at the synagogue, being trained, drilled, for the forthcoming Purim concert. Who will be King Achashuvorus? Who will be Queen Esther? Who the soldiers? Who Haman? There is a part for almost everyone. Even the young men are inspired to get into the act. Ah, if only I had a good voice! I might have been up on the stage in a main role rehearsing closely with Arthur Crotin and Harry Abramson. Even Walter Crotin has consented to play a part one year, but he is so much older than I, it is no use daydreaming about him.

“Oh It Was Lovely! . . .”

Almost, almost, it is spring again. Icicles from the rooftops are throwing silvery drops, tears of joy, to the ground that has risen three, four, in some places more than five or six feet with the winter's accumulation of packed down, frozen snow. Everything is softening, melting. Soon, soon, the bare ground will be visible again and flowers will come up in the marshes and the meadows. But as in other years, there will be none to behold the miracle with. Mary and Vera and Pearl, Dorothy and Grace Kussner, my sister Rebecca and her friends Little and Big Esther are yearning for something also, as are the young women who are older than we. Little Minnie, Big Minnie and her younger sisters, my cousin Bet-

*The coldest temperature ever recorded in the Province of Ontario—73 degrees below zero—was recorded January 23, 1935, at Iroquois Falls.

ty—all of us feel at times like prisoners in this haven that has given us one to the other, that has sustained us spiritually and physically through the necessary sharing that has made us like one family.

Our comfort and strength is our loneliness and weakness also. While we are all different, each of us an individual, we all know one another so well, we are like a family whose closeness will outlast all the years of our separation in time to come, but who must, when a certain time of growth comes, break away and seek expansion each in her own direction. Ansonville, Timmins, Cochrane, Kirkland Lake, Rouyn, Noranda. All the Jews in these northern towns, most of whom started in Krugerdorf and Englehart, are like branches of one family. Even so, some of the young find romance among their own as did their parents before them in the old world shtetel and in Krugerdorf. Yet most, when the time of play is past, when it is time to assert one's individuality, feel hemmed in, at an impasse; not only in their personal relationships but in their life's work possibilities. "What will I do when I finish high school?" takes precedence over "Whom shall I marry?"

Times moves suddenly, quickly, toward a change, a climax for everyone. The community can no longer scrape up \$100 a month, not even \$90, to pay my father for tutoring their children. Times are very hard and to know how to read Hebrew is not an absolute necessity. A new gold-mining town has just opened in northern Quebec, called Val d'Or, and the few Jews who have come there are city people who have been squeezed out of their little businesses by the depression. It will make them feel less as if they are in an absolute wilderness if their children are getting a proper education, and my father is invited to come there and be the Hebrew teacher. My mother and my sisters leave with my father. I move in with my aunt and uncle and cousins, so that I may finish my high school education. A high school has not yet been built in Val d' Or.

This is not the only change. There is a disquiet in the air from the impending catastrophe abroad. Hitler. We've heard the name before, but now the radio and the newspapers speak of the ever-broadening strength of the Nazi party. When my uncle and Barney Nosov and Boris Kushner sit at a table in the kitchen playing bridge, they no longer, as they used to in former times, concen-

trate altogether on their cards. Barney would just as soon leave political discussions out of the game, but there's no stopping Boris and my uncle once they get started. "We are on the brink of war. Hitler is about to overrun Europe. You wait and see!"

The boys we used to play softball with in the summertime in the empty field next to Crotin's look at us sideways now, as though they're not quite sure who we are, as though not remembering that a little while back we played ball and hide-and-seek together. When they speak their voices sound like men's, and their chins and upper lips have a fine, soft growth of hair on them. Arthur Crotin, like his brother Walter before him, is not only our school's athletic champion, but also comes home with trophies from Kapuskasing, Timmins, Kirkland Lake, Cochrane, all the neighboring towns where competitions are held for the young people. Not only the china cabinet is filled to capacity with the trophies in Sonia Crotin's sparkling dining room, but every sideboard, every polished little table. She feeds us her delicious shtrudel and chocolate-iced porridge cake, then has us follow her into the dining room to *kvel* (beam with pride) with her at her sons' achievements. Arthur's twin, Louis, and her daughter, Mary, she loves also, but these two who have brought home all these trophies fill her with a pride, fulfill her life's reason for being. I look at the gleam in her dark brown eyes and remember that she is the one I heard weeping the first week we were in Canada as my sisters and I lay in bed hearing snatches of conversation, behind the closed door, between our mother and the lady who had come to visit. . . . Before coming to Canada her youngest child had died, a beautiful little boy. And she's had to leave him behind in his lonely grave in the land of murderous anti-Semites.

When the war breaks out and conscription comes for all fit young men, I am in Val d'Or awaiting confirmation that I've been accepted as a student nurse in the one hospital in Montreal that accepts Jewish girls. When I hear the following year that Walter and Arthur Crotin are dead, casualties of the war, I am in the hospital in Montreal, a target of anti-Semitic slurs from the lady superintendent of nurses who uses her weekly classes in ethics to air her views about the "Jewish Race." Soon after the war's end, I hear that Sonia Crotin, too, is dead and that Mary and Louis are taking care of their father. Two of Little Minnie's and Little

Esther's brothers have died, Edward Dawson has been shot down in a plane he was piloting, many of the boys who were in my class in high school are gone.

Gone is the world of my Canadian childhood. Gone the zest for life in the Jewish community. Each time I inquire, yet another of the children—now grown—or an entire family has moved to the city. Yet the sign of what has been, of what there was, endures.

One of the sons refuses to let go of it all, refuses to lose to strangers what his father built for his sons. Alex Abramson and Son. Not only the sign is still there at the corner of Railway and Synagogue Streets, but Yankie, the youngest son, returns each summer with his wife and son and takes his place behind the counter.

Three summers ago when I returned to Ansonville to look once more upon the fields and meadows of my childhood, Yankie turned to his son, Henry, who would soon be Bar Mitzvah, and told him it is because of my father's teachings that he, too, is learning the Torah. "He changed my whole life," Yankie said with emotion, to his son, of my father, and I bowed my head in remembrance of how it was for all of us.