The Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta invites you to relive the excitement
You loved the exhibit...

...now reap the harvest and join us as we launch the book.

Monday, June 11, 2007
7:30pm
Calgary JCC, 1607 - 90 Avenue SW

The program for our book launch will include Harry Sanders (CBC’s “Harry the Historian”), who will host a local history quiz and Prof. Donald Smith (University of Calgary), who will bring greetings.

Copies of A Joyful Harvest will be available for $75.00 a copy. Be among the first to own this beautifully written and richly illustrated limited edition tribute to many of the people, places and organizations that have defined Jewish life in Calgary and southern Alberta. The event is open to everyone and refreshments will be served.

If you are unable to celebrate with us that evening, you can purchase your copy of A Joyful Harvest from our office. Contact us at (403) 444-3171 or jhssa@shaw.ca.

You can support this publication through becoming a Discovery sponsor.
The Lieberman Saga

By Lucien Lieberman
(Lucien Lieberman is a former Calgarian now living in Vancouver)

The typical Alberta pioneer family story recounts early struggles but eventual success. The Lieberman story is somewhat different. It is a story of untimely deaths and missed opportunities.

Sophie Lieberman was the first of our family to arrive in Canada. She came to Alberta in 1912 (the summer of the Titanic sinking) with prospects of marriage. In the following year she married Raphael Gurevitch, a farmer in the community of Rumsey who had entered his homestead in 1905.

They were blessed with five children, Rhoda, Molly, Allan (Curly), Sol and Francis. In 1923 Sophie and Raphael Gurevitch brought six of Sophie’s family from the Ukraine to Canada, including Sophie’s parents – Hersh and Beila Lieberman – and four adult siblings, Leo (my father), Molly, Sam and Lucy. Their immigration visa required all six to spend at least one year on the farm as farm workers; their farmer sponsor was Raphael Gurevitch. They were all city people unfamiliar with farm life, and Raphael erected a separate building to house them.

After a year the six Liebermans moved to Calgary. At this point Hersh and Beila had five adult children in Canada and five adult children left in Russia. If things worked out, there would presumably be more of the family coming to Canada. It was not to be.

In 1927 Raphael Gurevitch died suddenly of a heart attack. He was 48 years old. An autopsy revealed that his lungs were coated with grain dust, an occupational hazard. A few months later his wife’s sister Lucy Lieberman, only 25, died. It was an event shrouded in mystery for many years. How ironic that my parents would name me in her memory, 12 years later, but avoid all discussion of her death. Lucy’s death was, in fact, a case of suicide.

In 1927 Raphael Gurevitch died suddenly of a heart attack. He was 48 years old. An autopsy revealed that his lungs were coated with grain dust, an occupational hazard. A few months later his wife’s sister Lucy Lieberman, only 25, died. It was an event shrouded in mystery for many years. How ironic that my parents would name me in her memory, 12 years later, but avoid all discussion of her death. Lucy’s death was, in fact, a case of suicide.

Events moved quickly. Molly, the single older sister, wishing to avoid the stigma of suicide in a small community, returned to Russia. Hersh and Beila, who were elderly, started to make similar plans. I know that Molly preceded them because the story was told that upon her return to Russia she wrote the family in Canada in her best English and her brother Sam, the kibitzer, returned her letter with the grammar corrected.

I envision a scenario involving brothers Sam and Leo Lieberman. One of them had to escort their elderly parents back to Russia. It may have been a coin toss which Sam lost, but I think Leo just refused to return to “that place”. In the autumn of 1928 Sam left a promising little business – a news stand in a government building at the corner of 12th Ave. and 1st Street West, and a deposit account at the Bank of Montreal.

Leo, on the other hand, was freed of the obligation to help support his parents and became serious about raising his own family. He married my mother, Clara Maerov, in 1931.

In 2007, as I write this, I have trouble understanding how the senior Liebermans could abandon their daughter Sophie Gurevitch, a widow with five young children on a farm in Central Alberta. As well, the money for the six tickets to Canada was not fully repaid to Sophie.

In 1931, with the farm economy failing, Sophie Gurevitch leased the farm to a Mr. Sutcliffe and moved her family into a small residence/corner grocery store in the Riverside neighbourhood of Calgary. Sophie is the hero of this story. She kept her family together.

Jack Edelson, a family friend, recalled this warm memory for me. “In high school in the 30s I was friendly with Curly and Sol. I used to enjoy going over to the Gurevitch house. Everyone old enough to work part time while going to school was helping out. There was a piano in the house and always someone pounding away at it. It was a happy household.”

Leo and Clara Lieberman had two sons, Ray and Lucien. It was their hope that we would go to university and gain a profession. We were the first in the family to enjoy the benefits of Alberta’s expanding economy. We chose chemical engineering and graduated from the University of Alberta in 1957 and 1960, respectively. Our father Leo was employed for 50 years with Alberta News, which merged into United News. He earned a modest salary, but he benefited from the close friendship of his employers, Abe and Joe Busheikin.

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and Morris and Larry Shapiro. He retired at age 78.

When Leo died in 1976, I wrote to my uncle Sam in Russia. My parents had made contact with family in Russia ten years earlier on a six-week visit. My letter was passed from Lieberman family to Lieberman family and Sam replied in a broken English.

In 1991, some 15 years later, I received a letter from New York City written by Lidiya Svet. She provided me with a detailed family tree of the seven Lieberman families descended from Hersh and Beila who had lived their lives in Russia. She was my first cousin and had come to the U.S. in 1989 with four other members of her family representing four generations, including her mother, aged 100.

I was aware that most of the family had survived World War II by being evacuated to Tashkent in Uzbekistan. The grandparents (Hersh and Beila Lieberman) died of natural causes during the war and two of the children, together with their spouses, were caught in a roundup of Jews in the city of Lugansk in 1942 and murdered by the Nazis.

Paraphrasing Lidiya’s struggling English, the following is her description of the life of our Aunt Molly and Uncle Sam. “Molly married an engineer in Sverdlosk (Ural Mountains) and managed to distance herself and her family from the worst of the war.

Sam, after serving in the Red Army during the war, was sent to Stalin’s Gulag for 10 years. His crime: he had lived in the West and had contacts there. He returned a very emotionally sick man and was not allowed to reside in a large city.”

Of her own life, she continued, “We lived under a regime that was totalitarian, fascist and anti-Semitic. We were slaves to our government. We think that Sam and Molly made a very big mistake by returning to Russia in 1928.”

So there it is! A summation of a life in the Soviet Union compared with the promise of prosperity and freedom in Canada.

I recall the day in 1956 when my parents received a telegram from the International Red Cross stating that Sam Lieberman had been released from “exile”. In the earlier years, when he had been in touch with Leo, he used to ask about the health of “Uncle Monty”. This was his way of asking about his account at the Bank of Montreal. The account accrued interest over a period of 28 years. After 1956, my parents used that account to buy clothing for overseas shipment to Russia.

An old friend of Sam’s, Joe Shapiro, remembered Sam’s early years in Calgary. He said, “Sam was a good looking guy with a zest for life. When he was not at work, he carried either a soccer ball, looking for his male friends or a mandolin, looking for his female friends.”

In the early 1990s I would visit Calgary while my daughter Marcy was a nursing student at the University of Calgary. On these occasions we would visit the family graves in the Jewish cemetery. First, my parents’ stones near the memorial to the fallen soldiers of our community, then a few steps away to Lucy’s stone. It merely states, “Lucy Lieberman July 1, 1927.”

It struck me that she died on Dominion Day, our nation’s public holiday. We decided to go to the university library and look up the Calgary Herald archives for that week in 1927. There on the pages of the Herald was the tragic story of Lucy’s demise. The family had reported her as missing, that she had a history of illness and had threatened self destruction on numerous occasions. Her body was removed from the Bow River where it had been found entangled with a dredging cable near the Cushing Bridge in East Calgary.

Our older cousins had held to the story that Lucy was being pressured into a marriage that she did not wish to enter. This was a story most families would want to conceal from the next generation. I can understand my parents wishing to squelch the story, but to be named in her memory required that I search out the truth and consider the consequences of her action.

In March 1991, on the occasion of my son Jeffrey’s Bar Mitzvah in Vancouver, we invited Lidiya Svet’s grandson, Yuri, aged 14, to occupy the empty chair reserved for the Russian Jewish child who was not able to have a Bar Mitzvah in Russia. Yuri came with his mother Tanya from Brooklyn. In a luncheon speech following the Shabbat service, I noted that Tanya and Yuri were the first members of the Lieberman family from Russia to visit Canada since the great grandparents returned to Russia in 1928. A period of 63 years had passed.

Oral History Workshop

Nine people attended the Oral History Workshop led by Bertha Gold on March 7th. Bertha led them through the entire process and offered helpful tips to make the experience more enjoyable for both the interviewer and the subject. If you were unable to make it to the workshop, but are interested in conducting oral interviews for the JHSSA, please call our office and we will try to organize another workshop in the near future.
Philip Yarmarko: Rockyford’s Last Doctor

By Jack Switzer

A panel in the JHSSA exhibit, A Joyful Harvest, notes that about 75 small towns in Alberta once had Jewish populations, mainly merchants who stayed a few years until they rejoined the rich Judaic life of the bigger cities. Many also left because of a poor rural economy, notably during the Depression years, and because of the many discomforts of small-town life.

All of these factors played a role in the brief southern Alberta sojourn of the Philip Yarmarko family in Rockyford, a town about 50 miles north-east of Calgary. Yarmarko was a physician – not a merchant – but even as a professional he found earning a living in a cash-poor area an unappealing challenge.

Most of our information on the Yarmarko family comes from memoirs sent to the Glenbow Archives by Dr. Alfred Yarrow, Philip's step-son, who revisited Calgary and Rockyford in 1996.

Philip Yarmarko was born in Winnipeg in 1900, to a family of Jewish immigrants from the Ukraine. He was able to study medicine in England, graduating as a doctor in 1929. He later married Leah, a Polish immigrant to London, then a widow with three children. Dr. Yarmarko left for Canada, establishing a practice in Rockyford late in 1932, and was joined, early in 1933, by Leah and one of her children, eight-year-old Alfred.

Alfred and his mother were driven from Calgary to Rockyford in Dr. Yarmarko’s new car. It was a two-to-three hour trip to Rockyford, mainly on gravel roads. Alfred notes: “All of this was very exciting as I cannot recall ever being in a private car before, let alone being a member of a family who possessed a car.”

Rockyford was a relatively small town, with 194 residents counted in the 1931 census, plus many area farm families. It had five grain elevators, a two-room school, three stores, a hotel, a bank, a small hospital and a doctor’s house, one of only three in town with running water. (But there was no toilet; the family used an outhouse.)

Alfred Yarrow recalls regular morning singing of God Save the King, O Canada and The Maple Leaf Forever. “It never struck me as odd at the time what an unsuitable song The Maple Leaf was for many Canadian children...as if all our forefathers came from the United Kingdom. In fact, while many of the townspeople were of UK extraction, many of the farmers roundabout, ad their children, derived from all over Europe. Of course French Canadians must have hated it.”

There was one other Jewish family in Rockyford, named Davis. Sam Davis ran a delivery truck and also had a pumper tank to empty septic tanks. “The children I saw in school; Sarah and Louis were older than me, Annette the same age, Rosetta younger. We had nothing to do with this family socially.”

The Yarmarkos had a large garden, not planted until Victoria Day, but harvested relatively early, in July and August. “There was far more than one could eat so the housewife pickled, preserved, salted. Even eggs were preserved in isinglass. As my father was often paid in eggs, this came in handy.

“Whatever mother may have felt about life in Rockyford she made an effort to adapt to her new life. She was befriended by a neighbour, Mrs. Hudson...and became a member of the Ladies Aid Association, a housewives’ club. The women cooked, baked, preserved, made jam. And they vied with each other to be the best and to demonstrate how well they looked after their families.

“When the men were not at work they had recreations. I can recall Dad going duck shooting in the fall. The great centre of activities in the long winter months was the ice rink. Most of this was devoted to skating, except when it was used for ice-hockey matches. Part was set aside for curling. Dad played.

“In the winter there was little to do in break periods. After school, almost every night, I went skating, as did most of the town kids. I was very quickly bought skates and rapidly mastered the art. Sometimes Dad would go skating or curling. Mothers never went.

“Once I recall youngsters from the Blackfoot Indian Reservation coming to play us at ice hockey. I had never seen real Indians before. I wandered into their changing room by mistake and was ejected with some vituperation. They were, if they were the same age as our team, much larger and heavier, superb players and skaters, who gave our team a drubbing. But they were very surly; there was no fraternizing. They came, they conquered, and they went home.

“When one recalls that their grandfathers had been plains warriors and had been ‘persuaded’ to give up a way of life and go and live on a reservation, one can understand why they did not love us. But the incident has remained vividly with me all my life.

“Somewhere in the town was a baseball diamond and from time to time, and always on May 24th, our town would play neighbouring villages like Rosebud and Strathmore. On a baseball day the cars would line up behind the diamond, and people watched from their cars. If our players hit the ball the drivers would honk their horns furiously to encourage them...
Ribtor: A Family Affair

By Joel Lipkind

Joel Lipkind submitted an informative response to our 2000 Jewish Business survey. His father, Sol Lipkind, was a founder of Ribtor, a very well known Calgary business. The following is Joel’s article, with the addition of some Lipkind family history and some more recent information about Ribtor.

Ribtor Manufacturing and Distribution Co. Ltd. is a retail business specializing in family camping, hunting and fishing products, general hardware, industrial surplus goods, used restaurant equipment, and new industrial kitchenware. Ribtor is now located at 318 - 11th Avenue S.E.

Sol Lipkind was born in 1914 in Daysland, Alberta, where his parents, Clara and Jacob Lipkind, operated a general store. Jacob came to Calgary from Russia in 1905 along with his wife’s brother, John Hector. The Lipkind children (there were five, born in various places) grew up in Canmore, Daysland, Calgary, Three Hills and in Trochu, where the J. Lipkind & Company general store had a large hardware department.

Sol struck off on his own in the 1930s, working for Safeway in Prince Albert and Edmonton. He joined the RCAF in World War II, serving as a radar technician. He married Margaret Sweigman in Toronto during the war. After the war, Sol returned briefly to Trochu. In 1946 he moved permanently to Calgary to work in the hardware trade, sometimes with partners. These included Lord Hardware, Contractors Hardware and Atlas Electric and Hardware Co.

In 1946 a partnership between Ted Riback and Sol’s cousins, the Hector brothers – Max, Morris, and Sam – opened Ribtor Surplus at 605 Second Street East (now Macleod Trail and 6th Avenue S.E.). In 1949 Sol Lipkind bought Ted Riback’s interest, merged Atlas Electric with Ribtor, and incorporated the company as Ribtor Manufacturing and Distributing. Sol purchased the remaining Hector interest in 1972.

In the 1950s there were many other Jewish businesses in the area, especially on nearby Eighth Avenue East. In particular, I remember Nagler’s Department Store, directly across the street from Ribtor. It is now the site of the Calgary Public Library. Steinberg’s Department Store was around the corner on Seventh Avenue, and the City Hall Market was just a half-block away, across from City Hall.

Cecil Horwitz had Calgary Farm Machinery just to the north; Sam Sanford ran Calgary Scrap Metal across from that business. The House of Jacob synagogue was a short walk away, on Fifth Avenue.

Ribtor remained in its familiar red brick building on Second Street East until 1971, when the City expropriated the site. It is now part of the Rocky Mountain Plaza. In 1972 Ribtor re-opened at its present location, 318 - 11 Avenue S.E., a 4-storey building that was erected in 1913 as the Massey-Ferguson warehouse.


Margaret and Sol Lipkind, c. 1945. Photo courtesy of Joel Lipkind.

Old Ribtor building, 605 Second Avenue SE, 1954. Photo courtesy of Joel Lipkind.

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Ribtor: A Family Affair

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spent a large part of their careers with the company, often until their retirement. (In 2000 Keith Ochtab, hardware and warehouse manager, had been with Ribtor for 39 years; Josie Napper had 37 years of service in the office.)

‘Family owned and family operated’ is still the credo at Ribtor. We have always believed in taking care of family. We have fathers and sons and husbands and wives working together, and we treat our staff as family.

The secret to Ribtor's success was Sol's philosophy that “You should give the customer what they want, and if you don’t have it, get it for them.” This still holds true today.

Fun times at Ribtor -

Sol loved to deal in government surplus, auctions, and clearouts. Margaret and Mac Mehta, the long-time financial controller, were talking one day about how much time Sol was spending away from the store attending auctions and such. Mac suggested that maybe Sol was seeing a blond, not machine parts. Margaret, who often worried about how many unfamiliar goods Sol bought at these sales, replied “better a blond.”

Surplus army bunks that Sol bought weren’t selling for $30, or $20, or even $10. They just wouldn’t sell, even though they were better than any other bunks on the market. Sol told Keith to find out how much other bunks were selling for. The army bunks were raised to $80 and sold immediately, with 5,000 going to the Canadian Correctional Service.

Nochess, which means “Black” in Spanish, was Sol’s cocker spaniel. Sol and Nochess were buddies to the end. Nochess often ran away in search of whatever dogs like to do. Sol was often heard saying: “Got to get my dog out of jail again.”

Ribtor has a long history of supplying movie companies with set decorations and other paraphernalia. Little Big Man was the first. “Dustin Hoffman was just a regular guy. Small, skinny, and he helped load the truck”, Keith recalled. Superman, Legends of the Fall, The Unforgiven and Shanghai Noon all used period pieces from Ribtor. TV series like Lonesome Dove and Honey, I Shrink the Kids, also featured pieces that were only available from Ribtor’s large and varied stock.

The store itself was turned into a movie set for scenes in the screen version of Truman Capote’s In Cold Blood.

Joel Lipkind is active in the Victoria Crossing Business Revitalization Zone, working to re-invigorates the old Victoria-Park warehouse and retail area. He says Ribtor will remain open to serve the housing, office and retail area under development between the CPR tracks and the Stampede grounds. The upper floors of the Ribtor building have already been renovated as loft-style offices, and Ribtor East, a mixed-use complex, is under construction next door to the old Ribtor building.

If you have not completed the JHSSA Business Questionnaire and would like to submit information about your business for our files, please contact our office at 444-3171 or jhssa@shaw.ca.

Philip Yarmarko

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to run and to rattle the opponents.

“Once I went to stay in Calgary for the Calgary Exhibition and Stampede. I remember distinctly watching the opening procession. The Prime Minister of Canada, R.B. Bennett, led the cavalcade in an open car. Someone threw an egg at him which splattered all over. Because of the economic situation he was very unpopular, and at a later election, lost to the Liberals.

“The years 1933-35 were years of terrible slump in North America and wheat prices were so low farmers could hardly live. Many men left home and ‘bumped’ around the country ‘riding the rails’. In the summer they would get off the evening freight train, come and knock and ask if there were any chores to do. To save their pride you would find something like chopping wood or weeding. You could not turn them away hungry and my mother fed them. These were terrible times.

“The work of a country practitioner was very erratic. Great blizzards would keep people home. If they were very sick you might need to visit. If the roads were blocked, Dad would hire a horse and sleigh and a driver.”

Philip Yarmarko gave up his Rockyford practice in mid-1935, and the family returned to London where he was more successful. Philip Yarrow (he Anglicized the family name) died in 1954.

His son sums up the situation of small-town medicine practice: “Like all his predecessors he could not make a living; the population could not support a doctor and there was a terrible economic depression.” Yarmarko was the last doctor to live in Rockyford. Area residents had to travel to Strathmore or Drumheller after his departure.

Alfred Yarrow studied medicine in Edinburgh, lived in England and Scotland, retired in 1984, and moved with his wife Sheila to Israel.

When Alfred and Sheila Yarrow visited Rockyford in 1996 the village was down to two grain elevators, a few houses, one store, and no Jews.

Sources: Alfred Yarrow fonds, Glenbow Archives; JHSSA Archives; Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, Winnipeg.
JHSSA News

Wedding Photo Identified

Our thanks go out to Muriel Lainof and Arnold Dvorkin who called to inform us that the bride and groom in the wedding photo that was featured in our February issue are Jack Krangle of Vancouver and Marjorie Dworkin, daughter of Tony and Sarah Dworkin. They were wed in Calgary in 1948, but lived in Vancouver.

Looking for 80 year olds

Once again the JHSSA will be honouring our community’s elders at our AGM in the fall. We would like the names of those long time members of our community who have turned 80 this past year. Please call our office at 444-3171 or email us at jhssa@shaw.ca to pass on their names.

“Preserving Your Textile Treasures” – Workshop lecture, Sunday, July 8, 2007

Textile conservator, Gail Niinimaa, will be giving a talk about long term care of textiles as part of the Judaic Textile Treasures Workshop that will be offered at the Calgary JCC on Sunday, July 8, 2007 from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. The workshop will include the talk, a display, some hands-on needlework activity and an opportunity to share your interest in the textile arts. Registration is $35 and includes lunch. To register call the Calgary JCC at 253-8600.

A Local Beauty Queen

For Purim, the JHSSA rotating display at the Calgary JCC entrance featured a “Purim Beauty Contest” consisting of historic photos of young women from our photo collection. We collected 41 “votes” from visitors to the JCC and local beauty Minnie Dworkin Stein (1904-1981) was voted our local Purim Queen. Minnie is one of the people featured in our new series tribute cards that are available for any occasion.

Thank you to all those who voted. If you have photos of Beauties in your family collection, please pass them on to us and we will mount a new display next year. We are also currently looking for photos that typify the 1950s for a future display.

Congregation House of Jacob Memorabilia

Congregation House of Jacob-Mikveh Israel will be celebrating the centennial of its founding charter in 2009. In preparation for the celebrations, the Centennial Committee is looking for items or memories relating to the history of the synagogue. Please contact the synagogue at 259-3230 or hojm@telus.net if you have anything to contribute.

JHSSA Tribute Cards

Thirteen different tribute cards are now available from the JHSSA. We will send out cards on your behalf for any occasion for a minimum donation of $10. Blank Cards are available from our office for $5 each or $45 for a pack of 10 cards. In addition, for $36 you can dedicate a book in our library to honour a special occasion. We also offer certificates in the JHSSA Book of Heritage for $100.

For further details or to order a card, please contact our volunteer, Carey Smith, at 253-5152 or careysmith@shaw.ca.

Write for Discovery

Recent issues of Discovery have featured several articles written by “amateur” historians. We invite you to join our team of authors; send us your family’s story or an interesting historical anecdote. Secure your place in history.

Yes, I would like to join the Jewish Historical Society

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