Ben Hyman outside his shop, 1925. It had practically everything, including a bar mitzah registry.
All photos courtesy of Rosemary Donegan, Spadina Avenue

Demonstration against German rearmament, Bloor and Spadina, c. 1960. In the centre (with glasses) is Joshua Gershman, editor of the *Vochenblatt*.

Spadina Avenue: *The Cosmic Spine*

By Gene Homel

For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, Spadina Avenue, more than any other area, was the traditional centre of Toronto's Jewish life.

Spadina was much more than a broad boulevard running north from Lake Ontario. It was a colourful community, a way of life, that still produces an intense mixture of nostalgia and affection.

I witnessed those emotions recently when I gave a presentation on Spadina to groups with some older people whose roots go back to that neighbourhood.

Viewing the old photos, my listeners noticed relatives and places where they had lived and worked, and they fondly shared their memories.

I too have fond if more recent memories. A 1960s photo of Grossman's Tavern reminded me of chilly nights warmed momentarily by jazz, knishes and beer.

Such nostalgia is based on a strong sense of place that is said to be dwindling nowadays, but it's a sense that is absolutely vital to the collective memories of Toronto Jews.

For Rick Salutin, writer and *Globe and Mail* journalist with roots in the neighbourhood, Spadina was an "alternative" to "the rigid grid of Toronto's streets, and the rigid grid of values and attitudes in much of Canadian life...."

For Matt Cohen, one of Canada's finest novelists, Spadina was "the centre of the universe" when he lived in Toronto in the 1960s.

It wasn't always this way. In the 1800s, Jews were a tiny group in an Anglo-Protestant city. Spadina in the early 1800s was part of the large estate of William Baldwin, an important member of the gentry. In the 1870s and 1880s Spadina was a fashionable address.

All that changed after 1900, with the waves of European Jewish migration to Toronto. The city's Jewish population increased sixfold between 1900 and 1911, and then doubled in the next ten years. The Jewish population grew 15 times from 1901 to 1931, from 3000 to 45,000.

At the turn of the century, most Jewish immigrants lived in "The Ward," a crowded, run-down area between Queen and Gerrard west of Yonge. By World War One, most were moving westward to Spadina. Those still struggling moved to the Kensington area; the prosperous lived around Beverly Street or as far west as Palmerston Avenue.

For several decades, Spadina was a vibrant Jewish neighbourhood. By 1931, although Jews comprised only 6% of Toronto's population in a city over 80% British, Spadina's visibility and concentration gave Jews a much higher profile. As late as 1951, Jews were still the largest non-British ethnic group in Toronto, as they had been in 1931, and most still lived or worked in the area.

Spadina's lower end housed a feisty, mercurial factory economy based on clothing and furs. Industrial unionism was popular among the employees. When one union went on strike, "the whole community went on strike," observed J.B. Salsberg, one-time director of the Communist Party's labour operations. Many other families went into business, running restaurants, bakeries, dry-goods and grocery stores.

A strong sense of community and a rich network of associations were typical of the area's fraternal and mutual-benefit societies. Yiddish theatre and cultural

GENE HOMEL teaches Liberal Arts at the BC Institute of Technology in Burnaby, BC, and holds a PhD from the University of Toronto. He appeared in our January/February issue with an article, "Creation in the Blast Furnace: Mieczyslaw Weinberg's Jewish Songs."

[1] The Vochenblatt was the Yiddish forerunner of Outlook. – Eds.

First Annual Fruit Ball , 1927, Labour Lyceum at Spadina and St. Andrew, the head office for int. needle trades unions and other organizations such as the Workmen's Circle and the Socialist Farband.

groups flourished. The Workmen's Circle, for example, was staunchly secular, socialist and enthusiastic about promoting Yiddish. "The Toronto Jewish community is composed of born 'joiners'. Not to belong to at least sixteen organizations is an open confession of financial or physical disability," a Jewish publication joked in 1922. Perhaps, as *Vochenblatt* Editor[1] and activist Joshua Gershman suggested, groups were a second home to many because of crowded housing and long working hours.

Political diversity and engagement were also earmarks of Spadina. Anarchist, Communist and democratic-socialist forces were well organized; 25,000 turned out for a May Day demonstration in 1938. Communist J.B. Salsberg was the area's MPP from 1943 to 1955. Of course, the Conservatives and especially the Liberals also had their supporters.

Spadina became Toronto's symbol of an area where immigrants could settle and get established. Sociologists call this institutional completeness, a place where newcomers can find practically all the goods and services they want, in their own language and culture.

The Second World War was a watershed for Spadina. By the 1951 census, Canadian Jews had the highest average annual income of any ethnic group, including the British. With a new prosperity and a new sense of freedom, Jews began the trek north to Bathurst and the dizzying heights of Spadina Road in Forest Hill. The secular families were eventually followed by the more Orthodox in the late 1950s and 1960s. The transformation from a working-class, left-wing society to a prosperous, secular, professional and politically centrist society was dramatic.

Spadina became a mosaic of newcomers: Portuguese, West Indians, Hungarians and many others. Since the 1970s, the Chinese and Vietnamese presence spread from the small, older Chinatown area around City Hall to Spadina, which now has about 10,000 Chinese residents.

While the ownership of industrial Spadina was still in many cases Jewish, as it had once been Anglo-Protestant, the work force was no longer Jewish. However, Shopsy's, Switzer's, Perlmutter's and United Baker drew people down from the northern

Leaders at the Second Convention of the Industrial Needle Trade Workers, early 1930s.

suburbs to stock up on corned beef, rye bread and cheesecake.

Still, Spadina remained in some ways an "alternative." The Stop Spadina Freeway campaign, the victories of the humble NDP MP Dan Heap over the well-connected Liberal Jim Coutts, the student and countercultural population which, while normally English-speaking, sometimes had a jarring accent—all these were signs that Spadina wasn't ready to be part of the "rigid grid."

In 1984 art curator Rosemary Donegan compiled a gallery exhibit of Spadina photos, past and present. By the following year, when her book *Spadina Avenue* was published with an introduction by Salutin (Matt Cohen was originally chosen but had to bow out), many of the buildings seen in the historic photos were gone. More still have left us since.

Now an Assistant Dean and Associate Professor at the Ontario College of Art and Design, Donegan recalls that "when I started the research, I was aware of the vibrant and radical history of the area: the Jewish community, the garment industry, the trade unions and the history of various left-wing movements. I came to understand how many other immigrant communities had settled in and around Spadina and considered it their main street."

"Spadina Avenue has had two personas over the last 100 years: as a centre of immigrant life and work and as a nexus of creative culture in the city. What I hoped to do with the Spadina exhibition and book was to locate the continuity of a city street with these layers of histories, cultures and social movements that define our understanding of place."

"While Spadina has changed completely, it is still booming. The material on 'the Avenue' is always

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lation that banned extra billing. She probably made few friends at the Ontario Medical Association when she said doctors should feel privileged to work in a system that offers them relative job security and a comfortable income.

"There's some kind of sense of entitlement that's really out of proportion," she remarked of her profession. "If you begin to think over every piece of work you do as a medical service, you can begin to resent that you sewed those three stitches and didn't get paid for it.

"If you're earning $300,000 and you have to go down to $250,000, it may look like you've taken a big hit. But no one's going to be sympathetic."

Led by Dr. Divinsky, the Medical Reform Group went on to urge Queen's Park to make abortion "as available as any other medical service."

In the early 1990s, she was part of a team of Ontario physicians who went on a speaking tour of 12 U.S. cities to extol the virtues of a public health-care system, in a campaign organized by the Democratic Socialists of America.

She participated in "hunger clinics" to help people with low incomes reclaim a diet allowance that was cut by Mike Harris's Conservative government, noting that without the supplement, a social-assistance recipient had an average of $2.43 a day to spend on food—"legislated poverty."

Dr. Divinsky's father, noted mathematician and chess master Nathan Divinsky, swears his daughter was the reincarnation of his own father, a doctor. Mr. Divinsky, who moved his family from Winnipeg to Vancouver in 1957, recalled: "As soon as Mimi was born, she seemed to have my father's characteristics. The desire to help people was more important than helping herself. Mimi had the gene."

Mr. Divinsky said his daughter "would spend an hour with a patient when a [another] doctor would not spend more than 10 minutes. She made house calls. This drove me nuts: When she'd come to visit us here in Vancouver, she'd make appointments with 12 people who were anxious to see her--all in one afternoon! When she put her teeth into something, she wouldn't let go."

She never married or had children, but had a hard-core cadre of friends who accompanied her to ballets and classical music concerts and cared for her well into the advanced stages of illness. In the days after Dr. Divinsky's death, "there were at least 12 women across Canada who said to themselves, 'I have just lost my best friend,' " Toronto lawyer Elaine Newman said. "And all of us were right."

A common thread runs through their recollections: that Dr. Divinsky never went out without loading her purse with $2 coins to hand to the homeless; that on more than one occasion, she administered medical aid to them; that among her few personal indulgences was membership in a philosophy salon that met each Tuesday.

Her keenness for the arts came naturally. She had been the rare humanities undergraduate (medieval and French history) to get into and graduate from the University of British Columbia's medical school.

"She wanted to be friends," remembered onetime patient Helga Haberfellner, a Toronto-based filmmaker. "I said, 'I'd love that but I need a doctor.' She said, 'You can always find another doctor but you can't always find another friend.' She proved it was possible to be a friend and a patient, but it takes an extraordinary doctor."

Or just one who sought out the narrative, who believed that if doctors simply listened, they would discover reasons for their patients' behaviour. Like her own patient who smoked not because she was self-destructive but because she was lonely; smoking was one of her best friends. Or the overweight woman who felt that her large size was a comfort, that when curled up with a book or even sitting in a theatre or airplane, she felt she was hugging herself in a way no one else could.

Physicians can't keep their emotions at bay, she wrote, because without them, "we risk becoming the kind of doctors who go down the hall to see 'the gall-bladder in Room 2.' " ◆

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expanding. I continue to have people contact me about the book and comment on seeing the exhibition 22 years ago. The reception to both has been wonderful. I hope they're still a tribute to the many people who lived very hard lives on Spadina."

The neighbourhood received another kind of tribute from Matt Cohen in *Typing: A Life in 26 Keys,* posthumous winner of the 2001 Jewish Book Award for Memoir. Cohen identifies the conservative, restrained, Protestant nature of Canada's literary establishment. To Cohen, as "the off-beat, very unconservative, unProtestant, unrestrained offspring of a completely different cultural and religious tradition," the establishment's experiences felt somewhat alien.

But not Spadina Avenue. Cohen affectionately celebrated the area for its Jewish and countercultural traditions: "Spadina was Toronto Central, the cosmic spine. On its southern stretch, you could breakfast at the Crest Grill, lunch at Switzer's, dine, drink beer and listen to jazz at Grossman's Tavern. You could shoot pool on Spadina, walk with girlfriends on Spadina .... I myself had already lived at three Spadina addresses, eaten at a dozen Spadina restaurants, dressed in Spadina-bought clothes, even gone to my grandfather's funeral at a Spadina Avenue funeral chapel."

Today, Matt Cohen Park sits at Spadina and Bloor. The Ontario Jewish Archives offers historical walking tours of Kensington, which still houses a couple of active synagogues.

But the Jewish presence is largely gone. Though there are some 11,000 Jews in Toronto's downtown core, only 445 people identified themselves on the 2001 census as solely or in part Jewish in the area bounded by College, Bathurst, Queen and University.

Says one Jew from the downtown core, "We just have to go up to Eglinton to get our *challah*." ◆