

# The Only Yiddish Library in Western Canada

## THE PAULA AND SHAYA KIRMAN LIBRARY

By Faith Jones

On February 19, 1953 a notice appeared in the *Jewish Western Bulletin*:

### Library at Peretz School Available for Public Use

“The Peretz School Library is available for public use. The library has now 340 Yiddish books and 140 in English, all pertaining to Jewish life, and many of the books are now very difficult to buy.

Anyone interested in making full use of the library can do so by contacting the library chairman, Mr. J. Greenberg, at CE. 8643.”

Jack Greenberg was an active member of Vancouver’s Peretz School, and a lover of literature and culture. The Peretz School, founded in 1945, always had books. These were brought by members who arrived in Vancouver from other places; were ordered through the mail; and were bought from visiting Yiddish writers who came through on speaking tours after hitting larger Jewish communities such as Winnipeg. But an organized library was not really part of the school’s early activity. This effort in 1953 to run the library as a cohesive collection of books was short-lived. About a month later, the school was devastated by its expulsion from the United Jewish Appeal, a victim of Canadian-style McCarthyism. While the battle raged in the pages of the *Jewish Western Bulletin*, and the school scrambled frantically to find other sources of revenue, the library became very much an afterthought. (The school was readmitted to the UJA in 1955, but at a much lower funding level). At the same time, older members had begun to die and younger members could not necessarily read Yiddish. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, the collec-



Shaya and Paulina Kirman

tion grew into a haphazard assortment held by various teachers in their classrooms.

In 1958, when the worst of McCarthyism was over in the Vancouver Jewish community, a new immigrant family arrived who breathed new life into the idea of a Peretz School library. Paulina and Shaya Kirman and their children were Polish Jews and, though not the first Holocaust survivors to be drawn to the Peretz School, they were particularly attached to Yiddish as a result of their wartime experiences. Paulina and her first husband had fled Poland when Germany invaded in 1940. Her husband died, and a few years later Paulina ran into Shaya, who had been a family friend in Warsaw. They married and lived in exile until the end of the war when they were able to

return to Poland. They found the anti-Semitism in Poland unbearable, and became very interested in finding a way for their children to connect to their heritage. When they arrived in Vancouver in 1958, they inquired after Yiddish education for their children, and the community’s immigrant aid office put them in touch with the Peretz School.

Both Shaya and Paulina were voracious readers in a number of languages, including Yiddish, and they eventually collected a sizable number of books in Yiddish, but Paulina was the force behind the library. Though she held a master’s degree in economics from Poland, she worked in Vancouver initially as a nurse’s aid. Through a Polish-Canadian patient there, she was put in touch with the library at the University of British Columbia, which required a Slavic languages cataloguer. Paulina knew six languages well and could catalogue in three more. The UBC library trained her, and she worked there for 22 years.

In 1972 Paulina and Shaya began a Yiddish reading group which met at the Peretz School. The group included both immigrants and Canadian-born members who had Yiddish as their first language. By that time Paulina had ten years’ library experience. She realized that there was a demand for a Yiddish library in Vancouver, and that the Peretz School had the books, although they were scattered and not arranged in a logical order. In 1976 she and Shaya got permission to use one of the classrooms to

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shelve and organize the books into a library.

Although both were working and they still had children at home, they spent hours at the school organizing the books into a working library. Paulina was able to scavenge old cataloguing materials from UBC. Paulina set to work cataloguing and classifying. Shaya assisted her, painting call numbers on the spines and typing cards which Paulina had prepared.

**The** library's opening was timed to coincide with the visit of a distinguished guest, New York Yiddish literary figure Itche Goldberg, on January 21, 1979. Paulina invited not only every Jewish group in the city, but virtually every organized seniors' group. She did endless amounts of publicity, sending personal invitations to UBC librarians, synagogues, and the Jewish Community Centre's library workers. This outreach was successful not only in attracting participants for the opening, and users for the library, but also in encouraging donations, which came from individuals who were not Jewish as well as those who were, and groups such as the Jewish Community Centre's seniors' club. The Ukrainian Fraternal Association made a donation, requesting that it be used to purchase a book on Jewish-Ukrainian relations. Paulina began regularly hosting seniors' groups from other organizations on trips to the library. Paulina opened the library every Sunday to serve members dropping off their kids.

At the end of the 1980s, Paulina began to experience health problems associated with her age, and the Peretz School was experiencing a space crunch. The library remained, but it was mostly used as a lounge, and new donations—pouring in as older members died—could not be catalogued or arranged logically on the shelves. Ironically, as the collection grew richer, it also grew less coherent. Volunteers who attempted to keep up with even the simple duties of re-carding and shelving returned loans were hampered by their lack of Yiddish. However, browsing was still possible. The library continued to serve a purpose in its way, but its situation reflected the state of the Yiddish language: its elderly librarian and shrinking number of readers could not maintain a normal level of activity.

In September 1996 I started taking Yiddish classes at the Peretz Institute. The classes were held in the library; I was about to start my master's in library science at UBC. Gradually as I learned the alphabet—we really had to start at the beginning—I looked at the books more closely and figured out what should have been obvious—that they were completely out of order. So I called the Peretz School's office one day and offered to work on it.

There was one other library volunteer, David Kaetz, who had come to the school initially as a researcher looking for old Purim plays to adapt for a children's show he was writing. David's Yiddish was good but, like me, he had no idea of what running a library meant. We struggled through together, even when we discovered the "duplicates" in the basement: donations that hadn't fit on the shelves, as well as books that had been boxed and moved for re-painting the library two years earlier and had never been unpacked. They were in boxes on a cement floor, some of them wet from a dripping pipe. We spent quite a few weeks getting books out of the basement and onto the shelves, shipping duplicates to the National Yiddish Book Centre, selling off saleable items, and figuring out what we had. In 1999, I got my library degree, and got a job in New York. David's performing career was taking up more of his time and he left Vancouver. Paulina, who had been too ill to take part, but was still a mentor for me and David, died that fall.

**And** the Peretz School was about to pack up and move into temporary quarters while the old building was torn down and a new building put up on the same site. The new facility was completed in 2001, including a purpose-built library named after Paulina and Shaya Kirman. At about the same time, a former member and Sunday school teacher rejoined the Peretz community. Al Stein, a graduate of the Peretz Shule in Calgary, with a love of books and Yiddish literature, had just retired to Vancouver from Victoria. Stein took over the duties of volunteer librarian. He obtained a grant for the computerization of the library catalogue from the Vancouver Jewish Community Foundation. With the grant he hired a qualified library technician who had the necessary computer skills. With Stein providing romanization and the technician entering the information, they painstakingly produced hundreds of catalogue records that adhere to professional cataloguing standards.

Now living again in Vancouver, I use the library for my research on Yiddish culture in Canada, and my reading group borrows books for our meetings. People doing programs at the Peretz Centre rush in to look things up. It is now the last Yiddish-language library in Western Canada, outlasting even the Winnipeg library (although a core collection from that library remains at the Winnipeg JCC library). The library is finally what Paulina Kirman, and before her, Jack Greenberg, envisioned: a fully-catalogued, accessible, deep collection of Yiddish-language books.♦

In addition to its Yiddish collection, the Paula and Shaya Kirman Library has an extensive English-language Judaica collection. - Eds.