

Calgary Herald

History comes to life at Calgary Jewish Academy; Gala celebrates the little school that could

Fri May 24 2013

Page: A17

Section: News

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Source: For The Calgary Herald

Illustrations: Stuart Gradon, Calgary Herald / Calgary Jewish Academy associate principal Shoshana Kirmayer, second from right, is joined by Gillian Hazan, left, Marnie Bondar, Esther Silver and Kathy McIntosh.; The Jewish Historical Society Of Southern Alberta / A class portrait from I.L. Peretz School in Calgary from 1930, two years after the elementary school opened. The school would later become known as the Calgary Jewish Academy.;

There may as well be a red carpet at the Calgary Jewish Academy's centennial anniversary party this weekend. Its star-studded alumni include Emmy Award-winning writers, a political rabble-rouser and an L.A. music producer.

The guest speaker at Sunday night's gala dinner is Joel H. Cohen, a writer and co-executive producer of *The Simpsons*.

Even without the name-dropping, the school's trajectory from its modest beginnings to today's Calgary Jewish Academy is truly a story about a little school that could.

Here is the Cohen Notes version: At the beginning of the 20th century, a few small Jewish schools opened in Calgary, only to have short-lived runs. Two schools ultimately endured.

In 1920, the Calgary Hebrew School was established, and for a period in the late 1940s was named the Charles Waterman Talmud Torah after its longtime president.

In 1928, the I.L. Peretz School opened; it was one of many I.L. Peretz schools that emerged in Canada in the 1920s and was named after Isaac Loeb Peretz, a Polish

Jewish artist and writer of Yiddish culture. Both schools had peripatetic addresses. Classes moved from rented rooms in a downtown commercial building to an apartment to their own buildings around the city.

There was also an ongoing discussion about whether the I.L. Peretz School was teaching too much Yiddish culture and not enough Hebrew, that it was too secular and radical, and whether the Calgary Hebrew School was providing too much Hebrew instruction and not enough Yiddish and was too religious and Zionist. Oy vey!

In 1987, the two schools merged to form the Calgary Jewish Academy.

Today, the Calgary Jewish Academy has 257 students from nursery school to Grade 9.

It required uniforms on students in 2011 and earned membership into the Canadian Accredited Independent Schools later that year.

About 38 per cent of the curriculum is dedicated to Judaic studies in Grades 1 to 6, and 26 per cent in junior high, with the remainder of the time spent fulfilling the

Alberta curriculum. Yiddish culture is studied and celebrated two weeks a year. In 2012-13, the Fraser Institute report on schools ranked it 14th in Calgary and in the top three per cent in Alberta.

"It was kind of like growing up in a Little Shtetl on the Prairie," says alumnus Benjamin Narvey, a lutenist in Paris who travels the world playing baroque chamber music and opera. "An unlikely cocktail mixing Russian existentialism, J.D. Salinger and Beverly Hills 90210, finished off with a twist of Stompin' Tom."

School officials pride themselves on raising a school of mensches who practise the tenets of tikkun olam (repairing the world), tzedakah (generosity) and gemilut hassadim (acts of loving kindness).

Associate principal Shoshana Kirmayer says the students raised funds to replant trees after the 2010 forest fire in Israel's Mount Carmel, they collect food annually for the Calgary Inter-Faith Food Bank, they entertain residents at local nursing homes and they raise funds for Israel's emergency medical services Magen David Adom, to name a few.

The current enrolment of students is a testament to the Jewish community's commitment to the school.

There are children from three families (Sidorsky, Eisenberg, Dvorkin) who are the fourth generation to attend the school, and there are children from at least 45 families who are the third generation.

Sometimes it seems like everybody knows everyone's business, but it is this connectedness, this sense of family and community that give the school its soul.

For such a small school, it certainly has a lot of talent and fascinating history pouring out of it.

Yale Joffe, who died in 2006, a school alumnus and school board president, left Calgary at age 19 along with classmate Frank Kettner to join Machal, a group of overseas volunteers who fought with Israel's army in Israel's War of Independence in 1948.

Initially, Joffe was in the infantry, but he soon put his photographic skills to use as an aerial photographer in the nascent Israeli Air Force, says his son Danny Joffe, a Calgary veterinarian.

"He would take photos, often hanging out of fighters and bombers, for reconnaissance purposes."

Aron Eichler, principal of the I.L. Peretz School from 1954-1976, is a Holocaust survivor. He was instrumental in getting the Alberta government to pass a law in November 2000 commemorating Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Memorial Day) which falls in April or May, in accordance with the Jewish calendar.

I.L. Peretz School alumnus Sheldon Chumir went on to become a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University, a lawyer and an Alberta MLA committed to protecting civil liberties and human rights. The Sheldon M. Chumir Health Centre is named in his honour.

Needless to say, there will be a lot of reminiscing and kibitzing among the 400 guests at the gala weekend. Powered by Marnie Bondar, more than 80 school parents, myself included, school staff,

alumni and community member volunteers, have helped make the celebrations possible.

Bondar's desire and drive to celebrate the school's milestone is deeply personal. "I am the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors and I have an acute sense of responsibility to my family's Jewish legacy," she says. "My grandparents survived Auschwitz through their own pluck, but also because many kind people stopped and helped. I want to be the kind of person who stops and helps."

Events include an alumni basketball tournament, choir class with former music teacher Arlein Chetner, Shabbat dinners hosted by local families, and tours of the CJA. A Hall of Fame featuring 55 alumni has been established in conjunction with the centennial. The school kvells over its high-achieving alumni, having not one but three Emmy Award winners - brothers Joel and Rob Cohen, and Philip Alberstat, who also produced the Academy Award-nominated documentary short *Downstream* in 2009.

On this occasion, the school will celebrate its academic journey, pausing to remember classmates and teachers who are no longer with them, and they will look ahead to a hundred more luminous years.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Here's what the alumni have been up to:

- Jonathan Anshell: Executive vice-president and general counsel of CBS Television;
- Carla Kettner: Television writer-producer. Executive producer on *Bones* and *The Mob*

Doctor. Writing-producing credits also include *Due South*, *Strong Medicine* and *Judging Amy*.

- Ezra Levant: Political pundit, lawyer, host of Sun News Network's daily TV show, *The Source*, author of six books, including the 2010 *Ethical Oil: The Case for Canada's Oil Sands*;

- Kevin Libin: Managing Editor of the *National Post*;

- Justin Meyers: Washington lobbyist;

- Sam Purkin: Record producer-musician-composer in Los Angeles. Sam became known as the "go to" Apple consultant for such artists as Quincy Jones, Beck, Sheila E and Rickie Lee Jones, as well as Academy Award Best Picture-nominated movies and hit films.

- Joel Price: Assistant professor of cardiac surgery at Johns Hopkins University and attending cardiac surgeon at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore;

- David Spevakow: Became Canada's youngest commercial pilot at age 17;

- Lisa Wilco 2006 World champion in taekwondo;

- Aviva Zimmerman: Israeli-based film director and producer. She co-produced the documentary *Art/ Violence*, which screened at the Berlin Film Festival in February 2013 and was awarded the Cinema Fairbindet Prize.

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