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## CONGREGATION ETZ CHAYIM AND ITS GHOSTS

### The Memorial Rooms of a Living House of Worship

> SHARON GRAHAM

SHARON GRAHAM is an independent scholar who lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba, with her family. She is an historian of Canada's Jewish community, with a special emphasis on the history of children's care within the Canadian social service sector of the early twentieth century. Her doctoral studies focused on the history of the Jewish Orphanage of Western Canada. Previous scholarly endeavours include a master's degree which focused on early synagogue architecture in Toronto. She is currently serving as the Winnipeg Section president of the National Council of Jewish Women of Canada.

**C**ongregation Etz Chayim is a Conservative synagogue located in the North End of Winnipeg, created by the amalgamation of three synagogues in 2002. The building retained through the merger for this congregation was the former Rosh Pina synagogue, built in 1952. A point of contention during the merger negotiations was finding a home for the memorial boards from all the participating synagogues in the building's space. In this essay, I will discuss the rooms created for these memorial boards, and how they work within Etz Chayim's building. More deeply I will be reflecting upon the role of memorialization and the future of a religious-ethnic group in a vibrant but struggling Canadian city. These memorial boards link the new congregation to the historic Jewish community of Winnipeg's North End and the ancestors who lived and died within a very different religious milieu. The installation of the memorial boards is a testament to the death of North End Jewish life and its rebirth in the more prosperous South End of the city, while also exhibiting the changes within North American Jewish culture during the twentieth century and now the twenty-first.

Historical examinations of buildings can be performed by a detailed analysis of stylistic elements. However, in the case of the memorial rooms of the Etz Chayim synagogue, there are very few stylistic elements to choose from; they are simply a number of rooms constructed out of drywall. In the case of these elements of the synagogue on 123 Matheson Avenue East, it is best to view the purpose and use of these rooms as their most



FIG. 1. ENTRANCE TO THE MEMORIAL LOUNGES FROM THE NORTH. | SHARON GRAHAM, FEBRUARY 2021.

striking feature. They can also serve as a lens through which the changes to the religious lives of Winnipeg's Jews can be seen, from the establishment of small, humble congregations, to the creation, often through the amalgamation of those small congregations, of a collection of modern synagogue buildings capable of catering large weddings and bar mitzvahs, through to demographic retreat away from traditionally Jewish neighbourhoods, and into the present, when Jews live throughout the city but in many areas without a synagogue to serve their needs.

### WHAT DOES A SYNAGOGUE LOOK LIKE?

Religious buildings in Canada have uses that often go beyond their role as worship spaces. For example, late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Canadian Protestant churches, such as Toronto's Jarvis Street Baptist Church, included large school spaces with movable walls, known as the Akron Plan, in order to accommodate large groups of children.<sup>1</sup> This flexibility is also traditional in synagogue buildings, which are called by three different Hebrew names that describe their multiple uses: *beit kneset* (house of assembly); *beit midrash* (house of study); and *beit tefillah* (house of prayer). All three functions can be housed in different spaces in synagogue buildings, although throughout history many communities only had a vestibule and a central sanctuary space which was used for a number of purposes, including community gatherings, study, and prayer.

While churches were usually built according to the Basilican model, guidelines provided in Jewish texts for synagogue design are not architectural templates and are often ignored. For example, in the Babylonian Talmud, it is written

that a synagogue should be the tallest building in the city, or at least taller than the homes.<sup>2</sup> The Talmud also stipulates that one should always pray in a house or room with windows.<sup>3</sup> Later rabbinic writings mandate a vestibule before the prayer hall.<sup>4</sup> An eternal lamp is always lit in the synagogue, as is described in the book of Exodus of the Torah; this light hangs over the ark, which is the cupboard holding the Torah scrolls.<sup>5</sup> The entire congregation faces toward Jerusalem, which, for those west of the land of Israel, is east (and for those east of the Land of Israel, is west).<sup>6</sup> Synagogues usually have some kind of elevated platform, called a *bimah*, on which portions of the Torah scrolls are read on Mondays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. Seating in traditional or Orthodox synagogues is separated by gender, with adult men performing all the ritual tasks.

These rabbinic sources lend an authority to this discussion of synagogue design and usage. However, it should be noted that there are venerable old synagogues that are missing many of the design or ritual elements listed above. For example, although the Babylonian Talmud, compiled between 200 and 500 CE, requires that a synagogue be higher than all the houses in a city, in many places and times in history under both Christianity and Islam, Jewish houses of worship were only allowed to be repaired, and new ones were prohibited from being built, much less allowed to be raised to lofty heights.<sup>7</sup> Almost all synagogues have windows, but few synagogues have the prescribed twelve eastern windows mandated by the authoritative sixteenth-century rabbinic text, the Shulchan Arukh (1565).<sup>8</sup> All synagogues have some kind of area with a table for reading the Torah, but the placement of this *bimah* varies; many of these platforms are at the back of the prayer hall, or in the centre, or

right in front of the congregation, or even underneath the ark. And while the eternal light is universal to most synagogues, and there is usually some kind of special cupboard or nook for holding the Torah scrolls, no other furniture or design elements of the biblical tabernacle or the Temple of ancient Israel is considered mandatory for a Jewish house of worship. Therefore, when considering synagogue architecture, one has to acknowledge that there is always flexibility in arrangement. To paraphrase the great twentieth-century Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel [1907-1972], Jews are more concerned with cathedrals of time (the Sabbath and holidays) than cathedrals in space.<sup>9</sup> The memorial board rooms that are being analyzed here exist solely due to this flexibility in Jewish approaches to synagogue architecture and ritual.

### AN ARCHITECTURAL COMPROMISE

The rooms under discussion in Congregation Etz Chayim are called the Memorial Lounges and fill a one-thousand-one-hundred-and-fifty-square-foot space that once held a very large cloak room, and which is connected to the body of the main sanctuary by two hallways, one that houses the gift shop and the stairs to the basement, the other leading to a cloakroom. This space is located in a wing of the synagogue that juts out of the north wall of the synagogue sanctuary block. On the other end of this wing is a small area with the security entrance for the synagogue offices, and a collection of chairs and a coffee table for congregants to use for socializing. Placed inside the large space between the offices and the sanctuary vestibule are the three memorial rooms. Figures 1, 2 and 3 illustrate the entrances to these rooms, from both entrances at the north and single entrance at the south ends of



FIG. 2. ENTRANCE TO THE MEMORIAL LOUNGES FROM THE SOUTHEAST. | SHARON GRAHAM, FEBRUARY 2021.



FIG. 3. ENTRANCE TO THE MEMORIAL LOUNGES FROM THE SOUTHWEST. | SHARON GRAHAM, FEBRUARY 2021.



FIG. 4. CLOSE-UP OF THE PATH THROUGH THE MEMORIAL LOUNGES FROM THE SOUTH, ILLUSTRATING THE COMMEMORATIVE WALLS. | SHARON GRAHAM, FEBRUARY 2021.

this wing. The three rooms are divided like an upper-case letter E with an extra horizontal arm, with two walls, like two vertical dashes, standing next to them, thus making all the rooms open on one side. Figure 4 shows the edges of three of the four interior walls of the E-shaped construction which makes up the three rooms.

All the walls of the Memorial Lounges and three of the four walls around them are mounted with large brass rectangular boards which hold the name plates of deceased members of Congregation Etz Chayim and its predecessor congregations. There are twenty-one boards on the multiple walls. Each name plate has two electric lights screwed into the short sides, supposedly turned on around the anniversary of the death of the person named, although which light corresponds with which name is unclear. Figure 5 shows an example of one of these plaques, this one dedicated to the membership of the Rosh Pina synagogue. These rooms are home to

the memorial boards of five synagogues: the new board for Congregation Etz Chayim; the three synagogues which were merged into it, Rosh Pina, Beth Israel, and B'nay Abraham; and boards for earlier congregations which merged into one of these three founders at earlier points in the twentieth century, the Hebrew Sick Benefit Association, Atereth Israel, and Beth Abraham.

Hallways around these rooms allow staff and congregants to avoid going into the interior with the memorial boards. Although the plethora of walls in these lounges was intended to create extra space for holding the boards, they effectively block the space off from the main pathways of the synagogue building. The resulting rooms of memorial boards are rather small and contain no furniture. All the lights of the memorial boards are lit when an extensive memorial prayer service is delivered on major Jewish holidays, notably the most well-attended Jewish holiday, Yom Kippur, the Day

of Atonement. However, having all the incandescent bulbs lit makes the rooms stiflingly hot as well as glow charmingly. In my experience, the only people to be found in these rooms at any time of year are children, who are short enough to comfortably sit on the floor underneath the boards; removing a child from one of these rooms is a difficult experience, as the walls feel close and the glass lights adorning the plaques protrude and glitter menacingly. By the end of the long Yom Kippur services, children are usually bored and slightly feral, having exhausted all interest in the children's religious programming and snacked on cookies and juice for most of the morning. Parents are hungry and short-tempered as it is a fast day, and the experience of being in these lounges is therefore either exciting if you are a child or profoundly straining if you are a parent (see fig. 6 for a child's perspective on a memorial lounge room space).

Housing children at play was not the intended purpose of these rooms, as





FIG. 5. EXAMPLE OF A MEMORIAL PLAQUE. | SHARON GRAHAM, FEBRUARY 2021.



FIG. 6. A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE IN A MEMORIAL LOUNGE ROOM. | SHARON GRAHAM, FEBRUARY 2021.

there are plenty of classrooms and play spaces in this synagogue, including one spacious room in the basement with floor hockey equipment. Instead, they were meant as a compromise that would allow the members of the three merging synagogues feel as though they were acknowledged in the new Congregation Etz Chayim, which uses the former Rosh Pina building. Ensuring that the rooms for the memorial boards existed in a visible part of the synagogue was an integral part of the merger negotiations.<sup>10</sup> It seems, however, that this hanging of the memorial boards in their own rooms has resulted in removing them from the main spaces used by the congregation. At another Winnipeg synagogue, Congregation Shaarey Zedek, the memorial boards are located in the chapel which adjoins the main sanctuary and is used for many prayer services, allowing regular worshippers to sit in a pew which is close to their relatives' names on the boards. At the Winnipeg synagogue Adas-Yeshurun Herzlia, the memorial boards are hung on the back walls of the main sanctuary. Though the boards are too high up on the wall to see, the ancestors of members are included in the main prayer

space of the congregation. My ancestral synagogue in Toronto, Beth Tzedec, has hung its memorial boards at the back of the sanctuary near the exit, allowing worshippers to pay a visit to the names of their relatives as they leave services. Construction of Etz Chayim's memorial lounges was important for the moment of the synagogue merger, but it appears that the memorial boards have become less and less integral to the emotional life of synagogue members since they were built, and the boards were put into spaces that are rarely visited.

### THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE ROSH PINA BUILDING

The building that surrounds the memorial boards is considered by the Winnipeg Jewish community to be an important part of its material fabric. Constructed in 1952, the synagogue that was then called Rosh Pina was designed in a modernist style and is similar to other post-World War II synagogues in North America that resemble community centres or public libraries; the lack of a traditional floor plan for synagogues allowed Jews to adopt modernist styles

very easily. The new style of synagogue that developed in the late 1940s and beyond was very different from those built by Jewish immigrants to the New World in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Pre-World War II synagogues in Europe and North America were erected in an urban setting, and the street façade was of primary importance. For example, Rosh Pina's first synagogue, built in 1893 at the corner of Marth and Henry Streets, had a façade of a central block flanked by two small ornamental towers with slightly domed roofs (fig. 7). This twin-towered synagogue façade was popular throughout the Western world as the towers often housed staircases to the women's balcony and created a striking Jewish presence on streetscapes without looking like a church. This style could be seen in the monumental and important Neue Synagogue Oranienburger Strasse in Berlin, built in 1866, as well as the elegant 1886 Eldridge Street Synagogue in New York, where the towers were shrunk to bays. Both these buildings embraced elements of Orientalist style, as well as other historicist nineteenth-century style decoration.<sup>11</sup> Winnipeg was



FIG. 7. EXTERIOR AND FRONT ENTRANCE OF ROSH PINA SYNAGOGUE (1893). | CREDIT JEWISH HERITAGE CENTRE OF WESTERN CANADA; PHOTO 30131.

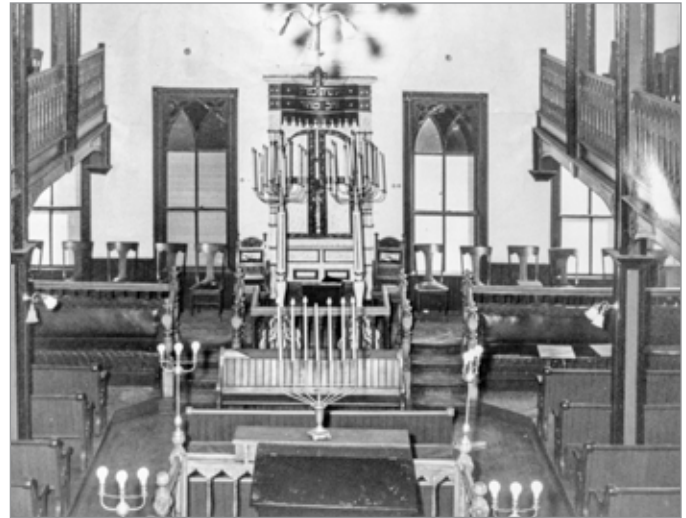


FIG. 8. INTERIOR OF ROSH PINA SYNAGOGUE (1893). | CREDIT: JEWISH HERITAGE CENTRE OF WESTERN CANADA; PHOTO 31211.

far less wealthy than Berlin or New York, and Winnipeg's Jews had fewer financial resources, especially in the first era of settlement in the city. Hence the 1893 Rosh Pina is a wooden structure, with such modest nods to Orientalist decor as the domes on the side towers and a rose window, which contrast eclectically with the Gothic fenestration on the sides of the structure. This early version of Rosh Pina, which may have only housed the sanctuary, a vestibule, and perhaps some additional space in the basement, was likewise modest even in the interior (fig. 8).

The new Rosh Pina was far more expansive. In the dedication book published by Rosh Pina in 1952 when the building on Matheson Avenue was opened, all of the noteworthy features of the building are listed: the sanctuary is connected to the auditorium behind it by a folding curtain wall that can be moved back to connect the two spaces; the back of the auditorium has a stage for concerts and plays with professional lighting; a small chapel for less-attended weekday prayers is connected to the sanctuary's

southern side by another folding curtain wall; a large catering kitchen is included in the building, making the synagogue the perfect place to host weddings, bar mitzvahs, and other lifecycle parties; the area in which the memorial lounges are now housed was built as another large hall, with a choir lounge, offices, and main washrooms connected to it; and there were also classrooms, a library, and a finished basement for a school. Situated beside the old Winnipeg Jewish Orphanage building, which was then still standing and being used as a community centre, the grounds were and remain green and lush.<sup>12</sup> All of these features indicate a synagogue that accommodated far more activities than its wood-framed predecessor. A postcard image of the new Rosh Pina (fig. 9) shows how the new building differed from its predecessor.

According to Lee Shai Weissbach's architectural history of the synagogues of Kentucky, this embrace of modernist, minimalist design by North American Jews is due not only to contemporary fashions but also to the fact that

additional functions of the synagogue space were of primary importance to the new suburban congregations. The addition of social halls, kitchens, and schools, Weissbach argues, meant that synagogue design was no longer centred around the entrance facade and signified the newly prosperous and interesting lifestyle of its congregants.<sup>13</sup> Not only was the 1952 Rosh Pina meant to be modern, spacious, attractive and to appear more solid and respectable than the clapboard synagogue the congregation had left behind, but it had to accommodate more activities. The nature of prayer, too, was acknowledged to have changed. The addition of the side chapel for weekday prayers means that the community knew that only small groups would be using the building for prayer during the week, as once weekly or occasional attendance at services became the social norm instead of twice or thrice daily prayer participation for adult males. A catering kitchen and professional lighting for a stage meant that far more social occasions and community events could be comfortably accommodated in the synagogue itself, bringing in much needed



FIG. 9. EXTERIOR OF ROSH PINA SYNAGOGUE AS IT APPEARED ON A 1970S COMMEMORATIVE POSTCARD. | JEWISH HERITAGE CENTRE OF WESTERN CANADA; PHOTO JM 1434-1.



FIG. 10. EXTERIOR OF B'NAY ABRAHAM SYNAGOGUE. | WINNIPEGARCHITECTURE.CA, [HTTPS://WWW.WINNIPEGARCHITECTURE.CA/235-ENNISKILLEN/], ACCESSED MARCH 11, 2021.

revenue as well as creating a comfortable space for more extensive and expensive Jewish celebrations. The higher incomes of the second and third generations of Winnipeg Jewry, and their disinterest in daily religious practice, were reflected in this attractive edifice.

It should be noted that B'nay Abraham and Beth Israel, the smaller synagogues in the 2002 Etz Chayim merger, also had attractive, modern, post-war buildings located in the North End developments. B'nay Abraham was erected in 1958 on 235 Enniskillen Avenue by the architectural firm of Boyle Francis Schaeffer. It was renovated in 1970 by the architect Ed Smith. It also had multiple rooms for many uses, including a chapel for weekday worship.<sup>14</sup> Built in the 1970s, Beth Israel was located at 1007 Sinclair Street; it also included a small chapel. B'nay Abraham was especially attractive, featuring a stained-glass east wall behind the ark in the main sanctuary, illustrating the tendency to build synagogues with more than one eye-catching exterior feature instead of a central façade (fig. 10). B'nay Abraham is now a church, and the Beth Israel building now houses a Jewish daycare centre.

### MERGING SYNAGOGUES IN THE POST-WAR PERIOD

The three congregations that amalgamated into Etz Chayim all brought rich histories and pride in being North End Winnipeg Jews to the merger. All three synagogues had begun as traditional or Orthodox congregations, and had eventually embraced Conservative Judaism, a theological middle ground between the innovative Reform Movement and Orthodox Judaism, which hews closely to religious law. Conservative Judaism was very popular in post-World War II Canada, and experienced huge growth from the end of the war until the 1970s. To announce their place as Canadians and as Jews, Conservative Jews constructed large, impressive buildings that had an impact on the landscapes of their cities.<sup>15</sup> But before new buildings could be designed and erected, a round of amalgamations had to begin in order to incorporate the first generation of small congregations in the new religious milieu of modern Canadian Jewry.

These earlier small congregations had diverse roots. Some synagogues were formed by groups splitting away from

larger congregations for theological, liturgical, or class reasons. For example, early attempts to establish a synagogue in Winnipeg began in 1883 with settlers who migrated to Canada in the 1870s working with refugees from the Russian pogroms, who came in 1882. In a conflict that was similar to other intra-Jewish strife in North America, the more acculturated early settlers and the traditional Eastern European refugees had very different ideas about how a synagogue should operate in Winnipeg. Multiple attempts at establishing reforming and traditional synagogues occurred. Creating synagogue compromises that pleased no one continued until 1890, when a group who wished to pray in the Sephardic (or Spanish) liturgy split off from the main congregation of Shaarey Zedek. This group renamed itself Rosh Pina in 1893, and from its very beginnings set itself in opposition to the modern and wealthy Shaarey Zedek, styling itself as an Eastern European congregation, more financially reasonable in terms of membership fees and with a strong emphasis on cantorial performance.<sup>16</sup> This breakaway was final for both Shaarey Zedek and Rosh Pina, but later synagogues were also splitting up or





FIG. 11. EXTERIOR AND SIGN OF ATERETH ISRAEL SYNAGOGUE (1919), 469 MAGNUS AVENUE, WINNIPEG, MB. | JEWISH HERITAGE CENTRE OF WESTERN CANADA; PHOTO JM 2658-5.

amalgamating throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Jewish immigration to Winnipeg was in full flow.

The Winnipeg Jewish community grew as oppression and poverty increased in Eastern Europe, especially in Romania and the Russian Empire before World War I. By 1901, the Jewish population of Winnipeg had increased to about one thousand two hundred people, and by 1911 to about nine thousand. Most of these immigrants were very poor and lived close to the railway tracks in the North End of the city, an area which was referred to by some British Canadian élites as “the Foreign Quarter,” and by some of the Jewish inhabitants as “Mitzrayim,” referring to the Egypt of the Exodus story.<sup>17</sup> Extended kin networks of people from the same families or hometowns would form their own small congregations, many of which did not have hired clergy. Arthur Chiel, himself rabbi of Rosh Pina in the 1950s and the first historian of Manitoban Jews, lists fourteen congregations that were founded in the North End between 1906 and 1930. He notes, however, that these

congregations were somewhat short-lived, with only seven remaining in existence by the time of the publication of his book in 1961. Chiel writes:

Self-contained and ruggedly independent, they were content to look to the immediate religious needs of their own generation, but because they did not know how to bridge the religious and cultural gap between themselves and their children, the thread of continuity was broken and their synagogues suffered severe decline . . . Thus by the late 1930s large numbers of native-born Jews were unaffiliated and had no religious identification. Indeed they called themselves “the lost generation.”<sup>18</sup>

Some of the synagogues which began to disappear in the 1930s onward were in fact amalgamating to make larger congregations. Both smaller synagogues which merged into Etz Chayim were themselves the results of mergers. Beth Israel Synagogue was the product of a merger between the Hebrew Sick Benefit Association (HSBA), which had begun as a mutual aid society and developed into a social organization which also held

religious services, and Tiferes Israel, also known as the Meziricher Synagogue, or the synagogue founded by former inhabitants of Mezirich, Ukraine.<sup>19</sup> Beth Israel’s predecessor, the HSBA, owned the Queen’s Theatre on Selkirk Avenue in the heart of what had been the Jewish North End. According to Beth Israel’s Twentieth Anniversary Souvenir Program from 1997, after it amalgamated with the Meziricher Synagogue, Beth Israel decided to move north, as its members were leaving the old neighbourhood for the leafy suburb of Garden City.<sup>20</sup> B’nay Abraham had built its new, modern building when it amalgamated with Atereth Israel in 1970. Atereth Israel had been one of the poorer, smaller congregations on Magnus Avenue in the North End (fig. 11). Due to that merger, however, the congregation was able to move north into the more spacious and landscaped neighbourhood of Jefferson and Seven Oaks.

This round of post-war mergers was a testimony to the changes in the Jewish community as it moved out of the neighbourhood close to the railway lines and into comfortable suburbs nearby. Such



mergers and movement out of inner cities and into middle-class garden suburbs were features of Jewish life in Canada in the second half of the twentieth century. For example, Toronto's Beth Tzedec was a product of a merger between two august synagogues that were located downtown, Goel Tzedec and Beth Ha-Midrosh Hagadol, the latter known more commonly as the McCall Street Shul. As soon as they merged, construction on a grand synagogue building in the fashionable Forest Hill neighbourhood began.<sup>21</sup>

The synagogue mergers that happened in Canada in the second half of the twentieth century tended to be marked with the construction of a new synagogue building, but the Etz Chayim merger in 2002 was not as exciting. Instead of picking out a plot for building in a developing suburb, this merged congregation had too many buildings and not enough Jews living in its quadrant of the city to justify a new construction. This dilemma left the new Etz Chayim in possession of three synagogue buildings and one old theatre, of which only one synagogue building was needed. There was a sense that this merger was one of retrenchment, with the community having moved away not only from the working-class North End but also from the northern suburbs of Jefferson, Seven Oaks, and Garden City. The Rosh Pina building was perhaps retained not only because of its larger size, but also due to its plot having a significant history in the Winnipeg Jewish community, as it sits next to the site of the former Jewish Orphanage. Nine years after Etz Chayim was created, in 2011, there was again talk of a synagogue merger, this time between Etz Chayim and Shaarey Zedek, now located in the South End of the city.<sup>22</sup> These talks did not succeed, but they were a signal that the declining synagogue membership rates which

had forced the 2002 merger were still a problem. In his 2009 history of Manitoba Jewry, Allan Levine notes that at the dedication ceremony for the creation of Etz Chayim there was an acknowledged sense of loss for the vitality of Jewish life in Winnipeg's northern neighbourhoods.<sup>23</sup>

### LOSS, MEMORIAL, AND SPACE

Loss and grief are not unknown to Jewish life, with special prayers and services, as well as home-based rituals, serving psychological grieving needs that extend far beyond the moment right after a death itself. It is noteworthy, however, that in this case the loss was not due to the death of family members but rather the death of a sense of place and belonging within the North End. It is fitting, therefore, that one of the first acts of amalgamation was to alter the Rosh Pina building to accommodate the memorial boards, a symbol of loss.

These permanent memorial boards have no historical place within synagogue architecture and appear to have only developed in the post-war period. The historian of American Jewish culture Jenna Weissman Joselit has traced the appearance of brass memorial boards to earlier temporary memorial paper plaques and folk art which were hung on the walls of synagogues and of Jewish mutual-aid societies in the United States.<sup>24</sup> Earlier synagogues in both Europe and North America did not seem to have lists of the dead, although there is at least one list of donors and their death dates in a Jewish cemetery building in Bytom, Poland.<sup>25</sup> One list of people's names incorporated into synagogue architecture is that of donors from the Cecil Street Synagogue in Toronto, now a public community centre, but this list is not a memorial to the dead but rather to the generous.<sup>26</sup> Joselit dates the

innovation of American bronze memorial boards to at least the 1920s, noting that they were advertised to synagogues as an effective way of raising money. To Joselit, using memorial boards to raise money is reminiscent of the practice of non-electrified synagogues encouraging mourners to make donations to the congregation during special *yizkor* prayer services as an act of memorial.<sup>27</sup>

The convention of buying small plaques in memory of one's deceased loved ones and having them housed in larger synagogue memorial boards is related to the development of *yizkor* or memorial practices in European Jewish life from the medieval period onward. *Yizkor* practices appear to have developed in early modern Europe, when Jewish life underwent an increasing ritualization trend that had begun in the late medieval period. This trend was a cultural process of extending ritual beyond what was already codified in Jewish law, and included practices related to mourning. Inspired by new mystical trends in Jewish life, mourning rituals were spread by the invention of book publishing. During that time, formal burial societies were established in European Jewish communities, with groups of laypeople dedicating themselves to preparing and burying the dead, as well as visiting the sick. These societies were made up of Jews from all strata of society and often had adjacent female societies for female body preparation. They were at the forefront of developing new rituals around death and mourning.<sup>28</sup> Known as *yahrzeit*, which means "year time," congregational devotions memorializing the dead on the death anniversary involved family members reciting the ancient Aramaic prayer, the *kaddish*. These rituals probably developed a little earlier, in the fifteenth century. They may also have been linked to earlier Christian trends toward

marking death anniversaries in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as well as memorialization customs that arose to mark the anniversaries of crusader massacres of Jewish communities.<sup>29</sup> A related idea had developed in twelfth-century rabbinic literature that the descendants of the dead could redeem their ancestors from the sufferings of *ghenna*, a place which can be loosely described as purgatory, by reciting the *kaddish* prayer and engaging in the customs surrounding it.<sup>30</sup>

*Yizkor* means to remember, and the act of remembering the dead became one of the primary reasons for post-World War II North American Jews to attend synagogue. Writing in *Commentary* magazine in 1953, Theodor Gaster observed: "During recent years, the appeal of the *Yizkor* service has come to exceed any other element of the traditional liturgy in its hold, except, perhaps, the seder on Passover."<sup>31</sup> Written a year after Rosh Pina's new building was dedicated, this article examines contemporary attitudes toward the rituals of *yahrzeit*. Gaster went on to analyze the appeal of the dedicated memorial service, which is usually noted prominently on synagogue service schedules, as a way of connecting the Jews of his time with their pasts, their parents, and their own heritage from which they often felt alienated. The generation of the first immigrants to North America was passing away by the 1950s, and there was a sense that even with their poverty and struggle they had lived more authentically religious lives than their children, who were prospering in the post-War World II environment. Gaster remarked that the source of the *yizkor* prayers was the idea that the prayers of the living can assist the dead, but that the modern North American Jew was uninterested in or did not know about these mystical threads within Jewish tradition.<sup>32</sup>

However, it is worth mentioning that Gaster had no evidence to support his claim that the adoption of extended *yizkor* rituals were not rooted in mystical ideas, and I believe that the existence of the memorial boards runs contrary to his theory.

Although the modern Jews who paid for these memorial boards were living with a version of Judaism that was very different from the Judaism of their parents, and were, as Chiel stated, alienated from the deep religiosity of their parents' generation, the donation of memorial name plates indicates the persistence of mystical ideas about the afterlife and the role of the prayers of mourners in redeeming the dead. This link between the recitation of *kaddish* prayers, the observance of *yahrzeits*, and the memorial boards may be seen in its most notable feature, the lighting. The small electric lights on either side of the name plaques are reminiscent of the practice of lighting a candle in memory of the dead. This practice evolved from the vigil over the body of the newly deceased,<sup>33</sup> but has been extrapolated into the customs of lighting long-lasting candles during the mourning period, at the anniversary of the death, and during the days of Jewish holidays which traditionally include memorial prayers in a synagogue.

Knowing that the little lights on memorial boards will be turned on around the time of the *yahrzeit* of their parents or grandparents, the buyers of name plates may understand that the boards incorporate some of the *yizkor* rituals which centre around death anniversaries. In this way, the synagogue building itself (with the assistance of synagogue staff) performs the ritual of remembrance, even if the mourner him- or herself will not be attending services to recite the

*kaddish* prayer. Any mystical needs of the dead in the afterlife will be assured even if descendants are uninterested in performing the necessary rituals. After all, the presence of the boards containing the names of many generations were so important that the new synagogue, Etz Chayim, sacrificed space and built a series of otherwise functionless rooms in order to accommodate them.

### THE PRESENCE OF ALTERNATIVES TO SYNAGOGUES AND THE NEW DEMOGRAPHICS

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When I last visited the synagogue building, in February 2021, I noted that since the merger, a new memorial board in the name of Congregation Etz Chayim has been established. The numbers of plaques dedicated seems to be decreasing, with the names of nine people who died in 2017, four people in 2018, and only one person who died in 2019. This trend may be due to the interruption of the COVID-19 pandemic in the purchasing plans of mourners, although another reason may be the decline in people attending and belonging to synagogues throughout North America. Another cause of the decline in the number of plaques, which is most relevant to this essay, is the longer decline of Jews living in areas of Winnipeg that are north of the great rail yards between Higgins and Jarvis avenues, and therefore within close walking or driving distance of Etz Chayim.

Winnipeg Jewry was traditionally split between North and South Enders, with the South End being defined as the area south of the Assiniboine River, including the posh neighbourhoods of Crescentwood and Tuxedo, as well as the more middle-class areas of Fort Rouge. The Jews who lived in these neighbourhoods before World War II were the descendants of the very first Jewish settlers

who had arrived in Winnipeg in the 1870s and were usually living a decidedly more middle or upper middle-class lifestyle. Living mostly in the spacious post-World War II neighbourhood of River Heights, the proportion of Jews in the South End grew steadily from ten percent of the total population between 1911 and 1941 to forty-seven percent in 1961.<sup>34</sup> This trend continued, even though many of the North End suburbs such as Garden City had homes that were as spacious and as modern as those in the South. Levine's history devotes an entire chapter to this geographic and identity shift, which has continued since the book's publication in 2009. According to him, the migration south was further accelerated by one of Winnipeg Jewry's most concrete achievements, the construction of a multi-organization Asper Jewish Community Campus in the South End in 1997 (fig. 12). The Asper Campus houses important Jewish organizations: the only remaining Winnipeg Jewish day school, the Gray Academy of Jewish Education; the Rady Jewish Community Centre, which has both athletic and cultural facilities, like a pool and a theatre; the offices of such major community organizations as the Jewish Foundation of Manitoba, the Jewish Federation of Winnipeg, and the Jewish Child and Family Service of Winnipeg; the offices of smaller organizations, including Jewish summer camps; and the Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, with an archive and museum display spaces. Housed in a collection of buildings which were once part of an early agricultural college and later used as army barracks, the Jewish assumption and regeneration of a space built by the British Canadian élites of the early twentieth century is remarkable, considering the antisemitism that dogged Canadian society from the time of its founding by those élites.<sup>35</sup>



FIG. 12. ASPER JEWISH COMMUNITY CAMPUS, 123 DONCASTER STREET, WINNIPEG, MB. | ADAM LEVY.

According to Levine, when discussions began in the Jewish community about building a new community centre in the late 1980s, the community as a whole was in decline as the population dropped and Vancouver usurped Winnipeg's status as Canada's third largest Jewish community. The Asper Community Campus has served as the hub of the Jewish community ever since its opening, even though it is located in the wealthy neighbourhood of Tuxedo which was restricted to Jews when it was first built in the early twentieth century.<sup>36</sup> Even Jewish community organizations that are not housed in the Asper Campus, such as the local office of the Jewish National Fund, have offices close by. Almost all Jewish communal organizations are now in the South End of Winnipeg. The only exceptions are the Gwen Secter Centre for Creative Living, a day centre for seniors, Gunn's Bakery, Congregation Etz Chayim, Aleph-Bet Child Life Enrichment Program, which is located in the old Beth Israel synagogue building, some subsidized housing options and a few small lay-led synagogues. Etz Chayim holds its *bar* and *bat mitzvah* classes on the Asper Campus, to make it easier

for families to attend, since so many of them either send their children to the day school or live in the South End.

As Levine writes, there are people in Winnipeg's Jewish community who are convinced that the location of the Asper Campus in the South End destroyed the North End Jewish community.<sup>37</sup> Still, the Asper Campus is considered a success, even if its construction was disruptive. In the 2018 Environics Institute's study of Canadian Jews, the authors noted that fifty-seven percent of Winnipeg Jews belong to a Jewish organization other than a synagogue, which they attributed to the existence of the Asper Campus.<sup>38</sup> This figure compared favourably with forty-eight percent of Toronto and Montreal Jews who are members of a non-synagogue Jewish organization. However, the ideal of discrete Jewish neighbourhoods within Winnipeg is itself unstable. According to a 2016 community planning consultation exercise that was conducted by the Jewish Federation of Winnipeg and included Jews across the city, respondents lived all over the map of Winnipeg, including the traditionally non-Jewish western

reaches of St. James (2%), and the southern areas of St. Boniface–St. Vital (2%). North Enders made up only thirteen percent of respondents.<sup>39</sup> As the parent of a teen who attends the Jewish day school, our weekends before the 2020-2021 pandemic were often spent navigating the new and still-developing southern subdivisions of Bridgewater Forest and Waverly West in order to attend birthday parties. The most southern Winnipeg synagogue, however, the Chabad Lubavitch Centre, is in River Heights, which in Winnipeg terms is a long fifteen-minute drive away from these new neighbourhoods. Bolstered by immigrants from around the world, especially from Argentina and Israel, the Jewish community seems to be content with living in neighbourhoods without a synagogue in sight.

## AFTERWORD

The only Jewish institution experimenting with bringing Judaism to the new Jewish neighbourhoods in the southern reaches of Winnipeg is not a synagogue but the Rady Jewish Community Centre (JCC). The 2019-2020 Fall-Winter JCC program guide advertised a *Sukkoth* fall holiday party organized by the JCC but located in a community centre in St. Vital, and a *Chanukah* winter holiday party to be held in a location in Transcona, a southern area of Winnipeg that did not have a noticeable Jewish presence until recently.<sup>40</sup> These announcements indicate a remarkable lack of synagogue attendance for many members of the Jewish community, a fact reflected in the 2018 Environics report which states that forty-two percent of Winnipeg's Jews infrequently or never attend synagogue.<sup>41</sup> Would more Jews attend synagogues if there were more congregations within their immediate neighbourhoods? Would having more local synagogues make a difference? Or are the Jews of today's Winnipeg less

interested in maintaining the practice of institutionalized religious rituals, like North Americans as a whole?

New forms of Jewish community activity, new buildings, and new neighbourhoods have drastically altered Jewish life in Winnipeg. As the Jewish community disperses over all of Winnipeg, especially to the southern ends, there does not seem to be much of a future for Congregation Etz Chayim in its building on Matheson Avenue. Indeed, there has been open discussion by members of Etz Chayim and its rabbi, Kliel Rose, about finding a new location for the congregation, although what might thus happen to this historic corner of North End Jewry is lamented. The memorial boards will no doubt have to go with the congregation when it eventually finds a new location and a new building. But will more names be added to the boards at all in the near future, as contemporary Jews forget the ritual and mystical ties that bound them to the world of their ancestors? Will families be able to point to the names of their great-grandparents on the walls of synagogues of which they may or may not count themselves as members? Or will the need to mark the death anniversaries of their parents be forgotten? And will new buildings be raised which accommodate not only remembrance but also the spiritual needs of the generation that played as children under the *yizkor* lights?

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