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Closure of Cape Breton's oldest synagogue marks end of era



The Congregation Sons of Israel in Glace Bay, N.S., has closed. The only synagogue in Cape Breton is now in Sydney.

Vaughan Merchant for National Post

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For 50 years, Mark Chernin had been walking through the front doors of the old synagogue on Prince Street and seeing the same things every time. It was like home to him, or a part of home. He knew the place that well.

It was where he had his bar mitzvah. Where he went to Hebrew school. Where he learned, as a child, that nobody could escape the all-seeing gaze of old Mr. Lipkus, one of the Jewish elders.

Mr. Chernin is 53 now, and when he walked into The Congregation Sons of Israel Synagogue in Glace Bay, N.S., two weeks ago, the place he knew was not there anymore.

The covering of the Ark where the Torahs were kept, the Eternal Light that had been on for 109 years, the giant menorah, all of it was gone. Cape Breton's oldest synagogue had been packed up in boxes and carted down the road to nearby Sydney in a moving van, never to return.

"All I saw when I walked in the door was a giant empty room," Mr. Chernin says. "That was a little bit strange. But this has been a long process for us."

For decades, a once-robust Sons of Israel congregation has been in decline. Last year, for the first time in a century, there were no High Holiday services in Glace Bay.

And this year, there were not enough Jewish males left in the old coal mining town to form a minyan, the 10-men quorum required for prayer services at an Orthodox synagogue.

By closing its doors, the Sons of Israel is closing the book on a rich chapter of Jewish life in Atlantic Canada, while leaving the Temple Sons of Israel Synagogue in Sydney, with its 57 congregants — and falling fast — as the island's sole surviving place of Jewish worship.

"For a time, there was actually more Jews in Cape Breton than Halifax," says Irving Abella, a Jewish historian at York University. "They were refugees from the Russian pogroms."

They started arriving in Cape Breton in 1890. The coal companies would advertise in the European papers, offering free passage for any man willing to go into the mines.

The Diaspora blew all around the island. Everywhere they went, synagogues sprang up: in Glace Bay, New Waterford, Old Dominion and Sydney. Some Jews stayed underground digging for black gold, but most would put aside a few pennies and migrate to the surface to open a small shop to sell their wares — cloths, cooking utensils, shoes, trinkets — anything required in the coal mining communities.

Ruthie Goldbloom lives in Halifax now, but grew up in New Waterford, a small town not unlike the other coal digging spots that once dappled Cape Breton's shores.

Ms. Goldbloom is 86. She tells the story of her grandfather, Joseph Claener, a Russian Jew, setting up a tiny grocery store in New Waterford. To make extra money, Joseph would travel by horse and buggy to rural areas hawking his wares, door to door.

There is a family tale of Joseph getting stranded after a snowstorm in Cape Smokey. A kindly family took him in for several weeks. Joseph only spoke Russian and Yiddish. When he returned to New Waterford his proud wife told the neighbours that her husband had learned to speak English. She wanted him to thank them for their kindness. So they gathered around.

"What he spoke was perfect Gaelic," Ms. Goldbloom says with a roaring laugh. "What he thought was English was Gaelic. And that's a true story: he was the only man in Canada, as far as I know, that could speak Russian, Yiddish — and Gaelic."

Joseph Claener's little store blossomed and grew and ultimately turned into Schwartz and Company, a department store that today survives as a furniture store and a museum of sorts in Sydney. It is the only Jewish-owned business left on the island.

Sixty years ago, there were Jewish businesses in every town: supermarkets, drug stores, tailors, shoemakers and more. Glace Bay had 6,000 people in 1900. By 1940 the population was 28,000. Cape Breton was booming. The Jews were thriving. At their peak, the island was home to more than 400 families.

"The Jews were a one-generation phenomenon," Mr. Abella says. "People worked and slaved so their children didn't need to do what they did and the kids went off to school and became professionals and never came back.

"It is the professionalization of the Jewish community that doomed the Cape Breton settlements."

Halifax has two healthy synagogues. Cape Breton has been reduced to one, in Sydney, and its health is in steady decline. Mark Chernin calls it a welcoming place. But it can never replace home.

The plan, and there really isn't a concrete one, is to either sell the Sons of Israel or donate it. Donation seems to be the more popular course among Glace Bay's surviving congregants.

"I just got a call about it today," says Mr. Chernin, who is president of the synagogue. "It was from a group that takes a piece of property and gets government funding and fixes it up for affordable housing. Something like that would be nice."

Something like that would breath some new life into an old place with lots of memories. The best of all may have been nine years ago when the old synagogue on Prince Street welcomed its scattered sons and daughters home for a 100th anniversary party. More than 400 people came back from across North America.

The place was packed for services on Friday. And Saturday. There were cocktail parties, trips to the country, and trips down memory lane.

"That's something I'll remember for a long time," Mr. Chernin says. "It was a great event. I'm glad we did it when we did."

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