A Tale of Two Synagogues: Culture, Conflict and Consolidation in the Jewish Community of Saint John, 1906-1919

Craig Chouinard

Abstract

The history of the Jewish community in Saint John, New Brunswick has the characteristics of both large and small-town Jewish communities. Saint John paralleled the early Jewish communities of Montreal and Toronto in its formation by English and German communities in the 1850s. Cultural and socioeconomic divisions between the Anglophile old community and the later immigrants from Eastern Europe resulted in a split into two synagogues in 1906, as was also the case in the larger communities. Economic changes resulted in Saint John’s decline as a major industrial centre by 1914. This decline, combined with closer cooperation between the two Jewish groups, produced a sense of community leading to the reunification of the synagogue in 1919-20, thus reverting to the profile of the one-synagogue smaller communities.
The first Jewish resident of Saint John was David Gabel, who arrived with his wife and children in 1783 with the Loyalists arriving after the American Revolution. He established a butcher shop and bakery on Kings Square. When he died in 1816 he was buried in the Old Burying Group across the street from his home. This was one of only two in the Atlantic Provinces – the other being Halifax. A second synagogue was established in 1906 (The Haven Avenue Synagogue) that formalized the social-cultural division between the long-established well-educated English-speaking Jews and the newly arrived Yiddish-speaking immigrants. Both congregations were orthodox, both had their Rabbis and both had religious teaching for the children. A Tale of Two Cities has long been one of Charles Dickens' most favored books. This book opens in the year 1775 by contrasting two cities: Paris, France and London, England. Throughout this story various characters are "recalled to life", meaning that they have had a new chance at life. Dr. Manette is clearly mad after being in prison for eighteen years. When Lucie, the Dr.'s daughter, and Mr. Lorry eventually nurse the doctor back to a healthy state and out of his insane state they had “recalled him to life.” Dr. Manette was nursed from an insane state with no real life to a sane one with a v