

Averbach / Averbach Family Reunion Album



The Averbachs and Winnipeg's North End

"The Past is Never Dead. It's Not Even Past" (William Faulkner)

The story of the Canadian Averbachs is an intrinsic part of the development of Winnipeg's North End, which began in the early 1880's and grew as the railway pushed west. By the 1920's, most of the city's 14,000 Jews lived in that area. The city was called "The Gateway to the West".

Much of the very early history of Milyeh and Muni Averbach's children is not recorded. What is confirmed historically is that following the assassination of the Russian Czar, Alexander 2nd, there followed an orgy of anti-Semitic programs; Jews now found that living in the European towns, which for centuries had been their home, no longer felt safe. Rumors of streets paved with gold in America filtered through the Jewish communities and many undertook the arduous journey to what they hoped would be a new beginning. A major exodus took place after the abortive 1905 Russian Revolution. It was during this period that the Averbach men and women left for Canada.

As reported in a book about Winnipeg's North End: *"Out of a meager subsistence, would-be immigrants had first to find money for an exit permit as well as for transportation. For many, if an exit permit could not be obtained, there were border officials to be bribed at every crossing, or frontiers to be negotiated along rudimentary kind of underground railroad, and "stealing the border"—the 'grenich'—was a further terror to be endured."*

It is quite likely that the generous assistance, first from Bessie, the first sibling to leave, and then others as they came over, helped provide the money for passage across the ocean. Immigrants were required to have at least \$25.00 in cash when they arrived—the equivalent today of several hundred dollars.

The first of the eight Averbach children who migrated, Bessie married Berel Finkle and they initially lived on a farm; it was there that those who followed were welcomed. Eventually, they all moved out to Winnipeg's North End; later, Louis (Lazar) moved to Minneapolis and subsequently to Los Angeles; Mickey went to Edmonton, and the youngest, Anne, following her marriage to Max Goffman, lived in Dauphin, Manitoba, until their move to Winnipeg in 1937. This brought six brothers and sisters back in the same city.

It was security that the family members sought, for themselves and later for their children, which prompted that gigantic step into the new country and the new life-style. They came with no knowledge of the language, with limited means and with limited education. They crowded together in the few square miles known as the North End; its streets had rows of frame houses all looking alike, built on narrow lots—but there was running water, kitchen stoves to help against the cold, and perhaps a promise for a bright future.

For some years the Averbach brothers and sisters lived in relatively close proximity—Bessie and Rissie each lived directly across the road on Selkirk Ave.; Manya lived five blocks east on the same street; Yankel and family lived five short blocks north on Alfred Ave., and Meyer and Chassieh lived one block beyond Yankel on Aberdeen Ave.

It was in this environment, in this melting pot, that their lives took further shape.

The Canadian Pacific Railroad tracks, then considered the largest rail yards in the world, separated the North End from the rest of Winnipeg. The North End, with its diverse population began as a semi-ghetto. Unlike the confined ghetto of the old East European Pale, here the residents chose a sort of isolation, living closely together for support, for shared language and customs. North End walls were psychological, but residents knew the pressure of outside hostilities: the education quotas, employment barriers, racially motivated signs--"Gentiles Only" could still be seen into the 1930's and early '40's.

Part of the ethnic mix of the area were the Polish, Russian, Ukrainian and German newcomers, in addition to the Jews. At the core of the tightly-knit Jewish society was an emphasis on Jewish education. Sending their children to the Hebrew and Jewish schools they helped construct meant great sacrifice on the part of the parents. Frances (Averback) Berman recalls her mother, with two-year old Frances in tow, traipsing the streets in an effort to get Jewish children—those who could afford it and those who could not—to attend the Peretz School.

The city of Winnipeg is flat prairie, with especially cold winters and at the time of the Averback family arrival, still underdeveloped economically. Still, they helped develop a culture that thrived, professions that made a difference, and were integrated into the social and political life of the city. Much of this may be attributed to the drive, the determination to succeed, the diligent work ethic and the sense of family which remained strong. Part of this is the immigrant experience. And part of the mix was that the North End created an environment in which the brothers and sisters could thrive and plant new, secure roots.

Selkirk Ave. was the hub of the North End. More than three-fourths of Winnipeg's Jewish and Slavic population lived within a few blocks of the street. Goods and services with prices lower than those downtown were available; familiar faces made shopping more pleasant and the language was one they could understand. Often, people from one's old home town would meet in one of the many shops on the street which was alive with bakeries, banks, grocery and butcher shops, cottage industries, and many other services.

Oretzki's one-level Dept. Store was the source for all the North End of unlimited goods ranging from coats to curtains. It was here most children came for their annual just-before-the-High-Holiday new shoes.

Three movie houses along the stretch of the street offered double features and free dishes. The Palace Theater changed its movie bill two times a week and Saturdays offered cliff-hanging serials. The Palace charged children 10 cents admission, but it was 5 cents at the other near-by movie houses.

Shopping on Selkirk Ave. was a sociable affair; as they went from store to store, women gossiped as much as they shopped. Business could be transacted (and bargained) in Jewish. Through all the activity was the constant clang and rattle of the street cars which rode the length of the street.

The big shopping day on Selkirk Ave. was Saturday; the evening was often the time when families came down together; for women there was talk and price bargaining while the men would engage in discussions on current problems. Children played hide-and-go seek, running between the streams of shoppers, hiding in and out the store fronts, and using the telephone pole in front of a store as the base.

There were four hardware stores virtually on each of the four corners of what was probably the busiest block on the stretch of Selkirk Ave. between Main and McGregor Streets. On the south side was Bessie Finkle's hardware store; across the road was the paint and hardware store owned by Rissie and husband Abe Silvert; on the other two corners were Falconer's and opposite was Steinman's. Of the four stores, only Silvert's continued in business from 1920 until the late 1960's.

The story of sisters Bessie and Rissie relationship is one that remains a matter of accuracy and version. Mimi (Klein) and Esther (Besbris) heard differing accounts and so this will be referred to simply as the Jewish Hatfield and McCoy issue. As children it was understood that their fathers each had good reason to forbid them from an interaction with the children across the road; infrequently, however, one would cross over when not observed, to play with the cousins. It is not known whether Bessie and Rissie spoke for many years—other than perhaps when meeting on some occasion. Decades later, when Bessie had moved to Los Angeles and Rissie was visiting here, Bessie and a friend came out to spend the day. No mention of the old barriers was made.

Five blocks east was the delicatessen store, which Manya (Badner) operated. Immediately adjacent to the store was the Queen's Theater. This was the home of the Yiddish theater and actors from New York, many whose names were nationally known, presented plays to which Winnipeg audiences faithfully attended. Heavy with drama (one woman in the audience fainted during one tragic scene), it helped temporarily alleviate the real problems of their lives.

Manya's corned beef sandwiches were a draw for the actors; her daughters Lorice and Berdie were recruited to fill in when the play required an ingénue; Berdie's future husband, Al, played the drums in the pit orchestra and Manya's future husband, Israel, a talented sign painter who probably accompanied an acting group on tour in order to paint any needed props, did not return to New York and he and Manya were married. They had two daughters, Ree and Edythe.

Five blocks north of Selkirk Ave. lived Yankel and family. Alfred Ave. was a step up from Selkirk Ave.. and their home had a library filled with a dazzling number of books. Yankel had lost a thumb in a threshing machine accident when he was working on a dairy farm. With some financial assistance, the Chicago Kosher Meat Packing plant was launched. The plant, in the North End of Winnipeg, supplied many of the stores and delicatessens in the city. The piled high sandwiches served at the famous Oscar's Delicatessen (a favorite spot for many residents), was piled high with Averbach corned beef or pastrami—at one time, two for 15 cents.

In 1930, some men with a different appetite and taste for direct cash, robbed the firm of \$450.00. Yankel was forced to open the safe at gun point and then was locked in a smoke room after being struck with the butt of a revolver. This was the firm's second robbery, but despite these setbacks, the business continued to prosper. In the long off-white coat and high rubber boots he wore when working in the plant, Yankel was forever identified with the business as it flourished and grew. A safety deposit box contained a crumpled one dollar bill—the first dollar he put aside to start a savings account,

Here, in Winnipeg's receptive North End, there existed the possibility of a process to gain social justice and equality. Meyer Averbach lived one block north of Yankel; he had been exiled to Siberia for his activities at the time of the 1905 Russian Revolution and Chassie joined him there. When they and their son Abe, who was born in Siberia, managed to get out and arrive in Winnipeg, they brought with them a continued sense of fighting for social justice. Meyer graduated from the University of Manitoba (due to poor eyesight, his son Abe read the legal text to him) and he earned a law degree.

Because of the stereotyping of Jews in Winnipeg and local opposition to Jewish immigration, which continued into the twentieth century, the years from 1914 to 1920 were the worst in Winnipeg's social history. Particularly in the North End, Jewish men and some early women turned more and more to increased political participation to help achieve the security and assurance for which they had crossed the ocean. The political climate and the interest and support evidenced by the North End population led to many firsts in municipal and legislative politics. Meyer Averbach and his brother-in-law Moishe Gray, were most active in the Independent Labor Party. Meyer, a lawyer and Hebrew Free School teacher and principal, ran under the I. L.P. banner and was elected school trustee.

Meyer's home on Aberdeen Ave. was often the meeting place for many lecturers and writers who came to participate in stimulating conversation, plans for the future, and endless cups (or glasses) of tea. Meyer's son Muni recalls being bounced on the knee of Golda Meyerson—later Golda Meir, premier of Israel.

Meyer worked diligently and tirelessly on behalf of the many causes important to him, continuing the same passion for social change and justice he had shown in Russia.

The Averbach men were active in the Propoisker Hebrew Association, a group chartered in 1911; it was both social and civic-minded. The Propoisker Ladies Association was organized in the mid 1920's, three Averbach

women were long time members: Besheveh Averback, Rissie Silvert and Chassieh Averback, who was president for some years. The Association members had lived in the area referred to as Propoisk, which was a common bond they shared. They supported each others' issues and personal needs and enjoyed social events which also served to raise funds for designated causes.

Frequent visitors to Winnipeg were Mickey (Averback) Book, who married Elsie Jones and moved to Edmonton, Alberta, and Anne Goffman. Mickey and Elsie ran a restaurant for a time; in the back of the store Mickey operated his "bookie" activities. He also ran card games, was handsome, dapper and charming.

When Anne made the move to Winnipeg in 1937, her home was the site of various family functions. It was not unusual for 35 assorted family members to be present on these occasions. It was to Anne that nephews, nieces and others turned for assistance, advice and approval—Her slight stature belied her towering presence in the lives of countless many.

Lazar's family did not make the (then) long trip from Los Angeles to Winnipeg, but in postwar years various Averback members visited L.A. and a closer connection was formed.

When Yasheh and Celia Herman and their daughter Jeannette visited Winnipeg in the mid-1930's, the excitement generated could hardly be contained. They were the "cousins from Omaha" and everyone was eager to express the warmest of welcome. The appearance of Jeannette, head-turning beautiful as she walked along Selkirk Ave., was an added source for much "remember when" talk long after the visit was over.

The Averback name was well known, primarily in the North end, which reflected their strong sense to survive, to push for upward mobility and an ideology, which recognized that for some the struggle continued. To varying degrees, they contributed time, money and energy in a continuing effort to enrich the social, cultural and political lives of their community. To their children, they demonstrated the value of strong family ties which they brought with them from Kaschiakouitch. Ultimately, Winnipeg's North End was a defining influence in the lives of many of the Canadian Averbacks.

....To conclude with the special one who was there at the beginning....

Milyeh, mother of the Averbacks who first migrated to Canada, was, together with youngest daughter Anne, the last to arrive. One can only wonder about the pain she felt for the life and those she was leaving behind, coupled with the eager anticipation of reuniting with the children who preceded her. Her quiet wisdom was manifested in her decision not to live with Besheveh's parents who had invited her to move in with them. She explained this might show favoritism if she lived with son Yankel's in-laws and so she moved into a small apartment (suites, they were called) about five stores east of Rissie's home.

She had no financial resources—there was no assistance offered by the city, and so her rent and any expenses were probably paid by Yankel and Anne. Rissie brought food; daughter Goldie recalls bringing soup and gefilte fish and chicken every Friday.

During the period of her illness, the only outward sign most in evidence of her unimaginable discomfort was the handkerchief she frequently placed against her mouth. It is doubtful she ever complained. Always, she was a warm, sweet, quiet, gentle presence in the lives of her family. She was the loved mother of the Averbacks who journeyed to Canada.

*Milyeh
& Family*



Lazar



Bessie



Mickey



Left to Right: Yankel (Jacob), Manya, Anne, Meyer and Rissie

Slema "Solomon" Averbach

Slema Averbach was born in Kostakovichi, Mogilev, Gubernia Kalinsky, Oeydesa, Russia, date uncertain, probably in the 1850s. He was one of many brothers and sisters, many of which were killed during the Pogroms in Russia. Slema married Khaya Sayua "Shandel" (b. about 1877) in Russia.

Slema and Khaya Sayua had four children, of his first marriage, all born in Kostakovichi: Celia born about 1891 (d. 9/1/1986), Leiser born May 15, 1898 (d. 5/11/1991), Dora born March 23, 1899 (d. 2/23/1987) and Riva born, May 5, 1902 (d. 7/19/1984). Slema's first wife died in 1905, leaving him with the four children. Slema then married Momegh, and became a step mother to his four children. Together, Slema and Momegh has Aleigh, and several other children, all born in Russia.

Slema had at least one known brother, Munyeh "Muni" Averbach who was born in Homel, or Kastakovichi, Russia. Slema's brother, Munyeh married Milyeh "Millia" Perlin on December 07, 1882. She died on August 01, 1927.

Slema and Munyeh were the start of the two branches of the Averbach family that emigrated to North America.

The early 1900's were hard times in Russia. Cold winters and harsh living conditions were prevalent. Jews were heavily persecuted by the Cosacks. The resulting pogroms led many people to flee Russia for a better life elsewhere.

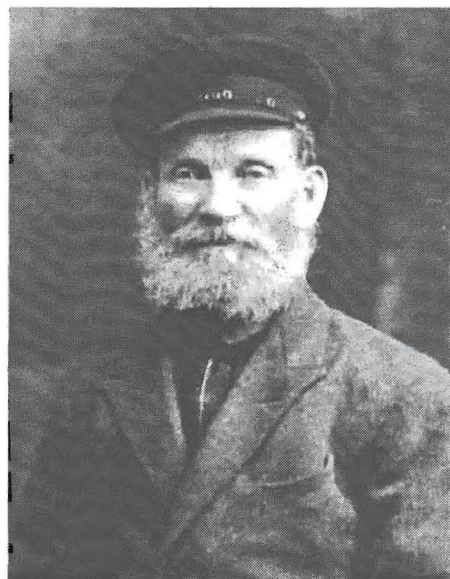
Slema's son, Leiser emigrated to Omaha, Nebraska, and upon arrival, changed his name to Louis Albert. He then married Sarah Wohlner in 1920. Soon Celia followed, and later in 1922, Dora and Riva emigrated to the United States, arriving through Ellis Island, New York.

Milyeh (Perlin) emigrated to Winnipeg, Canada, about 1907, and was soon followed by her husband, Munyeh. They had many offsprings, including Yehuda, Fieva, Meyer, Manya, Yankel, Bessie, Lazer, Rissie, Micky and Ann.

Thus the two families flourished in North America, one branch in Omaha, Nebraska, and the other in Winnipeg, Canada.



Slema Averbach



Slema Averbach



Milyeh Averbach