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Archive collects stories of Southern African Jews

Jodie Shupac, Staff Reporter, Tuesday, September 2, 2014

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Stephen Pincus

purposes of both historical research and posterity.

TORONTO — Hardly the wallflowers of Jewish immigrant groups, many Southern African Jews living in Ontario are well-established in fields such as medicine, law, business and academia and are notable contributors to the Jewish community.

Realizing it had a sizeable gap in its holdings when it came to archives from this community, the Ontario Jewish Archives (OJA) Blankenstein Family Heritage Centre, a department of UJA Federation of Greater Toronto, launched the "Southern African Legacy Project" this past spring.

The goal is to document and preserve the personal histories and archival materials of Ontario Jews hailing from South Africa and Zimbabwe, for the

Staff archivist Melissa Caza, who is heading the initiative along with the organization's chair, Eric Slavens, stressed the OJA is not only interested in stories from the community's most prominent members, but in every unique immigrant account. "This is the OJA's first effort to specifically target a particular immigrant group," she said. "So this is truly a pilot project."

Still in its early stages, the initiative is slated to involve three distinct phases: the collection of local Southern African Jews' archival records, ranging from photos and films to business records, personal diaries and correspondences; the production of a number of filmed oral histories, facilitated by professional oral historians, featuring individuals within the community and an exhibition to showcase OJA's findings.

To provide direction, fundraising assistance and help get the word out, the OJA has formed a committee of five community members of Southern African Jewish descent, chaired by Stephen Pincus, a Toronto lawyer who came with his wife to Canada from South Africa, via Israel, in 1982. The committee has been reaching out to the South African community for support and has already received private donations.

"I think Southern Africans in Canada have made quite an extraordinary impact on the Jewish community and the broader Canadian community in a variety of areas," Pincus said. "The impact made especially by those who came in the 1970s and '80s has been quite profound... in law, architecture, business, academia, the arts and sciences and community work."

He believes showcasing this community's stories is worthwhile "for the children and grandchildren of those who came [from Southern Africa] and for the wider Canadian Jewish community to understand what it means to be an immigrant and... learn from the successful integration and absorption of immigrants."

Pincus said the first wave of Southern African Jews came to Canada after South Africa became a republic in the 1960s, and was followed by another wave in the late 1970s, which was precipitated by anti-apartheid rioting and civil unrest.

"Certainly, the majority who came in the '70s and '80s came because of frustration with the politics of apartheid," he noted, "but they also came for professional or family reasons... parents often followed their children to Canada."

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While some Southern African Jews live in smaller Ontario cities such as Hamilton, London and Kingston, they're overwhelmingly concentrated in Toronto. Caza cited the 2001 federal census, the most recent tally available, in which 4,370 Toronto Jews said they were born in South Africa.

Southern African Jews in Canada are unique from other local Jewish immigrant groups, she said, because they weren't refugees fleeing anti-Semitism, nor were they the direct targets of violence. "[When they left Southern Africa], [t]he majority of them were financially well-off, well-educated and able to leave their country without extra social assistance," she said.

The OJA wishes to capture the experiences of Jewish Southern Africans of varying ages and backgrounds, as well as those who came here during different time periods.

So far, it has publicized the initiative in *The C/JN* and *SAJAC NEWS*, a magazine published by the South African Jewish Association of Canada, and is considering putting out calls for archival materials or donations in specific synagogue bulletins.

The goal is to complete the collection of materials and oral histories in the next few years, then create an exhibit to share with the greater community. Ideally, the OJA hopes to conduct similar projects with other Jewish immigrant groups.

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