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## **The Jewish Old Folks Home: How the Ladies Auxiliary became Invaluable to the Operations of the Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care**

In 1918, the Ezra Noshem Society, a mutual benefit society for Jewish women, purchased a property on 31 Cecil Street, and called it The Toronto Jewish Old Folks' Home. Run by a small staff of female volunteers, the Society expanded into neighbouring houses over the next 20 years, furthering its care and provision for 115 senior residents. With a need for a larger and more modern building, a new building was erected in 1954, consisting of two institutions: The Jewish Home for the Aged, and Baycrest Hospital. A year later, after months of meetings and research, the Women's Auxiliary opened up under the leadership of Dora Till.

It was not uncommon in the Jewish community for women to be involved in philanthropy. Women typically had a more difficult time finding jobs than men. Some devoted their time to volunteer work for seniors and children. Equal Pay legislations in Canada, including the Ontario's Female Employees Fair Remuneration Act, arose only in the 1950s, attempting to defeat the most common form of sex discrimination in employment.<sup>1</sup> Women played a significant role in developing the organization in the Ontario Jewish community we now call the "Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care." The Women's Auxiliary for the Baycrest Centre had opened in 1955, and Dora Till was elected to be the founding president of the organization. Till continued to lead the women in the Women's Auxiliary to "honour the aged and provide for them" for its founding four years, and then passed her title to Mrs. Arthur L. Soles. During its

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<sup>1</sup> Ontario (1960) "c 139 Female Employees' Fair Remuneration Act," Ontario: Revised Statutes: Vol. 1960: Iss. 2, Article 14. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/rso/vol1960/iss2/14>

founding years 1955-1959, under the leadership of Dora Till, how exactly did the Women's Auxiliary become invaluable to the Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care?

Three main initiatives that allowed for the Women's Auxiliary at Baycrest to become as successful as it did. Through residential support and programs, public relations and initiatives, and the volunteering program, the Women's Auxiliary became an invaluable asset to the Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care. Meeting minutes, photos, invitations, member bulletins and other archival sources from the Baycrest Ladies Auxiliary under the leadership of Till, from 1955 to 1959, show that their efforts and initiatives played a crucial role in the operations of Baycrest. In the finding years, their strategies and accomplishments are outlined mostly in executive committee meeting minutes and annual reports.

The Women's Auxiliary at Baycrest held its first executive committee on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1955.<sup>2</sup> At this meeting, a guest speaker, announced to the committee that "we can develop in the home a program not only related to the needs of the residents in the home, but to the needs of the aged in our entire [Jewish] community".<sup>2</sup> This motivation describes the intentions of the Women's Auxiliary from the beginning, as wanting to always provide for the aged in the home, and in the entire Jewish community of Toronto in general. The Auxiliary's goals from the start were to provide for Baycrest and its residents, as well as those in the Jewish community. The preamble to their constitution read: "to honour the aged and provide for them", and to create and develop a program which would promote the welfare of the Home, to interpret the needs of the aged to the members of the Auxiliary and to the community at large, and finally to raise funds for those needs in keeping with the policy of the Home, and in harmony with the planning of the

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<sup>2</sup> Executive Committee of the Ladies Auxiliary. Meeting Minute. 9 May 1955. Box 2 of 15, File 9. Fonds 14, Baycrest Women's Auxiliary. Ontario Jewish Archives, UJA Federation, Toronto, ON. 19 January 2016.

community.<sup>3</sup> All of the residential programs that the Women's Auxiliary created were done through the mentality of honouring the age and providing for them.

In its founding year, 1955, executive committee meeting preoccupations revolved around setting up the foundation for the Women's Auxiliary for the years and plans ahead. Some of this planning included hiring new members into paid positions, passing motions put forward by executive committee members, setting the basis for residential programs, for publicity and public relations, and the volunteer program – all programs which were invaluable to the operations of the Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care. Many of these initiatives worked interchangeably to support each other.

One of the reasons why the residential programs were so successful is because they were culturally relevant to the residents in the home and the aged in the community. The projects first hosted by the Ladies Auxiliary played a significant role in entertaining the residents of the home. In 1955, the Auxiliary launched plenty of programs and events, including a fashion pageant, a library, and a beauty parlour.<sup>4</sup> The library in Baycrest carried Jewish daily papers such as the Toronto Jewish Daily to help entertain residents and provide them with reading materials. The beauty parlour, starting out by opening just one day per week, was successful as well – “residents were most enthusiastic in their response”<sup>5</sup> to the initiative.<sup>4</sup> These projects were some of the first hosted by the ladies auxiliary, and played a main role in entertaining the residents of the home.<sup>4</sup>

While the residential programs provided by the Auxiliary were a success, the Auxiliary ran into some complications at the beginning stages in their outreach and public initiatives. In

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<sup>3</sup> Executive Committee of the Ladies Auxiliary. Member Bulletin. June 1956. Series 4-10, File 3. Fonds 14, Baycrest Women's Auxiliary. Ontario Jewish Archives, UJA Federation, Toronto, ON. 11 January 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Executive Committee of the Ladies Auxiliary. Meeting Minute. 5 October 1955. Box 2 of 15, File 9. Fonds 14, Baycrest Women's Auxiliary. Ontario Jewish Archives, UJA Federation, Toronto, ON. 19 January 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Executive Committee of the Ladies Auxiliary. Meeting Minute. 12 December 1955. Box 2 of 15, File 9. Fonds 14, Baycrest Women's Auxiliary. Ontario Jewish Archives, UJA Federation, Toronto, ON. 19 January 2016.

1955, the first donation from the “Pride of Israel” in 1955<sup>2</sup> sparked rumours and confusion in the Jewish community. Donors expressed confusion and frustration about not knowing how the donation would be put to use by the Auxiliary. To dispel those rumours, the Public Relations department created a full report on how the home operates financially to be distributed to public papers.<sup>2</sup> In addition, to protect their reputation, the public relations department also revised scripts for public programs so that they could control what was being said to audiences. Publicity played a main role in the success of their programs, and at their first inaugural meeting, where they used radio, TV and the written press.<sup>6</sup> As for the publicity within the organization, they would reach out to their members via bulletin.<sup>4</sup>

The volunteering program was still at its start up stages in 1955, but all of the executive committee agreed that it would be necessary to have a director of the volunteer program. During this time, volunteers were still requested to help facilitate programs and therapy/clerical work, including setting up an addressograph system, checking mail lists, and stamping.<sup>6</sup> These volunteers assisted in the beauty parlour initiative as well by booking appointments and maintaining this “vital and necessary activity in a woman’s life”.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the volunteers participated in a few other forms of occupational therapy, where the revival of an old skill or art was brought to life again.

In the new year, 1956, the Baycrest Women’s Auxiliary had become extremely active in the Jewish community and in the Home. They tailored their programs to meet the specific needs and wants of the residents with culturally appropriate projects. Because the Women’s Auxiliary played such a big role in the Baycrest Centre, they also worked with the men’s executive, and were expected to set a budget amount that the Women’s Auxiliary would

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<sup>6</sup> Executive Committee of the Ladies Auxiliary. Meeting Minute. 25 August 1955. Box 2 of 15, File 9. Fonds 14, Baycrest Women’s Auxiliary. Ontario Jewish Archives, UJA Federation, Toronto, ON. 19 January 2016.

contribute annually.<sup>7</sup> They opened up a tuck shop, which was run by volunteers, to help drive profit, and provide merchandise that is required by the residents.<sup>7</sup> The Library committee also arranged to offer both Yiddish and English newspapers for residents so that there would be more options available to residents who were not fluent in English. In addition, they created a Festivals Committee, and arranged to have a Purim program for the residents in the home and their loved ones.<sup>7</sup> Besides this, they also spent time planning for Sukkot and Yom Kippur, the day of atonement in the Jewish Calendar.<sup>8</sup>

While there are no peer-reviewed academic works on the impact of the Women's Auxiliary on Baycrest hospital, some other scholars have written essays that discuss the different parts of geriatric care, women and volunteer work, and the life in an old-age home. Jillian Gould, an anthropologist from Memorial University, examined a weekly Sabbath tea that took place in a Jewish retirement home in Toronto, Ontario. In her article, "A Nice Piece of Cake and a Kibitz: Reinventing Sabbath Hospitality in an Institutional Home" she discusses the women's role in setting up the event, and their attempts to make the public institutionalized environment seem private and "heimish", or closer to home.<sup>9</sup> Women's Auxiliaries were invaluable to senior homes in Gould's article, as they are at the Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care. Women play a significant role in the events and programs run in these old-age homes, and in the hospitality of the home. Culturally appropriate services for residences is one reason why the Women's Auxiliary in Baycrest was successful.

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<sup>7</sup> Executive Committee of the Ladies Auxiliary. Meeting Minute. 16 January 1956. Box 2 of 15, File 9. Fonds 14, Baycrest Women's Auxiliary. Ontario Jewish Archives, UJA Federation, Toronto, ON. 19 January 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Executive Committee of the Ladies Auxiliary. Meeting Minute. 10 October 1956. Box 2 of 15, File 9. Fonds 14, Baycrest Women's Auxiliary. Ontario Jewish Archives, UJA Federation, Toronto, ON. 19 January 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Gould, Jillian. "A Nice Piece of Cake and a Kibitz: Reinventing Sabbath Hospitality in an Institutional Home." *Home Cultures* 10.2 (2013): 189-206. Web. 10 Feb. 2016.

While the Auxiliary's programs played a crucial part in their success, their public relations also had a lot to do with their contributions to Baycrest. By January 1956, they had received over \$1000 in donations.<sup>7</sup> They used these donations for maintaining their presence in the home, and to support the home. In May<sup>10</sup>, they published more bulletins to remain in contact with the hundreds of members and send out reminders of upcoming meetings. They continued an active publicity scheme, recognizing its importance for the betterment of the auxiliary work.

The volunteering program, on the other hand, was not fully developed yet in 1956. However, during this time, the executive board was still trying to find a volunteer director.<sup>8</sup> They had also introduced a program in which newly recruited volunteers would attend a three hour orientation where they would learn about the home and their roles and expectations as volunteers.<sup>11</sup>

In the annual report, reviewing 1955-1956, the writer explained that "the past year in the life of the Auxiliary was notable in that we exploited the many potentials of interest and devotion that exist"<sup>12</sup> and that their projects, which were far reaching, did carry through their objective, "To Honour the Aged and to Provide for them".<sup>12</sup> The report noted their struggle to find a proper "professional leader" to be the Auxiliaries Director of Volunteer Services. Aside from this, the only publication from the Women's Auxiliary at Baycrest was their bulletin. All the programs run by the Auxiliary were then discussed, including: the Beauty Salon, which was described as a "vital and necessary activity in a woman's life" that provided a happy and busy atmosphere to

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<sup>10</sup> Executive Committee of the Ladies Auxiliary. Meeting Minute. 14 May 1956. Box 2 of 15, File 9. Fonds 14, Baycrest Women's Auxiliary. Ontario Jewish Archives, UJA Federation, Toronto, ON. 19 January 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Executive Committee of the Ladies Auxiliary. Meeting Minute. 10 December 1956. Box 2 of 15, File 9. Fonds 14, Baycrest Women's Auxiliary. Ontario Jewish Archives, UJA Federation, Toronto, ON. 19 January 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Executive Committee of the Ladies Auxiliary. Annual Report. April 1956. Box 2 of 15, Series 4-2. File 2. Fonds 14, Baycrest Women's Auxiliary. Ontario Jewish Archives, UJA Federation, Toronto, ON. 19 January 2016.

female residents week, the Tuck Shop, which was a successful project from the start, is staffed by volunteers and provides products for residents such as sweets, cigarettes, and soft drinks, Floral Services, which were used to spread good cheer and seasonal sentiments by the colourful floral displays, and occupational therapy, which consisted of craft activities such as sewing.<sup>12</sup>

The annual report for their first year in service also notes the five major sources of their income, including: “Happiness and memory cards” which is a means of expressing sentiment on happy occasions, “Anniversary and Birthday Book”, which has inscriptions honouring anniversaries and birthdays of families and friends, the “Memorial Book” which memorializes the names of beloved ones, the “Yahrzeit”, which is a memorial calendar service for members, and “Dues” which refer to the income of fundraising financing their programs.<sup>12</sup>

The executive meeting minutes explain that publicity was received for their annual meeting, by press and local radio stations, as well as photos in the newspapers. They also acknowledge and express gratitude towards the Women’s Auxiliary at Mr. Sinai Hospital, for helping them to shape and plan their Women’s Auxiliary at the Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care.<sup>11</sup>

Entering 1957, the Women’s Auxiliary played a major role in the Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care. They were constantly coming up with new ideas and programs to help provide for the aged, and to fundraise. The Day Care Project was brought up in question<sup>13</sup> – the project consisted of providing for the aged in the community and not in the home, where seniors have the opportunity to come spend the day at the Day Care centre, socialize, enjoy food, and so on.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Executive Committee of the Ladies Auxiliary. Meeting Minute. 11 February 1957. Box 2 of 15, File 9. Fonds 14, Baycrest Women’s Auxiliary. Ontario Jewish Archives, UJA Federation, Toronto, ON. 19 January 2016.

This would give some of the aged an opportunity to experience Baycrest before becoming a permanent resident of the Home.

The Women's Auxiliary also set up a booth at the B'nai B'rith Carnival, and sold ceramics and sewn items made by the residents from the occupational therapy department.<sup>12</sup> Occupational therapy was one of the biggest programs at Baycrest, and allows residents to feel useful and empowered. In one of their executive committee meetings, they discussed an occupational therapy opportunity providing outreach into Israel, where the residents would knit socks and other materials for the Israeli soldiers.<sup>12</sup> Not only did the women's auxiliary make a difference in the aged community at Baycrest, but also in surrounding communities in Toronto and even as far as Israel. These types of programs were efforts to support the Israeli soldiers, and empower the residents to feel helpful.

In 1957, plenty of new initiatives regarding Public Relations were launched. One of these initiatives was a scrapbook for the Auxiliary and the home that would be publically showcased. Aside from the scrapbook, they also worked on publicity and brochures on the home and the work of the auxiliary for the home. In 1957, they also released their second publication, a combined effort with the Men's Board, the Men's Service Group, and residents.<sup>12</sup>

In an executive meeting, they had also notified all members that it was their responsibility to keep an ear out for detrimental rumours that they may hear regarding the home, and report to the director of public relations. Many of these rumours, according to the director of public relations, come from mis-understanding or mis-interpretation. To defeat rumours, the director of public relations would need to know about them and help to re-inform those who may misunderstand the intentions of the Baycrest Women's Auxiliary.

In the meeting minutes during this time<sup>12</sup>, a section on “goods and welfare” begin to appear, regarding the capacity of beds in the Home compared to the number of elderly people that are awaiting entry, being studied, and who are interested.<sup>12</sup> The Women’s Auxiliary had a direct correspondence with the residents of the home and the publicity of their organization as a part of Baycrest had attracted many Jewish elderly people and families, and had a direct impact on the success of Baycrest, and is a significant part of the Home. The Volunteer program began to pick up in 1957 when the volunteer services program hired a new director.<sup>14</sup> At this time, the new director focused on enlisting many volunteers and finding work for them all throughout the home, including volunteer librarians and occupational therapy, as well as working with senile rehabilitation residents.<sup>12</sup>

Susan H. Kahn’s study of Jewish women pre and post- WWII in Cleveland, Ohio, tells a similar story to the Jewish women in Toronto post-WWII. "Tales of our Mothers: Archivist takes a fresh look at Cleveland's Jewish women and their remarkable achievements" by Susan H. Kahn is an article about the impact made by Jewish women pre and post- WWII in Cleveland, Ohio. It discusses the reasons why post-war women were so active in voluntary organizations [usually for children or seniors] during the late 50's and early 60's<sup>15</sup>. This explains why there were so many volunteers for the Women's Auxiliary in the late 1950's, and why their volunteer run programs were becoming increasingly successful. Although this study takes place in the United States, Kahn states that "the ebb and flow of employment opportunities for Jewish women in Cleveland are parallel to that of the rest of America".<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Executive Committee of the Ladies Auxiliary. Meeting Minute. 21 October 1957. Box 2 of 15, File 9. Fonds 14, Baycrest Women’s Auxiliary. Ontario Jewish Archives, UJA Federation, Toronto, ON. 19 January 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Kahn, Susan H. "Tales of Our Mothers: Archivist Takes a Fresh Look at Cleveland's Jewish Women and Their Remarkable Achievements." *The Cleveland Jewish News* 80.6 (2001): 22. Web.

In 1958, Dora Till was re-elected for her last term as President of the Women's Auxiliary. Having already been the leader of the Baycrest Women's Auxiliary for three years, the same types of programs continued to run and succeed. The home was growing constantly both in size and population, and their programs were increasingly successful, as the meeting minutes state.<sup>14</sup> One of the programs/fundraisers planned this year was a movie night and theatre night<sup>16</sup>, which were both highly successful. While the Auxiliary supported the residents with programs, they also supported the home with monetary donations around \$10,000 each year.<sup>17</sup> This is another example of how the Women's Auxiliary helped to financially support the home. The beauty salon was still being used, and was a great morale builder for residents<sup>15</sup>, especially around Passover.<sup>15</sup> Providing these services to the residents made them feel good about themselves and gave them motivation to go to enjoy the holidays. Other than the beauty salon, other programs and services were provided to the residents during this year as well, including events for other Jewish holidays such as Channukah. The Auxiliary would host a tea in celebration of the holidays, and give gifts out, present a Jewish film, and host a social program for the residents. For publicity, they sold tickets to the public for their theatre night events, and put up posters around the home to advertise the fundraisers.

Around 1958, the volunteer program started to improve in size. This year, they decided to host a function to honour the volunteers and give out recognition to those who have volunteered for a certain amount of time.<sup>15</sup> Around this time as well, there were volunteers in virtually all departments around Baycrest. This includes Library & study, Festivals, Beauty parlour, Films,

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<sup>16</sup> Executive Committee of the Ladies Auxiliary. Meeting Minute. 14 October 1958. Box 2 of 15, File 9. Fonds 14, Baycrest Women's Auxiliary. Ontario Jewish Archives, UJA Federation, Toronto, ON. 19 January 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Executive Committee of the Ladies Auxiliary. Meeting Minute. 28 April 1958. Box 2 of 15, File 9. Fonds 14, Baycrest Women's Auxiliary. Ontario Jewish Archives, UJA Federation, Toronto, ON. 19 January 2016.

Sewing, Tuck Shop, Occupational Therapy, and Clerical staff for the Women's Auxiliary office.<sup>18</sup> The volunteers were also recognized at luncheons, and these luncheons were used to recruit even more volunteers.<sup>15</sup> At this point in time, volunteers took up a large part of the operations at Baycrest. The Women's Auxiliary financed two thirds of all volunteer expenditures, and Baycrest financed the other third.<sup>16</sup>

The annual report for 1958-1959 reviewed the last year of the Women's Auxiliary under the leadership of Dora Till. In this report, the writer discusses how the Women's Auxiliary has grown in scope and strengthened its services to the Home and Baycrest Hospital through its membership, newspaper subscription cards, Yahrzeit service, contributions towards necessary equipment, and so on.<sup>19</sup> They mention how all of the many services rendered by the Women's Auxiliary are obvious as soon as anyone enters the Home.<sup>17</sup> The environment at Baycrest allows retired seniors to retire into an enriched residence where there is always something to do and something to look forward to.<sup>17</sup>

The report looks back on their achievements throughout 1958-1959, and sheds light on a few accomplishments: the Theatre Night Project, which rose around \$10,000 to be used towards the Day Care Program and necessary services – Inscription books, which has been expanded and grown every year – Volunteer services in many departments and the orientation and training programs that are being held – Occupational therapy, including crafts that keep the residents busy – the Tuck Shop and Beauty Salon, the Library and study, Films, and the list goes on.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Executive Committee of the Ladies Auxiliary. Meeting Minute. 13 January 1958. Box 2 of 15, File 9. Fonds 14, Baycrest Women's Auxiliary. Ontario Jewish Archives, UJA Federation, Toronto, ON. 19 January 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Executive Committee of the Ladies Auxiliary. Annual Report. 14 May 1959. Box 2 of 15, Series 4-2. File 8. Fonds 14, Baycrest Women's Auxiliary. Ontario Jewish Archives, UJA Federation, Toronto, ON. 19 January 2016.

Attention to women organizers and volunteers is useful to the field of Canadian Jewish History and Canadian Jewish Studies. During a time where Jewish peoples from Europe, the Middle East, and Northern Africa were immigrating to Canada, the Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care was becoming a well known institution in the Jewish community and is just one example of many, where people in the Jewish community gathered together to provide for their people. In the case of Baycrest, their commitment was to provide for the aged, and that is exactly what they did.

As Mrs. Till's term came to an end, she shared her experience with the audience of the year end meeting, including executives, members, and volunteers. She reminds them that she will always be with them, and that her experience serving the Women's Auxiliary over the past four years was a privilege.<sup>17</sup> Her last quote,

For when we share and build, let it not be for the present delights, nor for the present use alone, but let it be such work as our descendants will thank us for; and let us think that the time is to come when these stones will be held sacred, because our hands have touched them.<sup>19</sup>

Dora Till identifies the impact they've left as builders of the Women's Auxiliary, and their work will carry on through generations, as the Women's Auxiliary at the Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care.