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OJA collects stories of South African Jews

For more than 40 years, the Ontario Jewish Archives, Blankenstein Family Heritage Centre (OJA) has been collecting and preserving the stories of our Jewish community. Earlier this year, they launched the South African Legacy Project, an exciting initiative to collect material from South African Jews who immigrated to Ontario.

Over the past year, many Jewish Southern Africans have shared their stories and records (photos, letters, memoirs, scrapbooks) with the OJA as part of a special initiative to document and preserve the community's immigration experiences. This is the OJA's first collection development initiative focused on a specific immigrant group, and the OJA plans to use this pilot as a model to work with other groups in the future. The OJA has been working with a committee including Stephen Pincus, Colin Baskind, John Cohen, Lorraine Sandler and Heather Super.

Although the first large wave of immigrants from Southern Africa started arriving in Canada soon after the Soweto Riots in 1976, a small number of immigrants did begin arriving as early as the 1950s. The earliest immigrant to connect with



Ivor Simmons at Island Yacht Club, 1994

the OJA is Percy Skuy, a pharmacist who ended up in Toronto by chance in 1957. He had run short on money while traveling through the United States and needed to earn enough for the fare back to Africa. Unable to work in the States, he headed to Toronto to find work, accepting a sales position that came with a car. "I took it really for the car ... and never left. I fell in love with Toronto."



Percy Skuy at Redpath Pharmacy, 1960

On the 2011 National Household Survey, 4,725 Jews from Toronto indicated they were born in South Africa. Although relatively few in number, project chair Stephen Pincus explains, "immigrants from Southern Africa have had a significant impact on Canada in a broad range of fields.

"We hope that the Legacy Project will document many of the fascinating stor-

ies comprising this remarkable immigration."

As more individual stories come into the archives, the larger community story is beginning to emerge: why they left South Africa and Zimbabwe, why they chose Canada, initial impressions of Canada, the challenges they faced when integrating into life here, the differences and similarities in Jewish traditions, and the important role they have played in Ontario's Jewish community.

The project involves the collection of family portraits, images of holiday celebrations and other photographs, letters, speeches, family videos, diaries, and cookbooks. Everything collected is stored in the OJA's state-of-the-art storage vault and made accessible to researchers and will also be accessible on the OJA's website. This initiative is an opportunity to ensure that the stories of this unique immigrant experience are preserved for future generations. ■

If you would like to participate, please contact archivist Melissa Caza at 416-635-5391 ext. 5110 or by email at mcaza@ujafed.org