It Takes a Village: How The Jewish Grocery, Garment Worker, and Real Estate Communities in Toronto Built Ed Mirvish

Jeff McMahan

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Ed Mirvish loved to tell stories. There are countless stories that he relays in his autobiography, *How to Build an Empire on an Orange Crate: Or 121 Lessons I Never Learned in School.*[1] His 121 lessons are personal anecdotes and small moral stories that are highly idiosyncratic and colourful, but what can they teach the aspiring entrepreneur about how to build a financial empire? Are there other lessons to be learned from the history of a Jewish immigrant in Toronto other than personal success? Mirvish's memoir was published the same year he opened the Princess of Wales Theatre–1993–seventy years after he first arrived in Toronto with his family. He was seventy-nine at the time and had been profiled in the media many times. He knew how to focus media attention on himself and his enterprises quite resourcefully, and the fact that this book came out at the same time as the theatre, unsurprisingly, provided great press.

The media loves to tell stories as well. The stories that the media told about Ed Mirvish focused mainly on his discount warehouse, Honest Ed's, and his theatres. Both venues provided a forum to tell dramatic, entertaining, unpredictable stories that absorbed the spotlight. But three other key stories about Ed Mirvish that are worth telling are those of his family's grocery business, of the small dress shop run by Ed and his wife in the 1940s, and of his steady accumulation of real estate from the late 1940s until the end of his life in 2007. These economic opportunities were areas where he, as a Jewish Canadian, found a path forward to financial success and economic mobility. The fact that Mirvish did all so well and combined his various business successes into a flamboyant personal brand filled with chutzpah is a testament to his razzle dazzle. Yet underneath his marketing bluster was a strong Jewish family and a community that he would draw from his whole life. Though he rarely foregrounded this community support

[1] Ed Mirvish, *How to Build an Empire on an Orange Crate or 121 Lessons I Never Learned in School* (Toronto : Key Porter Books, 1993), 1.

in his self-fashioning, and though the popular press tended to omit this community contribution, it was precisely this feature that helps account for his success.

Edwin "Honest Ed" Mirvish had many names, many titles, many honours, and many accomplishments. He was born Yehuda Mirvish in 1914 in Colonial Beach, Virginia to David and Anna Mirvish, but his name was Americanized to Edwin by his "worldly older cousin."[2] He would later call himself "Honest" Ed when he opened one of the first discount stores in Canada, Honest Ed's Warehouse. He was called "crazy" by *Maclean's*.[3] He was crowned a merchant-prince by the *Canadian Jewish News*.[4] He was referred to as "the self-made merchant prince" by the *Globe and Mail*.[5] He bought a block of houses along Markham Street that he renamed Mirvish Village. He bought a theatre that would grow into one of the largest for-profit theatres in Canada under Mirvish Enterprises. He bought more buildings next to the theatre and opened a series of restaurants in his name called, Ed's Warehouse, Ed's Folly, and Ed's Italian.[6] He was referred to as an entrepreneur, entertainer, showman, and theatre impresario by the media. He was given honourary degrees from Trent University and the University of Waterloo[7], awards from Jewish organizations for his donations[8], and made a Commander of the British Empire.[9] Was he the self-made man that the media portrayed him to be? While it is clear that Mirvish was

[2] Mirvish, 5.
[3] McKenzie Porter, "How to Get Rich the Crazy Way," *Maclean's*, August 02, 1958, 22.
[4] Bernice Dyment, "Hero Of The Week - The Man Who Saved The Royal Alex Loyal Member of Toronto Synagogue," *The Canadian Jewish News*, February 22, 1963, 9.
[5] Frank Rasky, "Shop Owners Who've found the Key to Merchandising," *The Globe and Mail (1936-2016)*, May 26, 1982.
[6] Mirvish, 86-87.
[7] Jack Batten, *Honest Ed's Story: The Crazy Rags to Riches Story of Ed Mirvish* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1972), 16.
[8] Belinda Silberman, "Mirvish takes the limelight," *The Canadian Jewish News*, October 20, 1988, 25.
[9] Marion Finlay, Special to The Star, "Awarded CBE by Queen 'I'm Still a Storekeeper' Honest Ed Says Proudly: [FIN Edition]," *Toronto Star*, August 01, 1989.

a hard-working, driven, savvy businessman, his success was not a happy series of accidents of a penniless immigrant, but rather an example of an individual supported by a community.

In 1985, Ed Mirvish was honoured for his "outstanding contributions" to the community with a Gardiner Award. In recognition of this honour, a *Globe and Mail* article summarized his accomplishments by mentioning his discount warehouse and his restored Royal Alexandra Theatre, described as Toronto landmarks.[10] When he was awarded the first-ever Canadian Business Statesmen Award by the Harvard Business School Club, in 1984, he was once again praised most prominently for his store and the theatre.[11] Yet the way in which the media reported on an individual who has stood out by being successful is a critical component of a constructed narrative that needs to be examined. In a 1989 article in *Maclean's*, Ed Mirvish was designated a "self-made merchant" who started out from "humble beginnings" while being noted as a "child of European Jewish immigrants."[12] Why did the author describe him as "self-made"? Did Mirvish use this term himself in interviews? The initial portrayal of Ed Mirvish in the 1960s by the *Toronto Daily Star* is an interesting example of how the background of Mirvish was described to the public. Ron Haggart profiled the original owner of the Royal Alexandra Theatre, Cawthra Mulock, and spoke of him and his family as "aristocracy," able to enter Toronto society with the "highest credentials."[13] He also mentioned that the establishment of the Royal Alexandra in 1907 was "the final and greatest gesture of the paramount family of the old Toronto Establishment."[14] In contrast, Edwin Mirvish was described as the "son of [a] debt-ridden Russian Jewish book salesman," and his store Honest Ed's was described as a "tilted, slant-

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[10] "ONTARIO BRIEFS Ed Mirvish Honored for Community Role," *The Globe and Mail*, May 31, 1985.
[11] Zena Cherry, "Business Club at Harvard Gives Award to Ed Mirvish," *The Globe and Mail (1936-2017)*, May 11, 1984.
[12] D'Arcy Jenish and Brian Willer, "The lights, sound and action of a community man: Edwin (Honest Ed) Mirvish (theater owner) (1989 MacLean's Honor Roll)," *Maclean's*, December 25, 1989.
[13] "Page 15," *Toronto Daily Star (1900-1971)*, Feb 18, 1963.
[14] "Page 15."

floored discount house."[15] There is an element of distrust hinted at as to what this person from a less "reputable" background had planned to bring to the illustrious story of the Royal Alexandra Theatre. The *Toronto Daily* Star, later that year, applauded the showmanship of Ed Mirvish and admitted it was pleasant to see the change in the area on Markham Street that would later develop into Mirvish Village but was upset by the "violence of colors chosen by Mr. Mirvish."[16] The media would often refer to Mirvish as a scrappy outsider or a self-made man who rose from poverty to achieve great success and this became mythology. It seemed that Mirvish himself embraced this myth in interviews and both in media that was written about him and by him. There is myth and there is reality, and Ed Mirvish was comfortable in both realms.

Myths are powerful stories that contain seeds of truth but many fictions. They often contain moral lessons along with other narrative elements that can be misleading. The myth of the self-made man is one. Is anybody a self-made man? Historian Heike Paul's *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies* argues that "success narratives" involving "assimilated protagonists" who achieve success and fame are often framed by autobiographies that tell a slanted story.[17] The story that is often told is one of an individual rising above all odds to achieve success. The myth "celebrates individualism and free will" while at the same time affirming "that everyone is responsible for their own fate and success in life."[18] These myths were reinforced in Horatio Alger stories that gained prominence in the early twentieth century due to their opposition to the rise of socialism and communism.[19] On the surface, the protagonists of these stories achieved success on their own. But what was often overlooked was

[15] "Page 15."
[16] "Page 31." *Toronto Daily Star (1900-1971),* Jun 29, 1963.
[17] Heike Paul, *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies.* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2014), 386.
[18] Paul, 372.
[19] Paul, 374.

there was always another character that acted as a mentor or the protagonist would "have chance encounters with benevolent and useful friends".[20] On the other hand, the myth of the self-made man was being debunked as early as the mid-nineteenth century by showmen like P. T. Barnum. The tactics of P. T. Barnum, who subverted the idea of the self-made man in his autobiography by mocking himself, are examined by Todd Nathan Thompson.[21] Thompson argues that Barnum satirized himself so effectively and mocked his own label as a self-made man that he left "nothing for his worst enemy to do."[22]This tactic was also used by Ed Mirvish with his advertisements where he would undercut himself and his own store in order to "[c]atch the reader's eye."[23] This is an interesting idea of the showman who decides to call himself a "nut"[24], perhaps in order to say the worst thing about himself first so it is not as effective by others. A philosophy Mirvish reinforced in a TVO interview where he claimed that by declaring himself "honest," people would get suspicious and therefore take a closer look at the deals he was offering.[25] It was a method for focusing attention both on and away from Mirvish's business practices.

Mirvish sought attention by way of the outlandish advertising that he used in his Honest Ed's store. Not only did these campaigns generate attention from the public, but they invited attention from the media as well. In a 1958 *Maclean's* article entitled "How to get rich the crazy way," Ed Mirvish was portrayed as an unorthodox maverick who bucked the trends yet managed to outsell his rivals. Yet, the article outlined the fact that Mirvish did several things that were

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[20] Paul, 374.
[21] Todd Nathan Thompson, "'*satire upon all of us': The self-made man as confidence man in P.T Barnum's America*," Nineteenth-Century Prose 42, no. 1 (2015): 24.
[22] Thompson, 2.
[23] Ed Mirvish, "Honest Ed's Lessons from Life: The Magazine for Canadian Entrepreneurs," *Profit*, 12, 1993, 68.
[24] "Honest Ed's Lessons from Life," 68.
[25] "Ed Mirvish," *Dialogue*. Aired on 02 May 2000, on TVO. https://www.tvo.org/video/archive/ed-mirvish, accessed 29 January 2021.

typical of "most discount stores"[26] including purchasing "bankrupt stocks, fire stocks, and distressed merchandise or goods the owner [was] willing to sell cheaply because [the owner needed] the cash urgently".[27] With the merchandise that Mirvish purchased at low prices, he would then pass savings on to his own customers, offering consumer goods at prices well below market value. The *Maclean's* article also discussed Mirvish's background, yet failed to mention that his family were Jewish immigrants from the United States. All the general details about him are included, but there is no mention of his family history. The article explained that, thanks to the war, he was able to open a ladieswear shop that sold to "munitions-factory girls".[28] There was mention of Mirvish buying up real estate on Bloor and Markham and that this was referred to as "lucrative real-estate holdings".[29] In many articles, this is not mentioned prominently or featured as much as the focus on his warehouse and the wild advertising that Mirvish practices. There is more emphasis placed on the wild and entertaining aspect of the wacky ways of Ed Mirvish and less on his pragmatic business dealings. Real-estate was an investment that was to serve Ed Mirvish well and helped him establish his store and expand it in 1948. Real-estate again would be the driving force in purchasing the Royal Alexandra theatre that was being sold for a mere $215,000 in 1963.[30]

The purchase of the historic theatre by Mirvish was considered strange to many and in a 1963 *Maclean's* article entitled "The Least Likely Art Patron in the World," Mirvish was viewed with skepticism and ambivalence by the Toronto community for saving the Royal Alexandra Theatre from demolition.[31] Many other interested parties were looking to purchase it so they

[26] Porter, 33.
[27] Porter, 33.
[28] Porter, 33.
[29] Porter, 34.
[30] Janice Tyrwhitt, "The Lease Likely Art Patron in the World." *Maclean's*, October 05, 1963, 50.
[31] Tyrwhitt, 50.

could tear it down and build a parking lot, but Mirvish was able to purchase it when he promised that he would operate it as a live theatre.[32] While some in the theatre community were happy he wanted to renovate the theatre, Mirvish admitted that "people [were] skeptical" and thought he didn't care about the art but just wanted to make money in a "non-cultural way."[33] Real-estate was the driving force behind the purchase of this Toronto landmark and not a desire to make a profit specifically in the arts. It was also noted that he purchased a row of houses on Markham Street to demolish to turn into a parking lot for his increasingly busy discount store. City council denied this proposal, forcing Mirvish to change his plans and instead transform the area into a low-rent artists' colony.[34] It is an interesting irony that external pressures forced him to transform a real-estate venture into an artistic one and that he was then able to purchase more real-estate above other would-be buyers by committing to an artistic venture yet again.

In contrast to the *Maclean's* article, there was a noted difference in tone in the Jewish press. In 1963, Mirvish was hailed as a hero in the *Canadian Jewish News* for saving the Royal Alex theatre from demolition.[35] In this interview, the reporter described the private office of Ed Mirvish as a "throne-room that well befits a true merchant-prince,"[36] whose origins are revealed in the story of a young boy who grew up in Colonial Beach, Virginia and whose father ran a saloon that went out of business because of prohibition. Soon after moving to Canada, his father set up a grocery store that later became a teenaged Ed's responsibility when his father died, and he was left with the struggling store to make ends meet for the family. The CJN made no mention of support groups or networks from the Jewish community helping the family during

[32] Tyrwhitt, 50.
[33] Tyrwhitt, 50.
[34] Tyrwhitt, 47.
[35] Dyment, 9.
[36] Dyment, 9.

this challenging time. Yet later, Mirvish is described as a hero for saving the Royal Alex which came as no surprise to the Jewish community, because he gives to many causes frequently such as United Jewish Appeal, buys Israeli bonds, and is a member of the Bais Yehuda synagogue.[37] It would appear that Mirvish contributed to his community as a philanthropist, but there is no mention of him benefitting from philanthropic organizations himself, as he and his family struggled in their early days in Toronto.

In Mirvish's autobiography *How to Build and Empire on an Orange Crate: or 121 Lessons I never Learned in School* he provides a glimpse into the community that he grew up in. Between 1923 and 1925, his father tried to sell the *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry* in Toronto, quit, began to sell Fuller Brushes, quit again, then moved his family into a store at 788 Dundas Street and opened a grocery store like he used to run in Washington.[38] How he was able to afford this is unclear, but he was able to rent out two second-floor rooms of the shop to tenants to make a more steady stream of income and take on another job as a travelling salesmen to sell candy bars and magazines to "coach passengers" from Toronto to Winnipeg "every few days" while his wife ran the store.[39] The store was situated near the epicentre of the Jewish community in Toronto at the time, next to Kensington Market, where in the 1920s and 1930s "about 60,000 Jews" lived.[40] In the early twentieth century "an influx of Jews selling from handcarts changed the neighbourhood's character" into a "merry din" where bargains where haggled over in the street.[41] Perhaps this had an effect on the young Mirvish who could witness the carnival-like atmosphere as a "visitor to the Thursday market in Kensington Place."[42] Historian Na Li argues

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[37] Dyment, 9.
[38] Mirvish, 14.
[39] Mirvish, 14-15.
[40] Na Li, *Kensington Market:Collective Memory, Public History, and Toronto's Urban Landscape* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 31- 32.
[41] Li, 16.
[42] Li, 16.

that the migration of Jews into the "Kensington Market area marked a turning point for the… community" because it enabled some Jews to leave poorer areas and rent out former properties to other Jews.[43] In addition, the many garment factories around Spadina were a big draw for Jewish craftspeople to live next to. There was a vibrant culture in the early twentieth century that the young Ed Mirvish stepped into that would inspire him and help him in the future.

Mirvish described the area of Dundas that he lived with his family consisting of a "vast majority of…Jewish immigrants who'd fled every country in Europe [and that] [a]ll the merchants on Dundas Street were Jews."[44] The merchants, as he recounts, where all part of a social network that consisted of "little family stores" and that most "socializing" took place there or in the synagogue.[45] One of those little family stores was a fruit store called Shimkofsky's, where he met his childhood friend, Yale, who would play a large part in working with Mirvish as he began to become more successful. One early venture, after the death of Mirvish's father, was to create "Simpson's Service Stores" that would provide dry cleaning to customers who would think they were going to a store affiliated with the Robert J Simpson department store. Yale officially changed his last name to Simpson so he could be the name behind the store, which ran out of the empty storefront that was the Mirvish grocery store.[46] Another significant connection that Mirvish made as a result of working at the family store was Leon Weinstein, whose father founded Standard Wholesalers that supplied to grocers. This connection allowed Mirvish to work for and finally become the fruit manager of Power Supermarkets which had eight stores in Toronto.[47]

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[43] Li, 15.
[44] Mirvish, 18.
[45] Mirvish, 112.
[46] Mirvish, 36.
[47] Mirvish, 34-35.

Mirvish faced a number of obstacles in his life, but he also had several advantages. He was a first-generation immigrant, but unlike his father he did not have to establish himself in Toronto because his father had already done that for the family. In fact, his father had re-established himself in a new country twice: the first time when he left Kiev when he was young man to move to the States[48] and the second time when he left America again with his young family to move to Canada in 1923.[49] Ed was nine years old at the time he moved to Toronto and could focus on play over work and establish life-long friendships at an early age with other children like Yale Shimkofsky whose father had a fruit store on Dundas.[50] Ed's father worked in a profession common to Jewish immigrants, which included grocers, restauranteurs, butchers, and deli owners, which supplied the Jewish community of Dundas and Spadina and Kensington Market with food that was both a necessity and integral to the culture.[51] Many immigrants found success in this field from Italians to Chinese to Greeks and Jews who were "essential to Toronto's food provisioning" in the early twentieth century to the mid-twentieth century.[52]

One advantage that the young Mirvish had was that, while he described the store that he inherited as his father's, it is really the family store. His mother had a hand in running it and would continue to do so. In addition, they relied on the income from renters in the other two upstairs rooms for a flow of income to continue to subsidize the store. Mirvish would gain valuable experience working as the manager of his family store, ordering supplies and food from wholesalers, setting prices and establishing connections at the St. Lawrence Market, and

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[48] Batten, 24.
[49] Batten, 33.
[50] Batten, 45.
[51] Batten, 43-44
[52] Joel Dickau, *et al*., "If you wanted garlic, you had to go to Kensington: culinary infrastructure and immigrant entrepreneurship in Toronto's food markets before official multiculturalism," *Food, Culture & Society*, (February 2021): 10-11.

purchasing fruit at the farmers market on the Humber River.[53] When he finally gave up running the shop in 1938, he had made a strong connection with Leon Weinstein, who then hired him to be the fruit manager of the eight Power Supermarket stores in the city.[54] The selection of fresh fruit and working with wholesalers was such a highly challenging environment in the early twentieth century that many non-immigrants did not want to work in it, which provided the opportunity for entrepreneurial immigrants like Mirvish to find success.[55]

With his new job and steady income, Mirvish and his wife, Anne, were able to rent a store not far from where he had lived with his family, thanks to wedding present money and his new bride, who cashed in her life insurance policy.[56] Anne decided to work with him, and it was her idea to open a dress shop.[57] They decided to sell dresses to young girls during World War II, and Mirvish was able to use the connections he made growing up with other Jews in the garment industry to get started. Mirvish admitted that his connection to the "garment-district guys" enabled him to bargain a few dresses "off the top" of the wholesalers before they were sent to the major department stores as he had grown up with them, and they liked to see a guy like him get ahead because they admired his "chutzpah."[58] Entering the garment industry allowed him the opportunity to accumulate the capital to purchase a house and begin to raise a family and, when the opportunity arose, to rent a whole block of buildings which would later become the site of his warehouse.[59] The garment district was nearby on Spadina Avenue, where Jews had worked for decades to build a thriving industry into which Mirvish would tap.[60] It would seem that by living

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[53] Mirvish, 28-29.
[54] Mirvish, 34.
[55] Dickau, 11.
[56] Mirvish, 42.
[57] Mirvish, 42.
[58] Mirvish, 43.
[59] Mirvish, 46-47.
[60] Daniel Hiebert, "Jewish Immigrants and the Garment Industry of Toronto, 1901-1931: A Study of Ethnic and Class Relations," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 83, no. 2 (1993): 261-262.

in a concentrated area with a community of people who worked in many of the same fields—wholesaling, groceries, garment manufacturing—that there was always the potential for support. One interesting aspect of Mirvish's life is that after his grocery store failed and was no longer tenable, he was able to use his connections with another successful grocery store merchant to ensure his financial security. The community that surrounded the Mirvish family was a close-knit one that had many Jews working in similar fields of expertise. These two industries, textiles and groceries, formed the backbone where Mirvish got his start. These were some of the few industries where Jews in Toronto could gain economic movement and, ultimately for Mirvish, economic mobility.

Another path was real estate. Real estate was central to the financial success of Ed Mirvish and took him down paths he probably never imagined. His first major purchase was a strip of buildings in 1946 along Bloor Street that included the dress shop that he and his wife rented.[61] These buildings required a $5,000 down payment and a $20,000 mortgage that would eventually turn into Honest Ed's.[62] According to historian Richard Dennis, "property was a way to propriety" for Jewish landlords in Toronto.[63] From the beginning of the twentieth century in Toronto, Jews were more likely to take a risk at property speculation unlike other non-Jewish citizens who were less risk averse.[64] Many Jews in Toronto who invested in property "were drawn from a wide range of occupations" including butchers, rabbis, and lumber dealers, or in the case of Mirvish, dress sellers.[65] While some Jewish landlords would move out of previous business ventures and focus exclusively on real estate, Mirvish did both.

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[61] Mirvish, 47.
[62] Mirvish, 47.
[63] Richard Dennis, "Property and Propriety: Jewish Landlords in Early Twentieth-Century Toronto," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 22, no. 3 (1997): 393.
[64] Dennis, 387.
[65] Dennis, 386.

Another significant purchase was of several buildings along King Street to house restaurants to support his Royal Alexandra theatre. These affordable buildings he purchased west of the theatre would do well for him, starting with his first small restaurant, Ed's Warehouse with 192 seats to a "restaurant complex" that served 2,600 diners."[66] Similarly, Mirvish would begin buying houses on the east side of Markham Street near his discount store to give his shoppers a place to park.[67] Again, Mirvish stumbled into a real estate purchase to support his business venture that would later prove more lucrative than the business itself. Mirvish is quoted as saying that "Markham was a merchandising thing when it got started" and that it was it helpful in getting good publicity. In fact, it helped him get "free lines in the paper" that were "more powerful than newspaper ads that you pay for."[68] Real estate served two purposes for Mirvish: it allowed him the ability to expand into new business ventures, and it gave him good press when the purchase was newsworthy.

At no time in the story of Ed Mirvish was he ever in rags, as suggested in the biography *Honest Ed's Story: The Crazy Rags to Riches Story of Ed Mirvish.* While his family certainly struggled and were working-class, they were not penniless. He was never homeless, he did not come from nothing, and he did not create his empire from nothing. There was a strong community and family that surrounded him and supported him. He did not immigrate to Canada with his own money as a young man but came to Canada with his family as a boy. His father paved the way and, with his connections to the Masons, was able to follow a job opportunity into Toronto. His mother played a significant part in the family store, often working fourteen-hour days. When her husband died, she made the choice to apply for Canadian citizenship in order to

[66] Mirvish, 88.
[67] Batten, 135
[68] Batten, 150.

collect Mother's Allowance from the government and to continue to run the family store instead of moving back to the States.[69] Ed Mirvish would go on to run the store for nine years despite claiming that "at fifteen years old, [he] became the proprietor of a completely bankrupt store."[70] How bankrupt the store was at that time may be one of those Mirvish exaggerations. In an interview with the *Canadian Jewish News* he admitted he did "exaggerate a lot" when he playfully told the interviewer that he came up with the "Honest" Ed name at the age of nine when he quit smoking.[71] Mirvish, like the media, is an unreliable narrator, but they both love to tell exciting stories. In looking past the surface of these stories, a vibrant Jewish community can be seen, which laid the groundwork, supported, and offered opportunities to a young immigrant in finding success.

Jeff McMahan is an undergraduate student at York University. He holds a bachelor of performing arts from Capilano University and is pursuing an honours bachelor of arts with a major in history and a certificate in public history.

[69] Mirvish, 27.
[70] Mirvish, 27.
[71] CJN Exclusive, "Ed Mirvish," *The Canadian Jewish News*, November 11, 1993, 2.