

## ROOTS

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I don't know if my family roots pass through the Ward, and now there's no one left to ask.

My mother's family, we know from the landing records in Halifax, came in the 1920's, and their first housing was a flat on Beverley St, part of the Jewish migration westward from the Ward to Kensington Market and Spadina. It's my father's family that is the mystery. I know they came from the Ukraine, or perhaps Russia, and they passed through the East End of London, where my grandmother acquired a lovely Cockney accent. But where they started in Toronto remains unanswerable.

I'd like to think they were in the Ward, and I'd like to think my father was one of the kids playing in the streets in the photos of this exhibit. He was born in Toronto in 1914, so the demographic profile fits. But look as I may, I see no obvious match. And, of course, I really have no idea what he would have looked like as a child, in the Ward or elsewhere.

Why would I wish my family had lived in a big urban slum? Wouldn't it have been better for them to skip this stage, and start directly with whatever came next? Do I really envy those who lived in the Ward? Not really, of course. Life was hard: The housing, as we see in this exhibit, was generally appalling, with many bodies crammed into too little space. The racism the new Jewish immigrants experienced was bad, but far better than that in the shtetl, where the Cossacks rode through on their noble steeds, bent on rape and pillage.

For the kids in the Ward, the streets were their territory, where they played, and watched, and wondered, and learned, all without adult interference. They were masters of their own destiny (though they might be forbidden by parents from leaving the block or crossing a major street.)

In spite of the multiple hardships of life in the Ward, I believe there was also a sense of hope, of optimism, of the infinite possibilities that the New World presented. The kids could grow up to be successes – doctors, dentists, lawyers – and, of course, many did. The Ward was just a starting point in the eyes of many, a place they would leave as soon as they were able, but in the interim it was a tightly knit community where people helped one another, often out of sheer necessity.

According to Richard Dennis (1997), in 1909, 74% of householders in the Ward were Jewish. (The actual number may even be higher as there was probably significant underreporting of residents, given prior Jewish history with state authorities in eastern Europe.) There were community agencies, operated by and for the Jewish population, and after-school programs to train the boys for bar mitzvah.

People – adults and kids – stuck together, in the home and in the street. There wasn't much space for the privacy we so value today. Community was a necessity, one that most were familiar with from the Old Country, and one that many embraced, at least for a while. With time, came success,

higher incomes and at least a degree of acceptance and integration into the broader society. The early ties of community weakened, and in many cases broke.

It's this sense of community that I never experienced. It's this sense of community that I regret I never experienced. I don't regret missing the poverty and the squalid housing. But I do miss the strong sense of sharing and collectivity and community, forces that few of us born post-War were ever lucky enough to encounter.