

Making Montreal Home after the Holocaust

### THANK YOU

### **INDIVIDUALS**

Ted Bolgar, Fishel Goldig, Paul Herczeg, Muguette Myers, George Reinitz, Tommy Strasser, Musia Schwartz, Renata Skotnicka-Zajdman, and Sidney Zoltak. Zelda Abramson, John Lynch, Lindsey Barr, and Judy Gold.

### INSTITUTIONS

The Jewish Public Library Archives, Montreal (Jessica Zimmerman), the Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives (Janice Rosen), the Museum of Jewish Montreal, and the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling.

Survivors' postwar experiences deeply connect with those who continue to arrive in Montreal to rebuild their lives. These stories should not be lost on us as we move forward and try to create a just society.

### **PROJECT TEAM**

Stacey Zembrzycki, Nancy Rebelo, Anna Sheftel, Eszter Andor, Philip Lichti, and Joyce Pillarella



JIAS clients outside its Esplanade location, 1949. Credit: Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives Cover Image: Ted Bolgar (left) and Paul Herczeg (center) gather with other Hungarian survivors on Park Avenue, 1948. Credit: P. Herczeg

# REFUGEE BLVD

INSPIRATION for the project's name comes from an article in the May 1949 edition of the Jewish Immigrant Aid Society (JIAS) Record.

MAY 1949

### IMMIGRATION

### "REFUGEE BOULEVARD"

Sloping down from Mount Royal, in the heart of Canada's metropolis is Flet-cher's Field, a large area of land, forming a natural descent from the hill but unlike it, violated by civilizations' need for mass transportation, the street car tracks and double lane auto highway which form the only eastern passage residential to parts on the other side.

Fletcher's Field has been for more than a generation a vast playground for Mont-real's old and young. Of an afternoon, youngsters and their elders gather to pay baseball tennis and other sports. Here, end, workers of the district sit and talk, mothers take their children for fresh air. and lovers walk hand in hand,

During the past year, however, Flet-cher's Field has changed. Not in contour nor in space, but to such an extent that in attendance it has been renamed "Re-fugee Boulevard" for the large number of newcomers who on Sunday mornings fill it in such large numbers that it looks like an open-air mas meeting.

The plain fact is that these people, in the words of one cop in a riot squad car who was called by a frightened tenant, 'are very orderly, only there are so many of them and all over the street that an oncoming automobile may well injure some of them."

The cause of all this excitement and the human mass is the gray-stone building on Esplanade Avenue, facing the park which houses the JIAS Head Office. Not the building itself, but the organization. For to these people JIAS represents a link between their past and future. To this building they come whenever they are not at work to meet their friends; some just to reminisce, others to greet more recent arrivals whom they have not seen since leaving the D.P. camps.

In the winter, JIAS offices and corri-does are jam-packed with milling humanity. It is cold outside and the less brave prefer the inconvenience of the crowded but immov-ble warm spot inside of the building. The more adventurous brave the usually very cold outdoors. And it is the same every Sunday and holiday. Only the number grows with more arrivals.

\* As soon as the first signs of spring the streets until such time as the wet ground of the park is dried by the sun. Then the park is occopied, and they stay in that section of the Park until 1 p.m. when the offices of JIAS close on Sun-

The; stand in groups and talk in maappear, the mass moves outside and fills - my languages. And they cover a million and one ubjects. Some discuss current events. To them this is an impor m subject; most of them knew the called current events had on their lives. Cthers talk shop; wages, hours and compare



General view of "Refugee Boalevard" on a recent Sunday morning.

Credit: Alex Dworkin Canadian lewish Archives

# 66...FLETCHER'S FIELD...HAS BEEN RENAMED 'REFUGEE BOULEVARD'

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As soon as the first signs of spring appear, the mass moves outside and fills the streets until such time as the wet ground of the park is dried by the sun. Then the park is occupied.... They stand in groups and talk in many languages. And they cover a million and one subjects....

Survivors use anglicized terms to refer to places in this neighbourhood. We employ them throughout to remain true to their experiences.

### THE NARRATOR



### FISHEL GOLDIG

was born in 1933 in Mielnica, Poland. He survived the war by hiding with his family on a Ukrainian farm. After liberation, the Goldigs moved to a number of places in Europe before immigrating to Canada in 1948 through the family sponsorship program. In Montreal, Fishel went to yeshiva and still sings in local synagogues.

Fishel Goldig, 1948. Credit: F. Goldig

# THE STORYTELLERS



TED (TIBOR) **BOLGAR** was born in 1924 in Sarospatak, Hungary. Having survived several concentration camps, he wanted to get out of Europe after the war. He came to Montreal through the War Orphans Project in 1948. He established himself in the fruit wholesale industry, and married a fellow Hungarian survivor, Marianne Guttman, in 1954. Together they raised a family that now includes a number of grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Ted Bolgar, 1947. Credit: T. Bolgar



### PAUL HERCZEG

was born in 1930 in Ujpest, Hungary. He survived two concentration camps but was orphaned in the process. He came to Canada through the War Orphans Project, arriving in Montreal in January 1948. He married Judith Singer in 1958, also a survivor from Hungary, and together they raised one daughter, while he ran his own import company.

Jan Paul Herczeg, 1947. Credit: Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives



**TOMMY (THOMAS)** STRASSER was born in 1926 in Nove Zamky. Czechoslovakia. During the war, he spent time in forced labor camps and then in the Budapest Ghetto. As the sole survivor of his family, Tommy decided to leave Europe. He immigrated to Canada through the War Orphans Project in 1948. In Montreal, he established himself in the retail sector, married Annie Brenner, a Polish survivor, in 1960, and now has a large family, which includes several grandchildren.

Thomas Strasser, 1947. Credit: Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives

Ted, Paul, and Tommy consider themselves family, building and sustaining relationships since arriving in Montreal in 1948.



### **GEORGE REINITZ**

was born in 1932 in Szikszo, Hungary. Separated from his family, he survived Auschwitz as a twelve-year-old boy. George came to Canada in 1948 through the War Orphans Project. Soon after arriving in Montreal, he became a world-class wrestler and, in 1956, he started a successful business, Jaymar Furniture. George married a Canadian-born Jew, Eleanor Schwartz, in 1958 and together they have a large family that now includes several great grandchildren.

George Reinitz, 1947. Credit: Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives



MUSIA SCHWARTZ (NÉE SZPISAJZEN)

was born in 1930 in Tomaszów Lubelski, Poland. She survived the war under an assumed Christian identity. Having lost all her family, save for an aunt, Musia came to Canada in 1948 through the War Orphans Project and settled in Montreal. In 1950 Musia married a fellow Polish Jew, Leon Schwartz, whom she met at the Jewish Public Library. When their two children started school, Musia began university studies; she went on to earn a PhD in comparative literature and taught literature.

Miriam Musia Szpisajzen, 1947. Credit: Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives



RENATA SKOTNICKA-ZAJDMAN

was born in 1928 in Warsaw, Poland. During the war, she entered and escaped the Warsaw Ghetto three times, aided by Catholic rescuers, before being sent to Germany as a slave laborer. In 1948, Renata immigrated to Canada and settled in Montreal. She married Abram Zajdman, also a survivor from Poland, in 1953. Together they raised two children and built a successful import-export company. Renata passed away in 2013.

Renata Skotnicka-Zajdman, 1947. Credit: Sharon Zajdman

# A NEW START

They, they just told us ... 'You're going to be in Montreal.' Ah, Montreal! I didn't care where I go. I didn't know anything anyway 🤧 George Reinitz



Renata Skotnicka-Zajdman standing next to a Welcome to Canada sign, 1948. Credit: S. Zajdman

Upon liberation, many Holocaust survivors found themselves alone and without a home to which to return. Antisemitism remained strong and led them to seek refuge outside Europe.

But most countries heavily restricted Jewish immigration. Canada's "none is too many" policy remained in place until the late 1940s when lobbying from the Jewish community made it possible for survivors to immigrate through the War Orphans Project, a variety of labour schemes, or family sponsorship.

Those who came as orphans had to be under eighteen and had to produce a dossier with proof of parents' death in addition to sound health, travel documents,

arrived in Canada through the War Orphans Project.



Paul Herczeg (3rd from left) with other Hungarian orphans onboard the S.S. General Sturgis headed to Halifax, 1948. Credit: P. Herczeg

### HERZL DISPENSARY

# This is the place I was born. George Reinitz

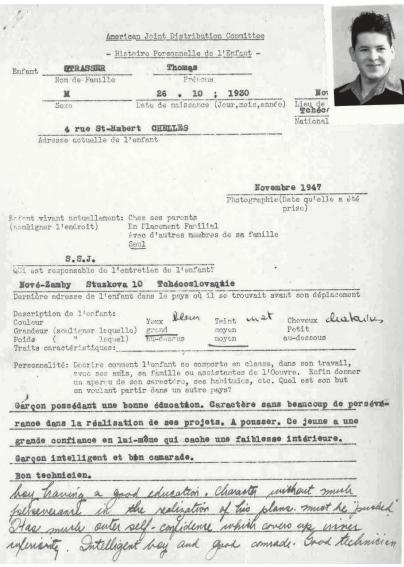
The Herzl Dispensary, a precursor to the Jewish General Hospital, was established by Montreal's Jewish community in 1912 and moved to 4652 Jeanne Mance Street in 1936, where it remained until 1948. This medical clinic was inclusive, treating anyone in need, at little to no charge.

In the postwar period, 525 war orphans, nearly 75% of whom were boys, cycled through this building, staying up to three weeks before they were either placed in foster care or found a room to rent, often with help from the Canadian Jewish Congress. The second floor served as a reception centre, offering them access to doctors, dentists, social workers, psychologists, and vocational guidance counsellors, English language classes, and lectures on civic and Jewish life in Canada.

Given the short nature of their stays, survivors have fleeting though largely positive memories of this place, referring to it in a variety of ways that speak to how they used the space and its services: the Baron de Hirsch Institute; the Herzl; Jeanne-Mance House; the reception centre; the hostel; and, even simply, camp.



War Orphans Advertisement, 1948. Credit: Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives



UJRA War Orphan Case File. Credit: Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives

# THE NEIGHBOURHOOD



St. Lawrence Boulevard near Bagg Street, August 1944. Credit: Archives de Montréal, VM94-Z2230-3







At the start of the twentieth century, Jews were the largest immigrant group in Montreal and, by mid century, Yiddish was the third most spoken language, after French and English.

Montreal Jews migrated north along St. Lawrence Boulevard, or the Main as it was called, which was one of Canada's busiest industrial and commercial arteries. Most Jews laboured in the city's leading industry, the garment (schmata) trade. Park Avenue was also a hub for Jewish life in the area.

Jews settled near their workplaces, in the streets neighbouring the Main, and it was here that Montreal's dynamic Jewish culture took shape. By the early 1930s, slightly over 50% of those living in the area, then called the St. Urbain Ghetto, were Jewish and, by 1941, this neighbourhood was home to 67% of the city's Jews.

Within a few city blocks, bordered by Park Avenue, St. Lawrence Boulevard, Pine Avenue, and Van Horne Avenue, there was an extensive network of synagogues, schools, social and charitable organizations, and restaurants and shops that catered to Jews.

Not surprisingly, most of the nearly 20,000 Holocaust survivors, who came to Montreal between 1947 and 1954, settled in this neighbourhood upon arriving.

Top Left: Renata Skotnicka-Zajdman, 1949. Credit S. Zajdman

Top Right: Thomas Strasser's friends pose on St. Lawrence Boulevard, 1948. Credit: T. Strasser

Bottom: Thomas Strasser and friends gather on Mont-Royal Avenue, dressed in the same suits, 1948. Credit: T. Strasser

# **YMHA**

The Young Men's Hebrew Association (YMHA), a cultural and athletic organization established in 1908, changed locations three times before moving to 265 Mont-Royal Avenue in 1929 to accommodate its growing membership.

The building's amenities included two gymnasiums, a swimming pool, three bowling alleys, an auditorium, a theatre, dance halls, games and meeting rooms, lounges, a canteen, and a small library. Its proximity to Fletcher's Field, namely the tennis courts and soccer fields, also made the Y's expansive programming possible.



George Reinitz poses in a wrestler's stance, 1948. Credit: G. Reinitz

War orphans received free memberships upon arriving to Montreal. Although the YMHA established a number of clubs that were intended to serve as "a natural bridge to unite the recent arrivals," survivors tended to subdivide along language lines.

Participation in various sporting events, either as team members or spectators, and Sunday night dances, which also drew members of the Young Women's Hebrew Association (YWHA), were popular social activities that helped survivors remake their communities.

friend George [who I was with in the forced labor camps]... I burst out in tears. Tommy Strasser

### The Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Association of Montreal SUMMER SCHEDULE OF ACTIVITIES June 1st to July 1st July 2nd to Aug. 24th (see other side) SNOWDON BUILDING Aug.25th to Sept.9th 5500 WESTBURY AVE. 1951 PHONE: EXDALE 6551 MAIN GYMNASIUM Monday Tuesday Thursday 10:00 - 1:00 FREE INTER-SR 9:30-12:30 Free Play Men 1:00 - 3:45 FREE INTER-SR MEN 12:30- 2:30 Int-Co-Ed Bad, 3:45 - 5:30 5:30 - 7:15 School Girls School Boys School Girls School Boys School Girls 2:30- 5:30 Sr. Co-Ed Bad. CLOSED 7:15 - 10:30 Co-Ed Bad, Int-Sr Fr.Play Co-Ed Bad. Int-Sr.Fr.Play

- Exercise on the latest consensus	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
10:00 - 5:30	FREE	PLAY	FOR	M E	N	9:30-5:	30 Free Play Men
5:30 - 7:15	FREE	PLAY	FOR	MEN	CLOSED		
7:15 - 10:30	Free Play-Men	Body Building	Free Play-Men	Body Building	CLOSED	CLOSED	

EYERCISE BOOM



YMHA Hakoah cake cutting for the war orphans. Credit: Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives



A class for war orphans, 1948. Credit: Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives



Social gathering. Credit: Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives



Sidney Zoltak (middle, facing camera) enjoys a YMHA Sunday night dance, 1950. Credit: S. Zoltak

# FLETCHER'S FIELD



Renata Skotnicka-Zajdman (standing) with friends sliding on Mount Royal, 1949. Credit: S. Zajdman

Plans for the creation of Fletcher's Field, renamed Jeanne-Mance Park in 1990 by the City of Montreal, date back to the 1870s. In the early twentieth century, concern over children's health led green spaces to be transformed into recreational parks. Located at the western edge of this neighbourhood and at the foot of Mount Royal, the park quickly became a hub for sporting and leisure activities and a favorite meeting place for residents who lived in cramped quarters.

When survivors arrived in the late 1940s, Fletcher's Field had tennis courts, soccer and baseball fields, a wading pool, and park equipment. Theatre productions as well as painting and sewing courses were offered in the park too, so as to encourage attendance among young girls.



Paul Herczeg poses with a friend in Fletcher's Field. Credit: P. Herczeg

In the winter, activities such as tobogganing and skating were popular. Various Jewish community services, including the Jewish Immigrant Aid Society, the Jewish Public Library, and the YM-YWHA were located along the perimeter of the park, on Mont-Royal and Esplanade. It was common for community gatherings within these institutions to spill out into Fletcher's Field.

Many survivors have fond memories of watching or playing for the Jewish Maccabees soccer team, picnicking with romantic partners, and simply meeting up with newfound friends in the park.



War orphans participate in a race on Mount Royal. Credit: Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives



Paul Herczeg (top row, 5th from right) and the Maccabee soccer team on Fletcher's Field. Credit: P. Herczeg

# THE JEWISH PUBLIC LIBRARY

In 1953, the Jewish Public Library, originally known as the Yiddisheh Folks Bibliotheque, moved into its own building at 4499 Esplanade Avenue, after a 10-year fundraising campaign. Referred to as both a "temple" and a "memorial shrine for European Jewry," the building's cornerstone was originally composed of a stone sent from Israel's Mount Zion and a pillar from Warsaw's Tlomackie Synagogue, "a sacred reminder of the largest ghetto of the Third Destruction."

The JPL hosted lectures, political debates, and English and French language classes for new immigrants; it also held a number of exhibitions, including one on the Holocaust in Spring 1953. This is where many war orphans learned English and happily recall being able to access books and newspapers in their mother tongues.

••They [those who worked at the JPL] were a beacon. • Musia Schwartz



JPL opening reception, 1953. Credit: Jewish Public Library Archives, Montreal
Top right: Musia Szpisajzen in Fletcher's Field, with JPL behind her. Credit: Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives

### **RECEPTION**

Survivors had a range of experiences when it came to reception. While some institutional support was available from the Jewish community, they often felt socially ostracized by Canadian Jews themselves. Demeaning slurs like "greener," "greenhorn," and "mockie" stigmatized newcomers as less civilized. Many Canadians, both Jews and non-Jews, did not yet recognize the enormity of the Holocaust, simply viewing the survivors as a broken people.

Despite this chilly reception, many survivors are quick to remember those who did not share such prejudices, going out of their way to offer advice, friendship, and places to stay and work. They fondly recall local business owners like Joe Schreter, French-Canadian co-workers, and employees of various Jewish community organizations who worked tirelessly to offer them the vital services they needed to rebuild their lives.



# **FOOD**

After years of hunger, survivors were eager to eat. Food thereby occupies a central role in their recollections of this period. Some reminisce about Jewish restaurants, bakeries, and other establishments, which served food that tasted like home and, in a time of uncertainty, provided comfort, community, and joy. Others recall a sense of plenty as they lavished in sweets and other new and unfamiliar plates that connected them to their new home.

We were hungry for pastry, sweets...because we were all growing boys and we needed some energy.

Musia Szpisajzen (2nd from left) enjoys a meal with friends at the Eschwege Displaced Persons Camp prior to leaving Europe. Credit: Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives

Addresses of food establishments mentioned in the tour, according to the year 1949:

### FALUDIS'

4527 Park Avenue (Informal restaurant located in the living room of a Hungarian immigrant family's second floor apartment)

ARENA BAKERY 84 Mont-Royal Avenue West

RACHEL MARKET 4205 St. Lawrence Boulevard

SZEKELY RESTAURANT 3631 St. Lawrence Boulevard

MOISHE'S 3967 (Now 3961) St. Lawrence Boulevard

BUCHAREST 3956 St. Lawrence Boulevard



Billboard advertisement for Bucharest Restaurant on St. Lawrence Boulevard, 1951. BAnQ, Affiches panneaux réclames, voirie Montréal, 1951

### SURVIVORS' CLUBS

survivors, there is not much dialogue going on without talking about the Holocaust... it doesn't go away. George Reinitz

Survivors organized informal clubs with others who were also lucky enough to make it out of Europe alive. These gatherings gave them the opportunity to speak openly about the past in their native languages. Some clubs, like the New World Club, rented rooms in the McGill Ghetto and on St. Lawrence Boulevard, and provided crucial opportunities for both adult and child survivors to meet during their initial years in Canada.

Survivors used these clubs to network, seek advice on how best to integrate into Canadian life, meet friends and romantic partners, and simply have fun.

Once survivors found jobs, met their spouses, started families, and moved out of the neighbourhood, many clubs disbanded. Others, like the '48ers (composed of those who came from Hungary in the late 1940s as opposed to after the 1956 Revolution), brought together survivors who hailed from the same countries, providing a foundation upon which life-long friendships, like the one between Paul Herczeg, Ted Bolgar, and Tommy Strasser, were built.

These informal clubs, often only accessible through memories, enabled survivors to assert their independence, build community, and reclaim their agency.



Paul Herczeg (5th from right) and Ted Bolgar (on Paul's left) at a beer hall in Wilheim, Germany, prior to leaving for Canada. Credit: P. Herczeg

### **WEDDINGS**

For many survivors, marriage signified a turning point in their lives, indicating that they achieved a sense of stability and normalcy. George Reinitz married a Canadian-born Jew because he "wanted to belong to a family." However, most war orphans preferred to marry other survivors not only because they understood each other, but also because they often felt uncomfortable dating Canadians, whether they were Jewish or not.

Beginning anew did not mean that survivors forgot the past or where they came from. They lived with their memories of the Holocaust, moving forward together to rebuild their families in Canada.





Left: Paul and Judith Herczeg, 1958. Credit: P. Herczeg

Middle: Renata Skotnicka-Zajdman on the day she married Abram Zajdman, 1953. Credit: S. Zajdman

Right: Thomas and Annie Strasser, 1960. Credit: T. Strasser







Left: Ted and Marianne Bolgar, 1954. Credit: T. Bolgar

Middle: Musia and Leon Schwartz, 1950. Credit: Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives

Right: George and Eleanor Reinitz, 1958. Credit: G. Reinitz



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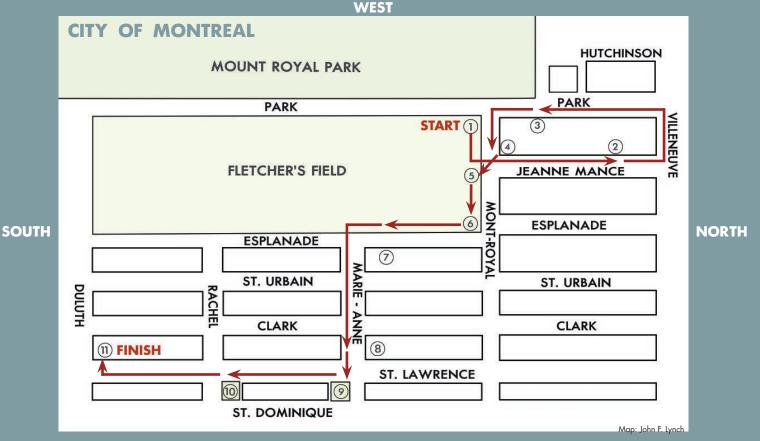


Musée Holocauste Montréal Montreal Holocaust Museum

### STOPS AND POINTS OF INTEREST

- Rubenstein Water Fountain corner of Mont-Royal and Park
- 2. Herzl Dispensary, 4652 Jeanne Mance
- 3. Faludis' Restaurant, 4527 Park
- 4. YMHA, 265 Mont-Royal
- 5. Fletcher's Field

- 6. Jewish Public Library, 4499 Esplanade
- 7. Jewish Immigrant Aid Society, 4221 Esplanade
- 8. Schreter's, 4358 St. Lawrence
- 9. Parc du Portugal
- 10. Rachel Market
- 11. Museum of Jewish Montreal, 4040 St. Lawrence



**EAST** 

The audio tour Refugee Boulevard is available at www.refugeeboulevard.ca