Market Forces

IN 1900, fewer than 400 Jews lived in Ottawa. By the 1930s, that number had risen to 2,800 as Jews fled the pogroms taking place across the Russian Empire. Many arrived in poverty and were immediately drawn to the Byward Market, where they began as peddlers before opening up fruit stores, butcher shops, bakeries, and dairies. **SHAWNA WAGMAN** looks back at families who formed a community around food — and planted roots in the heart of the capital

Friendly competition: Market businesses were family businesses, and personal relationships ruled every aspect of market life. In some cases, siblings and cousins ran identical shops right next to one another. Such was the case for produce merchants Moshe (M.Z.) Lithwick (above) and neighbours Harry Aisenberg (top), Harry Greenblatt, and Benjamin Coopersmith

PHOTOGRAPHY: **OTTAWA JEWISH ARCHIVES**

"It was the Depression time, but we always had a table with a lot of nice food on it....On Thursdays, my mother would go to buy the live chicken from the farmer and take it in a bag over to the *shochet* [ritual slaughterer], just behind the Old Market building. The chicken was cut at the *gorgle* [neck], and it had to be plucked at home. Then a fire was made out of paper and rolled around the chicken to burn off the pin feathers."

— Sam Zunder (at left), a long-time Byward Market fruit merchant, recalls the ritual of buying and preparing chicken, which would become the centrepiece for Shabbat dinner.

"YOU WANT TO KNOW how they used to pick a good chicken?" asks 81-year-old Sam Zunder, who spent most of his life in the food business in the Byward Market. Now retired, he vividly recalls the cages of clucking chickens that farmers would take to the Market when he was growing up. Every Thursday his mother would go to select a bird to serve for Shabbat dinner. The farmer would pull a live one through the trap door on the top by its feathers and hand it over. "She would then push her finger up the *tuchas* [rear end] to see if there was enough *schmaltz* [fat] up there," he says. Then he adds, with his signature dry wit, "It was like a prostate exam."

Zunder was still a child in the 1930s, yet he can name almost every Jewish food merchant who lived and worked on Byward, York, Clarence, and William streets between the two world wars. Now legally blind, he can still visualize the names that were once displayed in large letters across the shop windows of dozens of fruit stores, butcher shops, bakeries, and dairies. He rhymes them off block by block: Greenblatt, Cantor, Rivers...Zelikovitz, Pleet...Lithwick, Aisenberg, Coopersmith... "I'm walking around in my mind," he says.

Yiddish, once the primary international language spoken by Central and Eastern European Jews, became the lingua franca in the Market and provided a passport into the tight-knit community, which shared not just religious beliefs but a tireless work ethic and a vibrant social life. "It was families," says Zunder, whose own business history is intimately tied

to his parents, as well as to his brothers Israel and Mark and sister Miriam. "Every member of the family worked in the business." Zunder's Quality Fruit Supply, which later became Zunder's Fruitland located at the corner of Byward and George (now home to the furniture franchise EQ3), was one of the last remaining shops from that era when it closed its doors 14 years ago.

Dig into the personal history of almost any Jewish resident in Ottawa today, and there will be colourful stories about life in the Byward Market. These stories will almost invariably centre around food. Food was everything: it tied Jewish families together, it linked families and their community, and it connected all of them to the city. When Zunder's parents arrived from the Ukraine in 1924, they were part of a large influx of Jewish immigrants who were fleeing pogroms

PHOTOGRAPHY: **OTTAWA JEWISH ARCHIVES; COLIN ROWE** (SAM ZUNDER PORTRAIT)

"Nathan had gone to a wedding in Montreal and, having heard of the Montreal Fruit Terminal, went to see it. He bought a box of exotic produce – like avocado – and brought it to the store in Ottawa, where it was put on display. Somebody bought the whole box! They realized that they didn't have to sell one piece of produce at a time – they could sell a box!"

— Sheila Mandel, daughter of the late Rebecca and David Zelikovitz, spoke about her family for the Ottawa Jewish Historical Society in 1996 and recounted the story of how the Zelikovitz brothers went from peddlers to produce shop owners to the wholesale produce business in 1932.

Facing page, top: Sam Zunder stands on the corner where his fruit store was once located. Now home to EQ3, Zunder's Quality Fruit Supply, which later became Zunder's Fruitland, was one of the last remaining shops from that era when it closed its doors 14 years ago

Facing page: Jacob Freedman, one of Ottawa's early Jewish settlers, started out as a door-to-door peddler and rose to become one of the community's most successful business leaders. In addition to establishing the city's first cash-and-carry wholesale grocery business at 52-54 ByWard Market (now Budapest Delicatessen), he also came to own almost all the buildings on the western blocks of the Market

Right: Until the late '20s, farmers and storekeepers used horse-pulled wagons to take merchandise to the market; peddlers used these vehicles to sell merchandise door-to-door. Since cash was the only form of payment, credit was often extended. Customers could buy during the week and then pay all or part of their tab when the businesses came to collect at their home on Sundays.

— violent anti-Jewish attacks that were taking place in villages across the Russian Empire. Fewer than 400 Jews were living in Ottawa in 1901; by the 1930s, that number had risen to an estimated 2,800. A significant proportion of those Jews arrived in poverty and were immediately drawn to the Byward Market area in Lowertown, where food was easily accessible, rents were low, and the new working class — including French and Irish Catholic residents — found what they needed to become instant entrepreneurs. As each wave of *Greeneh Yidden* (green Jews, or newcomers) arrived, they were welcomed into a veritable *shtetl*, a Jewish village in the heart of Canada's capital. "We were happy. There was never a locked door, and everybody helped each other out," recalls Zunder. "It was all Jewish people. You could just walk into anybody's house, just like that."

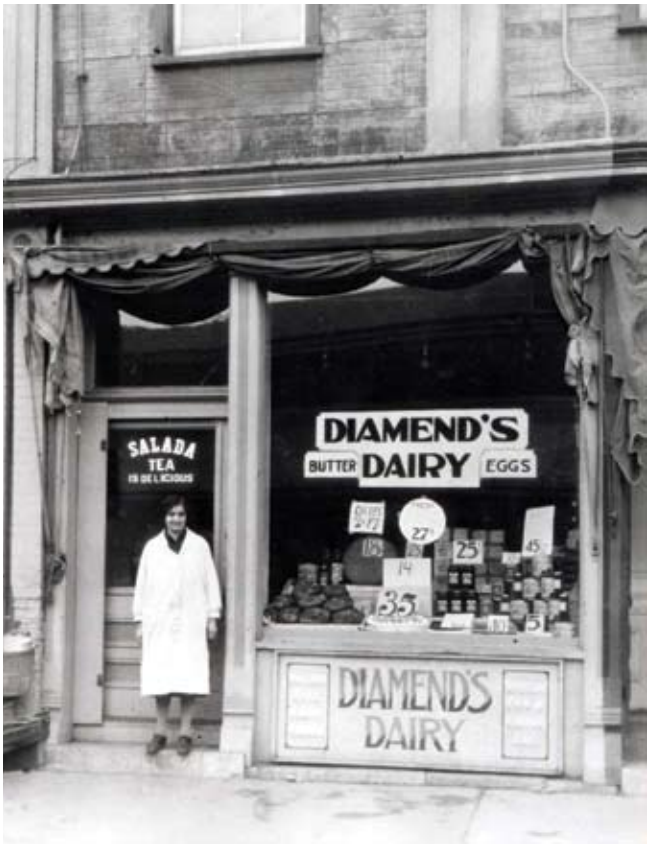
PUSHCART PEDDLING — hawking items out of a wagon on street corners or by going door to door — was a skill set that many Jews brought with them from the old country. Professional opportunities were limited because of discrimination. Some chose to deal in clothing, jewellery, or furniture, but food was a natural choice for many. For one thing, food required very little capital. Stalls at the Byward Market could be rented for a few cents a day, and Ottawa's peddling licences, too, were inexpensive — 10 cents a year compared with $25 in Montreal. Fruit could be purchased from Jewish wholesalers, who were often willing to extend credit to the peddlers, who would then arrange to pay for the produce after it was sold and a profit was made. In many cases, peddlers received small loans from a more established relative or neighbour for the same purpose: the new businessman would buy half a box of oranges from the wholesaler, and once the fruit was sold, he could purchase a whole box — and on it went until he repaid his loan and was on his way.

The logical progression for peddlers was to retire their pushcarts and rent a shop in which to operate a fruit store

"We had a Quebec heater in the shoemaker shop and a table with eight or nine chairs – and my father always had a pot of soup on the stove. Everybody who came in, all his cronies who came to visit, they would have a bowl of soup at the little round table. I remember Sunday morning especially, the peddlers would come in around 7 a.m. before they started their day. My father always had cash, I guess. He would give them each three dollars to pay for the rental of the horse and wagon. At night, they would come and pay him back his three dollars."

— Retired Ottawa caterer Jack Smith in a taped interview from June 13, 2001, for the Ottawa Jewish Historical Society. He speaks about his father, shoemaker Leopold Smith, father of 13 children, who lived upstairs from the shop on St. Patrick Street, near Murray Street, where many peddlers lived.

Shop talk: Everyone knew everyone in Lowertown between the two world wars, a natural extension of living and working so close together. Storekeepers and their families often lived behind or above their stores, while their children all attended the same schools. Socializing took place along the market sidewalks



PHOTOGRAPHY: **OTTAWA JEWISH ARCHIVES**

"Life in Canada was like living a miracle. Soon after our arrival, Uncle Black gave Eileen and me five cents to spend. Speaking Yiddish, he explained that we should take the short walk to Rubin's, a small store half a block away, and buy ourselves five cents' worth of candy. Because we couldn't speak English, he taught us to say, 'Five cents candy.' Holding hands, Eileen and I walked the short block to Rideau Street, repeating all the way, 'Five cents candy. Five cents candy. Five cents candy.' When we walked into the store, Mrs. Rubin got excited and, in Yiddish, said, 'Oh! You're the little children who came from Europe. How are you? How is your mother?' Well, by the time we had answered all of her questions, we'd forgotten how to say 'Five cents candy' and had to ask in Yiddish for 'Finf kopkes tzekerkes.' I remember we especially liked the hard, chewy candies called Honeymoons. They were so chewy that when you took a bite, your teeth stuck together."

— From the personal memoir entitled "A Jewish Odyssey" by the late Thelma Steinman (shown below), daughter of Jacob Rivers and sister of Irving Rivers. She ran Economy Dairy in the Byward Market with her husband Nat for 38 years.

Dairy king: Because there were no supermarkets or shopping centres, most commerce was done in the Market. Market days were Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays — everything was closed on Sundays. Because stock could not be refrigerated, storekeepers, like this man at Shore's Dairy, worked hard to ensure that the week's supply of perishables was sold by Saturday night

or wholesale produce business. Not only did this provide a steadier income, but shopkeepers were able to live in rooms above and behind their stores. That made it possible for women to help their husbands in the businesses while looking after their children and households. Sylvia Kershman, whose parents opened a butcher shop, W. Bodovsky Meats, in the old Byward Market building in 1921, says members of families and extended families often opened identical businesses next door to each other. Unlike the family businesses we hear about today, Kershman says that greed, competition, and conflict were rare. "Everybody worked hard, and they were happy just to have three meals a day, to play poker on Saturday night, and not be chased or worried about whether they were going to be killed tomorrow."

While Lowertown's European Jewish immigrants may have felt a newfound sense of security, many of them still did not own property and therefore were not able to seek bank loans. Again, the community found ways to adapt. Those who needed to borrow funds to buy a horse, stock their wagons, or otherwise enhance their enterprises joined a group known as the *actzia*, a Yiddish word that translates roughly as "brotherhood." "Everyone needed a little hand once in a while," recalls Kershman, whose father and husband were part of one actzia that grew to 60 members. Twice a year the more affluent members of the self-help financing organization borrowed money from the bank and made it available to its members. Every Sunday morning, the group would meet to receive the weekly loan repayments. "It was a social time for the men and their young children to get together," recalls Kershman. As always, there was food: herring and schnapps, she recalls. When the actzia had money left over at the end of a loan period, there would be a real feast that included smoked meats, salami, potato salad, and coleslaw.

"How was food brought to the Market?...We had Nathan Greenberg in Billings Bridge — this is Irving Greenberg's father, who grew excellent cantaloupes and cauliflower. Then, of course, there was the Marcovitches on Bowesville Road, which is now the Uplands Airport. They had potatoes and corn that they grew there. Fruits such as grapes and peaches, pears, and so on used to come from the Niagara area and were trucked in mainly by Max Lithwick. Apples used to come in by truck in large barrels. These were about three feet high, and in the winter, we used to break them and take the staves and make skis out of them."

— From a talk for the Ottawa Jewish Historical Society in 1992 about the Byward Market's Jewish merchants by Albert Rivers, son of Jacob Rivers and brother of Irving Rivers.

Family time: A portrait of the Rivers family taken in 1945. Front (seated) left to right: Fred Wallach, Leah & Jacob Rivers, Elaine Steinman. Back, left to right: Thelma Steinman, Gail Steinman (on lap), Nathan Steinman, Ben Wallach, Elenor Wallack, Irving Rivers, Goldie Cantor, Albert Rivers, Ben Goldberg, Eileen Goldberg, Howard Goldberg (on lap)

THOUGH FOOD SHOPS and fruit vendors still fill the streets and sidewalks of the Market, few signs remain from that era. However, presiding over one prime piece of real estate at the corner of Byward and York streets is the storefront of Irving Rivers. Spending his entire lifetime in the Byward Market, the late Rivers, a much-beloved local personality, earned the nickname "Mr. Market." His eponymous clothing and army-surplus shop, established in 1946, still "corners the market," making it one of the area's oldest businesses. Poetically, this is the very place where Irving's father, Jacob Rivers, started life in Canada in 1921. He sold eggs on the sidewalk. Irving's older sister, the late Thelma Steinman, recounted stories about the early Market days in a slim volume she penned shortly before her death in 2002 (a copy was donated to the Ottawa Jewish Archives). "That bit of sidewalk, wedged in between other hawking vendors, became his little corner of the world," she wrote.

Steinman described how her father worked seven days a week to eventually earn enough money to buy a wagon to make it easier to haul around the day's stock of fruit. It was much longer before he could afford to buy a horse to pull that wagon, she wrote. By the time Irving was born — the fifth of six children — their father had gone from running a small sidewalk stall to operating his first fruit store, at 16 1/2 Byward Market (where Zak's Diner is now located). The family lived upstairs, sharing just two bedrooms and a toilet. They went to the Champagne Bath on King Edward Avenue "supposedly to swim, but really to bathe."

Like all the other Market children, the younger Riverses attended the newly built York Street Public School and spent much of their time after school helping in the business, acting as translators for parents who struggled to learn how to read and write in English. They stocked the store with fruits and vegetables and began to supply stock to peddlers as well. Eventually Steinman became the shop's official bookkeeper. It was her job to deal with the peddlers who couldn't afford to pay what they owed. "We lost a lot of money that way, particularly because Dad was a softie and always willing to help someone out," she wrote. Her mother was tougher, she says, and would ask those men to settle the last week's account before starting a new one. Steadily the business grew, enabling the Riverses to buy a spacious house on Clarence Street. With great fondness, Steinman recalls how the residence became a social hub where friends gathered on Sundays for plenty of good food, parties, and sing-alongs. Among the regular card players who would convene at the Riverses' home were the Lithwicks, Coopersmiths, Greenblatts, and Aisenbergs — Byward food merchant competitors who all happened to be sisters and brothers.

As Rivers gradually developed loyal customers, he was able to move the business to 50 Byward (where Saslove's Meat Market is today), a roomier location that was in great demand. His landlord was Jacob Freedman, one of Ottawa's early Jewish settlers who started out as a door-to-door peddler and rose to become one of the community's most successful business leaders. In addition to establishing the city's first cash-and-carry wholesale grocery business at 52-54 Byward Market (now Budapest Delicatessen), he also came to own almost all the buildings on the western blocks of the Market. Meanwhile, he had the foresight to purchase an entire vegetable crop in Picton, which was canned and then stocked in his warehouse. When World War II broke out, he was able to supply his customers with tomatoes, corn, beans, and peas, all of which were in limited supply.

Throughout those difficult years, Freedman brought over dozens of family members from Russia and helped many Jewish people establish businesses in the Market. Steinman counted herself among them. She never forgot the day when Freedman called her father, requesting a meeting at his home the following Sunday. "We were terrified," she wrote. "Was he going to refuse to renew Dad's lease? Would our livelihood be cut off?" Instead, Freedman sat Rivers down and said, "I hear your daughter is going out with a boy who cannot get a job." The shopkeeper was vacating the store next to Rivers' (at 48 Byward Market, now a sushi shop), and he offered it to Rivers on condition that he sign the lease for his daughter. On May 16, 1936, Steinman and her future husband, Nathan, opened Economy Dairy, which ran for 38 years.

MORE THAN A CENTURY has passed since the first Jewish immigrants struggled to settle in the Byward Market, a dynamic setting within which the seeds of the city's Jewish community were sown. Surrounded by family, friends, and food, this enterprising group made an important contribution to the still frontier logging town as it struggled to grow into its role as the new national capital. Like the proverbial Jewish grandmother at the stove with a pot of chicken soup, the community seemed to understand one thing instinctively: it knew how to feed people. **END**

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PHOTOGRAPHY: **OTTAWA JEWISH ARCHIVES**