The Journey of Saul Hershberg

Winnipeg, Manitoba
April 30, 1919

Saul Hershberg checked his gold pocket watch and then picked up his pace as he crossed Aikins Street and walked briskly down Dufferin Avenue toward Main Street. It was already seven o'clock in the morning. If he didn't hurry, he was going to miss the streetcar heading downtown and face the wrath of Mr. Archibald for being late – again.

Bill Archibald was the owner of Archibald Builders and Supplies. Saul had worked for him for since he and his family had arrived in the city from Russia eight years ago. Overall, Archibald was a decent man – "one of the pillars of the Winnipeg commercial elite" was how a local newspaper had described him. He and his wife Alice and their three children lived in a magnificent mansion on Wellington Crescent close to Academy Road. Archibald was on the executive of the Manitoba Club, played golf at the St. Charles County Club, and owned a stunning summer home at Victoria Beach, where "foreigners" and "aliens" like the Hershbergs were definitely not welcome – or allowed.

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There were only two things that Archibald did not tolerate. One was any talk of labour unions and collective bargaining, which he regarded as a socialist plot to take over his business; the other was tardiness. So, while carpenters in the city who worked for other companies were members of a local union, those who worked for Archibald were not. From time to time, there was grumbling about this, but Archibald frequently reminded his employees that they were free to seek employment elsewhere. He didn't say this in anger, but his manner was certainly convincing.

A year earlier, in 1918, 1,458 buildings had been under construction in Winnipeg, representing an estimated $2 million worth of business. Archibald held about 70 of those contracts and earned at least $100,000 when the work was completed. Even after the overhead costs for his main office on Portage Avenue East and warehouse at the foot of Bannatyne Avenue, Archibald was going to make a small fortune. That was in stark comparison to the $33 a week he paid his each of his 30 carpenters and the $27.50 a week he paid Saul and other labourers.

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In 1901 when Saul was seventeen years old, he had said farewell to his parents and three younger brothers and left his home – nothing more than a wooden shack with a mud floor – in the primitive hamlet, or *shtetl,* of Pavoloch (or Pavolitsh as the village's Jews called it in Yiddish). He'd travelled a hundred kilometres southwest to the city of Kiev where he boarded with his father's older brother, Joseph, a celebrated carpenter. His uncle taught Saul everything he needed to know about using tools, properly measuring wood and reading design diagrams. Saul was an excellent apprentice and within a short time was almost as skilled as his uncle. He soon found work building houses, mainly for other Jews in the city. For the next five years, Saul worked hard. He also tolerated the blatant anti-Semitism, daily harassment and the plethora of government regulations and high taxes imposed on every Jew residing in the Pale of Settlement, the western part of the

Russian Empire where Jews had been forced to live since Catherine the Great's reign in the latter-half of the eighteenth century.

Despite the steady work, Saul barely made any money and began to contemplate the only way out of his predicament: immigration to "America." Then, one day in early 1906, he was introduced to Eva Kliman, the 18-year-old daughter of one of his uncle's friends. It was love at first sight – at least for Saul. Eva took a little a longer to feel the same way about Saul. He was persistent, however, and upon receiving her father's blessing, they married in June 1907. Their son, Max was born a year later. In 1910, they made a fateful decision. Eva was pregnant again and reluctant to leave her parents but agreed with Saul that their lives and the lives of their children would be much better if they followed the path of close to two million Russian Jews and immigrated to North America.

They would have preferred to journey to the United States, the "Golden Land" where, according to legend, the streets were paved with gold. But it was not to be. Eva's father had a cousin who had left Russia for Canada ten years earlier and now lived in the city of Winnipeg. All they knew for certain was that Winnipeg was not far from Chicago. Over several months, letters were exchanged to make the arrangements and the day finally came for Saul's little family to board a train to Hamburg, Germany. Once there, they acquired tickets in steerage class on a ship bound for Halifax on the east coast of Canada. After six days in the ship's cramped quarters, they landed in Halifax and then endured a week on a westbound train to their new home. Saul and Eva didn't know much about Canada, only that it was much like America. If you worked hard, Eva's cousin had assured them, you could make a decent living.

The truth of the matter was more complicated. On May 5, 1910, the couple were met at Winnipeg's Canadian Pacific Railway Station by Eva's cousin, Harry Shipman, his wife Seema, and two of their four daughters. Saul and Eva – who welcomed their daughter Sarah six months later – lived with the Shipmans in their tiny house on Dufferin Avenue for two years.

The Shipmans, who spoke Yiddish to Saul and Eva and their children, were welcoming and generous. Harry was a peddler, who hawked old clothes, bottles and trinkets on the streets of the North End. He owned his own cart and horse. Yet from what Saul learned, he also experienced a lot of abuse from unhappy customers and young men – English-speaking Canadians as well as other immigrants – who had nothing better to do with their time than heap scorn upon Shipman and other Jewish peddlers.

The family's home was in the heart of the North End, also known as the "Foreign Quarter," "New Jerusalem," or "CPR Town." Their life, like the lives of Winnipeg's other 20,000 or so Eastern European immigrants, was a struggle.

The clatter and soot from the nearby CPR yards was constant. Literally cut off from the rest of the city by the railyards, the North End was congested with slum housing without a proper water supply or sewage system. The Shipmans had an outdoor privy, as did most of their neighbours. The backyards of most houses in the area had chicken coops and horses, adding to the general squalor. Like the 9,000 Jews in Winnipeg, the Shipmans preferred to shop in stores along Selkirk Avenue, which resembled a *shtetel* marketplace. Most immigrants – and Saul and Eva were no exception – tried to learn

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c.1912 Construction of the Fort Garry Hotel.
ARCHIVES OF MANITOBA. INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF BRIDGE, STRUCTURAL AND ORNAMENTAL IRONWORKERS. (4588c.2)

English quickly, or at least a broken version of it. Saul diligently practiced his English-language skills by forcing himself to read the *Western Labor News* each week. That way, he could try to keep up with news about increasing tensions between the unions and business owners. But out on the streets of the North End, the only languages Saul heard were Ukrainian, Polish and Yiddish.

The Eastern Europeans were all newcomers who co-existed in a land far from their Old Countries. But Old Country hatreds did not disappear; they festered on the streets of the North End. Saul, for example, had a cordial relationship with his neighbours Jakub and Maria Nowak who had also arrived in Winnipeg in 1910 from a small village a few kilometres from Lublin, Poland, then under Russian rule. Jakub worked as a labourer for the CPR, which meant that he had to travel to sites outside the city for weeks at a time. During these absences, Saul and Eva were happy to assist Maria and her three children. Everyone seemed to get along. Yet, occasionally, Jakub would remark to Saul about a "damn Jew" merchant who'd charged too much for a shirt or a dress. It wasn't said with a great deal of animus, merely as a fact of life. Saul never appreciated such comments, but he had become used to them from Jakub and other Old Country immigrants.

These interactions did reinforce for Saul, however, that he was an outsider in a Christian land where his character and morality were always suspect.

1681 Crowds at Victoria Park.
ARCHIVES OF MANITOBA.
L.B. FOOTE COLLECTION. (4563)

In 1901, Winnipeg was a small provincial city with a population of 42,340 of whom 86 per cent were Canadian, British or American-born. A decade later, owing to federal government support for immigration from both Western and Eastern Europe, the city's population had more than tripled to 136,035. The percentage of Canadian, British and American-born had only declined slightly, to 77 per cent, but there were now at least 20,000 Eastern Europeans in the city and their numbers made them highly visible. To the "English" majority, these immigrants seemed untidy, unkempt and uncivilized – and in the case of Jews, non-Christian – "aliens." Such attitudes made even some of the most progressive-minded Winnipeggers nervous.

Saul, and every other Eastern European in Winnipeg, appreciated the freedom that Canada offered them. If that meant accepting a minority status and facing discriminatory and prejudicial treatment, then so be it. Saul resigned himself to accepting a labourer's job at Archibald's instead of that of a carpenter for which he was qualified. But he didn't have to be happy about it.

Saul's monthly salary of $110 was not nearly enough to cover rising food costs, winter coal and the rent on the small two-storey house they'd moved into, not far from where the Shipmans lived. The Great War broke out in 1914 and for the next four years, the prices of clothing, bread, and coffee all rose faster than wages. Eva was forced to do piecework at home to make ends meet, sewing buttons and hems for Faultless Ladies Wear. She toiled at her prized Singer sewing machine for ten hours a day, seven days a week to earn $20 to $25 a month. With Saul's meager salary, it was almost enough to cover their expenses.

That morning in April, Saul was late for one reason only: His daughter Sarah had been up all night coughing, and he and Eva feared the worst. They had almost lost Sarah a year ago during the influenza epidemic ravaging Winnipeg and the world. Of the more than 50 million people worldwide who died from the flu in 1918, 55,000 had been Canadians, including an estimated 1,200 Winnipeggers. In Saul's view, it was a miracle that Sarah, then only seven years old, had not succumbed. Last night, when Saul and Eva had heard the girl coughing incessantly, they were beside themselves. Saul was late getting started that day because he

refused to leave the house until he could see that Sarah was not seriously ill again.

The streetcar ride to the corner of Main Street and Bannatyne Avenue took about twenty minutes. Then Saul ran the few blocks to the Archibald Warehouse as fast as he could.

"'Heb', you're late again," bellowed Jim Fanning, the foreman Saul loathed. Fanning rarely missed an opportunity to insult Saul as a "Hebrew," especially if Archibald, who was more subtle in his general dislike of "aliens," was not present.

Ignoring the anti-Semitic taunt, Saul mumbled that he'd had a family emergency. Fanning replied with an assortment of expletives and ordered Saul to get to work. At least, thought Saul, controlling his anger, he did not have to endure another of Archibald's sermons about the importance of punctuality.

Saul had started loading a cart with wood when he noticed a group of carpenters and labourers standing nearby in deep discussion. The conversation was heated, and they were speaking loudly enough for him to hear. Saul already knew what they were talking about from what he had partly understood from reading the front page of this week's *Western Labor News*: the negotiations between the Winnipeg Building Trades Council, which represented the carpenters' union, and the Builders' Exchange, the representative of the business owners, were going poorly. A strike by the unionized construction workers was imminent – a sympathetic general strike by every other worker in the city might follow.

"Do we strike if it happens?" asked one man

"Archibald will never stand for it. He'll fire all of us. I can't risk that," said another.

"You think Archibald and his rich friends are going to put up with workers in this city striking?" asked another carpenter. "They'll do everything they can to stop it. This isn't Russia. We're not Bolsheviks, for God's sake. Well, maybe Hershberg is, but none of us are, that's for damn sure."

The men laughed and looked at Saul.

"What do you think, Hershberg," one of them asked. "You gonna strike? Ain't all of you people, Bolshies?"

Saul shrugged and kept on loading the wood. He knew enough not to get into any discussion about unions, socialism or strikes. The carpenters and other English and Scottish labourers had been calling him a Bolshevik for two years now, since Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks had seized power from the democratic socialist provisional government established after Czar Nicholas II abdicated.

For the past few months, ever since the war ended last November and thousands of returned men came back to the city, Saul had experienced more antagonism than usual. Only last week, while he and Eva walked with the children on Portage Avenue, they had been sworn at by a group of veterans who called them "dirty Reds" and "foreign trash" and told them to go back where they came from. It was disconcerting, to say the least. Saul was smart enough to let the comments pass, especially with his children present, but he sensed that the anger and hostility among the returned men was rising fast and could explode at any moment.

Saul did agree with his co-workers' consensus, however: Archibald and the other men who ran the city would never be dictated to by unions or accept collective bargaining. The union leaders, however, were feeling emboldened.

Last year, a confrontation between civic employees and the city administration had led to sympathy strikes by upwards of 15,000 workers from 30 different unions. In the end, negotiations between the two sides were successful: the striking civic workers were able to return to work and maintain the right to strike - a right city council had hoped to take away from them. A wider labour fight had been stopped, but there was a strong sense that this battle was far from over.

Saul was not a member of any union. He knew that the English leaders and the members of the more than 80 unions in the city who spoke passionately for labour rights and were calling for strike action had little interest in protecting the labour rights of Saul and other Eastern European immigrants. In fact, they were viewed as unskilled workers who often took the jobs of "true" Canadians, even though that was not the case. It was obvious that in a major strike in Winnipeg, Saul, Eva and other newcomers like them, who were barely tolerated and regarded as foreigners who could never properly assimilate, were sure to find themselves caught in the middle of an ugly confrontation that might tear the city apart.

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